



Christ Church Cathedral Choir, Newcastle 2016 UK Tour Report



Anyone sitting in the congregation in July and August would have noticed the choir suddenly become smaller in number, and then disappear together. Anyone keeping track of us on Facebook — or following Stuart the choir mascot — would have seen our adventures in England.

We arrived in dribs and drabs so for many of us there was a chance for sightseeing before the tour even commenced, but we saw each other for the first time as a group on the Sunday evening: the formal start of the tour before a big celebratory dinner. Then the next day it was a trip on the train to Southwark cathedral.



There has been a church on the Southwark cathedral site since the seventh century. Archeological evidence suggests Roman pagan worship even before that. Communities of religious on that sacred site saw the Norman conquest, the dissolution of the monasteries, the deprivations and poverty of the following centuries. Restored in the 1820s, it became Southwark Cathedral in 1905 as a new diocese was created within London. The cathedral as we know it today has seen two world wars and survived the London Blitz; it has stood as a

monument, the home of a diocese, and a source of reflection, quiet and comfort throughout a century of war and turmoil.

Of course, a trip to London in July is not complete without a trip to the Proms. After our first Evensong, a hurried coach ride across town and a scoffed down sandwich for dinner, we heard, among other things, Ravel's Bolero and Rachmaninoff's Third Piano Concerto in the Royal Albert Hall. A musical experience unlike any other, and one we are not likely to forget in a hurry!





Geoff and Jenny, Jo, and Max getting ready for the performance...

Katherine Dienes-Williams is the Director of Music at Guildford cathedral; we were lucky to have her presence at a rehearsal and Evensong (and a dinner afterwards). We had one rehearsal with her, and one service, and it's challenging to sing under a director whose style is unfamiliar, but it's a wonderful challenge. It seems a long time ago now, but we learned a lot, and we had fun doing it. And she liked Stuart the mascot!

Right: The choir with Katherine (front right) following evensong.



A day trip in the middle of our Southwark week saw us leave the hotel a little earlier than most of us would have liked for the ninety-seven mile trip to Beaulieu, the church from which Newcastle's first Bishop, William Tyrrell, came. The current church was a former refectory for monks of the area; the grounds house the ruins of the original monastery, destroyed under Henry VIII during the period of turmoil which saw the monasteries dissolved and their riches taken under the Crown. We performed a concert in the Abbey church — we stood under the plaque gifted by our diocese to Bishop Tyrrell's old church, and we sang music of England and France and Australia, some of it written in our own diocese. We remembered Bishop Tyrrell, roaming his diocese which stretched from the Hawksbury River in the south to Cape York in the north, caring for the brand new Church of England from horseback. We shared the knowledge that we are linked to the folk of Beaulieu not only through a long-dead bishop, but also through the faith and the prayers and the love of God that we share. And we sang for them, and they gifted us with a wonderful meal before they sent us on our way. The choir is pictured with Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, and the plaque gifted to their church may be seen in the right hand side of the photo. Alongside that is the choir "in action" during the performance.



Some of you might remember Jane, who sang soprano in the choir for six months while she studied in Australia. Six months is not a long time, but she became part of our choir family and we missed her dreadfully when she went back home to England where she now works as a doctor. So it was wonderful to visit her home village and sing a concert for her friends and family, in her very own parish church — a church that was built in the late tenth century, which saw the battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest, which heard the prayers of King Canute, whose daughter lies in a stone coffin beneath the floor. It was a beautiful place, in a picturesque village (we met Jack, the resident orange cat), with loving, welcoming people. We sang the concert with our dear friend Jane, and although we said goodbye to her afterwards, it's not forever. Once you've been a part of the choir, you always will be, regardless of whether you live on the other side of the planet.



The choir in action in the beautiful old parish church at Bosham. A wonderful opportunity to share in the hospitality and fellowship that music and the church affords us.

The week at Southwark was over too quickly, with free time spent wandering through the Borough Market, visiting the Globe theatre, sightseeing, shopping and of course, seeing shows at the West End. It was also spent singing beautiful music — Australian, English, French; music written mere years ago and music with a history of hundreds of years. We were a part of the ancient tradition of Evensong, singing psalms and hearing readings, and of course sharing music.



Above: The choir with the clergy and vergers of Southwark Cathedral, and Rupert Jeffcoat, our amazing organist for the week, following our final evensong.



Above left: The choir in action during Evensong at Southwark Cathedral, and right, showing that we also know how to relax!!

