

Farewell to Christopher Benham

Dorothy Toyn



Christopher Benham became Director of Music at All Saints' in 1996, having become Assistant Organist under Michael Frith some 6 or so years earlier.

Chris's love of music began in his Norfolk childhood where he was a Chorister at Wymondham Abbey for 7 years. He continued his musical education at the Colchester Institute School of Music, winning prizes for solo and ensemble piano playing.

After graduating he joined the Institute's staff as a piano accompanist. In 1989 Chris began training for the teaching profession and subsequently took up a post in Harlow.

At this time he was appointed assistant organist at All Saints' Church where he continued his organ studies with Michael.

I recall seeing Chris playing the organ when he first came to All Saints and remember hearing Michael Frith give his report at the APCM and telling everyone how Chris was doing. It sounded a bit like a school report being read aloud – “has great potential but needs to develop” sort of report - and I felt quite sorry for him!

Well, develop he did, and Chris can be justly proud of his achievements at All Saints over the years, and there are many of them! He became Director of Music in 1996 having successfully led the choir trip to Southwell Minster that year jointly with Brian Bromley.

Since then he has led choir trips, which are always a highlight of the Choir's year, to St David's, Norwich, Exeter, Worcester, Southwark, Lichfield, Chichester, Wells, Chester and Bristol Cathedrals.



Having been on the choir trips myself as one of the “Choir Mums” I can vouch for the hard work and dedication that Chris puts into them and feeling very moved when I heard the superb music in such wonderful buildings – All Saints Choir at their best.



Chris developed the music repertoire, including major liturgical works like *Messiah* Handel, *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* J.S.Bach, *The Twelve* Walton and *Lo, the full final sacrifice* Finzi, as well as *Requiems*

by Duruflé, Fauré, Howells and Mozart with orchestra as appropriate.



He has encouraged the boys to develop their music skills and gain their various ribbons, and I am sure I am not the only parent saying that their son would not have done so well in his Music GCSE had it not been for the Choir!

He introduced girls to All Saints and worked with Alison Walker to start the Girls Choir adding a different perspective and a different sound to All Saints.

Around 14 years ago Chris had the idea for lunchtime concerts including a bite to eat, and "Soundbites" was born, although I understand the first concert did not go as planned but with a bit of improvisation, it was the first of many successful concerts.

Chris persuaded Pearce's Bakery to very kindly sponsor Soundbites initially and latterly Waitrose after Pearce's closed. The standard and variety of music (and lunch) is always growing at these concerts which are now a very popular part of Hertford's Music Scene.

Chris also had the idea that the money raised at Soundbites could be used as a "Music Development Fund" for educational purposes for the children and also to fund Choral Scholarships in conjunction with The University of Hertfordshire, which began in 2004 with Daniel Antrobus who graduated in 2007 with a First Class Honours degree.

While Chris has been in post he has overseen the overhaul and development

of the fine Willis organ, organising and encouraging fundraising in order to thoroughly clean and repair the existing pipes and mechanisms and to purchase additional pipes, and once that was complete he set about raising funds to purchase a new concert piano, encouraging people to sponsor piano keys in order to get the funds required. Two major achievements.

As well as his musical talents Chris regularly supported the Choir Football Team when they played various other local church choirs, and has been seen playing himself when the Choir boys played The Vicars XI! The boys ran rings around the opposition that day from what I recall!!



I am sure everyone at All Saints will join me in saying a heartfelt thank you to Chris for his vast contribution and dedication to the music at All Saints over the years – I feel the above is only a brief summary and I am sure I have missed loads out – especially his musical achievements.

He will be missed, but we are very pleased that he will continue to be involved in "Soundbites", so it is less of a "goodbye", more "see you on Wednesdays!"

We wish Chris all the best for his new job at St Edmunds in the autumn and thank him again for everything he has contributed to the musical life of All Saints.

Chris's final services at All Saints' will be on Sunday 26th July please join us if you can.