

RSCM Oxfordshire – May Day Roaming Evensong of Oxford Colleges

Hardly had the RSCM (Royal School of Church Music) Oxfordshire advertised the biennial May Day bank holiday Roaming Singing Tour of Oxford Colleges than the event was fully booked. Perhaps this should come as no surprise when you read that members will be given access to sing in some of the most prestigious college chapels in the world.

On this occasion the total number of singers had to be limited by the size of two of the four chapels selected this year, **Corpus Christi** and **Oriel**. Nevertheless, nearly 90 participants from Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Wiltshire were all present including, of course, several members of All Saints' Choir.

This year's May Day was a stunningly beautiful sunny day and as all the four colleges were within easy walking distance of each other, we were able to gently stroll in the afternoon sunshine from college to college taking in the magnificent historic quadrangles and buildings now clean and gleaming under the clear blue sky.

RSCM Oxfordshire is so fortunate to have such talented musicians as Peter Smith MA, LTCL, Chairman RSCM Oxford, our Director and Conductor and Cynthia Hall MA, FRCO as our organist. In just one hour, Peter managed to pull together all the disparate singers into a respectable choir and amazingly we did make a pretty reasonable sound. I really do not know how Peter does it! It must be said that Peter and Cynthia are supported by Terence Carter, who meticulously organises the event, with help on the day from Alice Stainer. RSCM Oxfordshire has an exceptional team, all of whom are volunteers. Among those who attended was the Chairman of RSCM Council, Lord Gill.

The arrangements for the afternoon followed the usual pattern for these events. We assembled to rehearse from scratch in **Corpus Christi College Chapel** from 2pm to 3pm and then began the service there. The remaining parts of Evensong were then sung in half-hourly slots as we progressed from **Corpus Christi** to **Oriel**, then on to **University College** and finally **The Queen's College**.

We are told in advance which music we are going to sing and most items were well known to those attending. However, the Introit: *O Lord, give thy Holy Spirit* by Thomas Tallis (c. 1505–1585) was not so familiar, neither was the Anthem: *As for our God – The Lord hath been mindful of us* (the concluding section of *Ascribe unto the Lord*) by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876).



The service began in **Corpus Christi** with a Welcome introduction by the acting College Chaplain, The Revd Canon Brian Mountford who also led the first part of the service. All the chapels we visited have long and interesting histories, so at each venue the Chaplains gave us a brief potted history before the service began. We learnt that **Corpus** was founded in 1517 by Richard Fox, bishop of Winchester and a trusted diplomatic and political adviser to King Henry VII. Also pointed out to us was the portrait of the College's seventh President, John Reynolds (d. 1607), who was a key organizer and translator of the 1611 Authorised Version of the Bible (LEFT). The Introit was followed by a Penitential Introduction and then sung Ferial

Responses. The office hymn was *Rejoice, O land, in God thy might* (Wareham), with music by William Knapp (1698–1768) and words by Robert Bridges (1844-1930).

We progressed to our next venue **Oriel**, where we were welcomed by its College Chaplain, The Revd Dr. Rob Wainwright. Again we were given the history of the chapel. The current Chapel is **Oriel's** third, the first being built about 1373 on the north side of the front quadrangle. By 1566, the Chapel had been located on the south side of the quadrangle and drawings show that Elizabeth I visited Oxford that year. The present building was consecrated in 1642 and retains most of its original appearance. The Blessed John Henry Newman (1801-1890) is among the most renowned figures associated with **Oriel**. Alongside fellow clerics John Keble and Edward Bouverie Pusey, Newman was the driving force behind the Oxford Movement, which tried to reassert the catholic heritage of the Church of England.



We continued with Psalm: 121 *I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills: from whence cometh my help* to the lovely chant in A flat composed by James Turle (1802-1882). The first lesson: Deuteronomy 11, vv 10-15, was followed by the *Magnificat* in C by Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924), which is always a great favourite of church choirs. Before leaving the chapel, some of us went up to see the oratory behind the organ which has been made into a memorial to Newman (left). A new

stained glass window was completed and put in place at Easter 2001. The window was designed by Vivienne Haig and realised by Douglas Hogg.

We moved on to our next stop, **University** and again we learnt from the College Chaplain, The Revd Dr. Andrew Gregory, of the fascinating history of **Univ**. It owes its origins to William of Durham, who died in 1249; however a legend grew up in the 1380s that the college was founded even earlier, by King Alfred in 872. However, nowadays, William of Durham is considered the true founder and it still means **Univ** may claim to be the oldest college in Oxford or Cambridge.

We resumed the service with the second lesson: St John 16, vv 23-33, followed by the *Nunc Dimittis* in C [Stanford], the Apostles' Creed (said), Lesser Litany and Lord's Prayer (said), and sung Ferial Responses and Collects.



As we left **Univ**, the Chaplain suggested we go to see the memorial to Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) near the north-west corner of Front Quad. Shelley came up to **Univ** in 1810, and was expelled the following year for, as the College Register of the time put it, "contumaciously refusing to answer questions proposed to [him], and for also repeatedly declining to disavow a publication entitled *The Necessity of Atheism*". At the time, the College thought it had washed its hands of a troublesome student; it only realised

later that it had expelled one of England's greatest romantic poets.



Our final venue, which brought the service to its conclusion, was **Queen's**. We were warmly welcomed by **Queen's** College Chaplain, the Revd Mrs

Katherine Price, who had accompanied us throughout the service. She told us that the College was founded by Robert d'Eglesfield in 1340 to be 'a place of education and religion', and there had been a chapel at Queen's since 1382. The current building was consecrated on All Saints' Day in 1791. Over the sanctuary is a wonderful circular painting of the Ascension by Sir James Thornhill (1675-1734) (left). The College states that the chapel 'is there for everyone – of any faith or none'.

We resumed the service with the Anthem: *As for our God – The Lord hath been mindful of us* (from *Ascribe unto the Lord*) by Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876). This anthem was almost certainly composed for the Church Missionary Society's Annual Service on 22 May 1851 in Winchester. It is a most beautiful piece and was much enjoyed by all. This was followed by Reflection and Prayers for Rogationtide. The service concluded with the hymn: *All creatures of our God and King* (Lasst uns erfreuen) with music arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) and words from St Francis of Assisi (1182-1226). After the Blessing and Dismissal, Cynthia played, as an organ voluntary, the 1st movement from *Organ Concerto Op. 7 No. 1 in B-flat, HWV 306* by *G.F. Handel* on the College's famous organ, which was built by the Danish firm of Frobenius in 1965. This organ set the standard for the classical organ revival in Britain, and remains one of the finest instruments in the country and with Cynthia's wonderful playing brought a glorious afternoon to a magnificent finale.



After the service, we had tea in the splendid Queen's College Dining Hall (left), with fabulous portraits of the great and the good of The Queen's College around the walls. Congratulations to Peter, Cynthia, Terence and Alice, for all their hard work in making this singing tour such an enjoyable and wonderful experience for members of the RSCM.

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