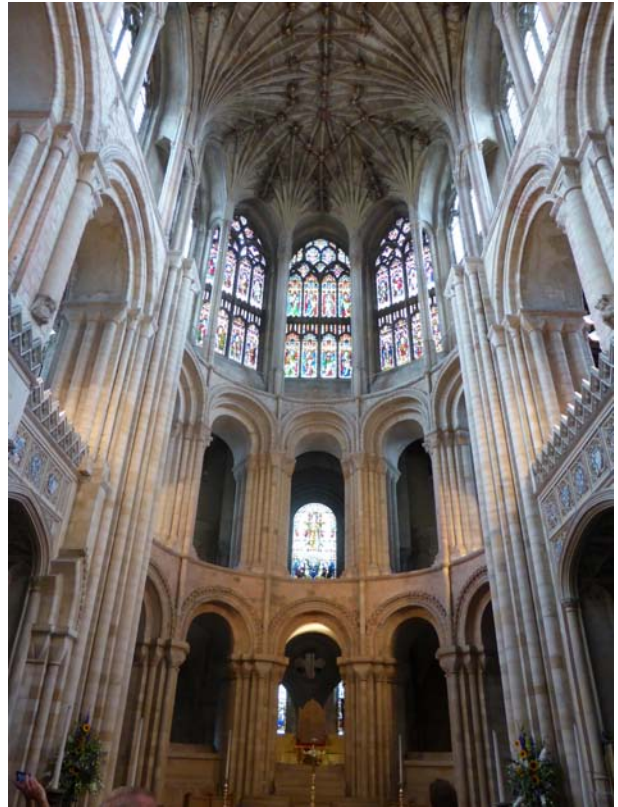
Norwich cathedral is older than Southwark. The stones underfoot are smoothed by the passing of almost a millennia of the faithful, and the once-sharp angles of pillar and corner are softened with time. Norwich was once home to Benedictine monks, who kept the daily patterns of prayer and reflection, and the cathedral is still primarily a place of prayer, a place of stillness and reflection — and the busyness of rehearsals — in the midst of the bustle of a medieval city. We sang in the quire, behind the rood screen, where for almost a thousand years people have prayed and sung; we heard in the daily prayers the year's mind of monks centuries-dead. We saw a stained glass window pieced together from the mere fragments which survived the Reformation and the religious battles of the sixteenth century. And again, we sang the music of our heritage, old and new, and we were welcomed into the fabric of the community of the cathedral, and we prayed with them.



Above: Norwich Cathedral West End

Right: The organ and vaulted ceiling from the western end of the Nave.





Above left: The organ and choir stalls. Above right, the East End of the Cathedral showing the bold columns of the Norman architecture supporting the flair of the Gothique architecture in the upper levels.

We didn't spend all that week at Norwich, though. One day we travelled the sixty-three miles to Cambridge, and (as you do) we sang a concert at Trinity College.

The Trinity College chapel is more cathedral than chapel, a monument to the God of thought and intellect, richly decorated and looked down upon by the founding fathers whose images are captured in the stained glass windows. Isaac Newton, Francis Bacon, A.A. Milne, even the poet George Herbert (who, incidentally, wrote the words *Come my way, my truth, my love*, words we sang in that very concert, arranged by our own Director of Music, Peter Guy), even George IV — all are Trinity College alumni. We stood that day in the shadow of the intellectual greats, and we sang.



*Zadok the Sheep—our own intellectual giant!!—making an appearance in the tenor section (on Jenny's head!) before our performance of *Waltzing Matilda*...*

The biggest hit of the concert though was the gloriously quirky version of *Waltzing Matilda*, arranged by tenor Jenny Pickering (who sang that part of the concert with her famous sheep scarf, Zadok, on her head) and Peter Guy. *Waltzing Matilda* meets *Baa Baa Black Sheep*, the *1812 Overture*, *Land of Hope and Glory* and a really wonderful tenor waltz, and we took it to Trinity College, and the audience loved it. Perhaps an anthem for the September music list?



The Choir at Trinity College following our lunchtime concert, with Sarah Kim, our organist for this concert, and for the week at Norwich Cathedral.

It seems that once you finish Wednesday, the week flies, and before we knew it we were having Friday evening drinks with the cathedral staff in the cloisters after Evensong (in which we were directed by Andrew Reid, Director of the Royal School of Church Music, UK), and finishing the evening with a grand dinner; then came Saturday, and then Sunday, and our last service. We went out with a bang: Elgar's *Give Unto the Lord*, a rousing Victorian setting of Psalm 29, lots of rich chords and vigour, with the gentle reflection of the glory to be found in God's temple, and the quiet, heartfelt certainty of the Lord's blessing of peace — unquestionably apt for our time, as it was for Elgar's.



Left: Norwich's immense spire lit amongst the peace and calm of the English evening.

And then the tour was over, and we all travelled back to London and then went our separate ways. And we all arrived home, again in dribs and drabs, in various states of jet lag and disorientation, and we all went back to work and study, and it might all have been a dream but for photos and souvenirs — and memories, and strengthened friendships, and wonderful learning. Each of us have been changed by two weeks of praying and singing together, by two weeks of walking through the history of our tradition, of singing our faith on the other side of the planet. Now we are back to the daily routine, to the distractions of work and home and all the demands of day-to-day life, but we sing the same faith at home, and know that it is the same faith sung by our sisters and brothers in England, and it's the same faith that has been sung for more than a thousand years, and we are connected by more than we ever imagined, part of a family of love united by the God who created us.

One of the final hymns we sang in England puts it:

As o'er each continent and island
the dawn leads on another day,
the voice of prayer is never silent,
nor dies the strain of praise away.

So be it, Lord; Thy throne shall never,
like earth's proud empires, pass away:
but stand, and rule, and grow for ever,
till all Thy creatures own Thy sway.

This trip has changed all of us. No one has been unmoved by the things we've done and seen, and we've certainly become better musically for it. But we have brought back renewed knowledge of the great communion of faith we're a part of, and the faith we sing will be stronger for it.

It's nice to be home.



The Choir at Norwich Cathedral following our final Evensong, with the Canon Precentor, Canon Librarian and Canon Pastor of the Cathedral.