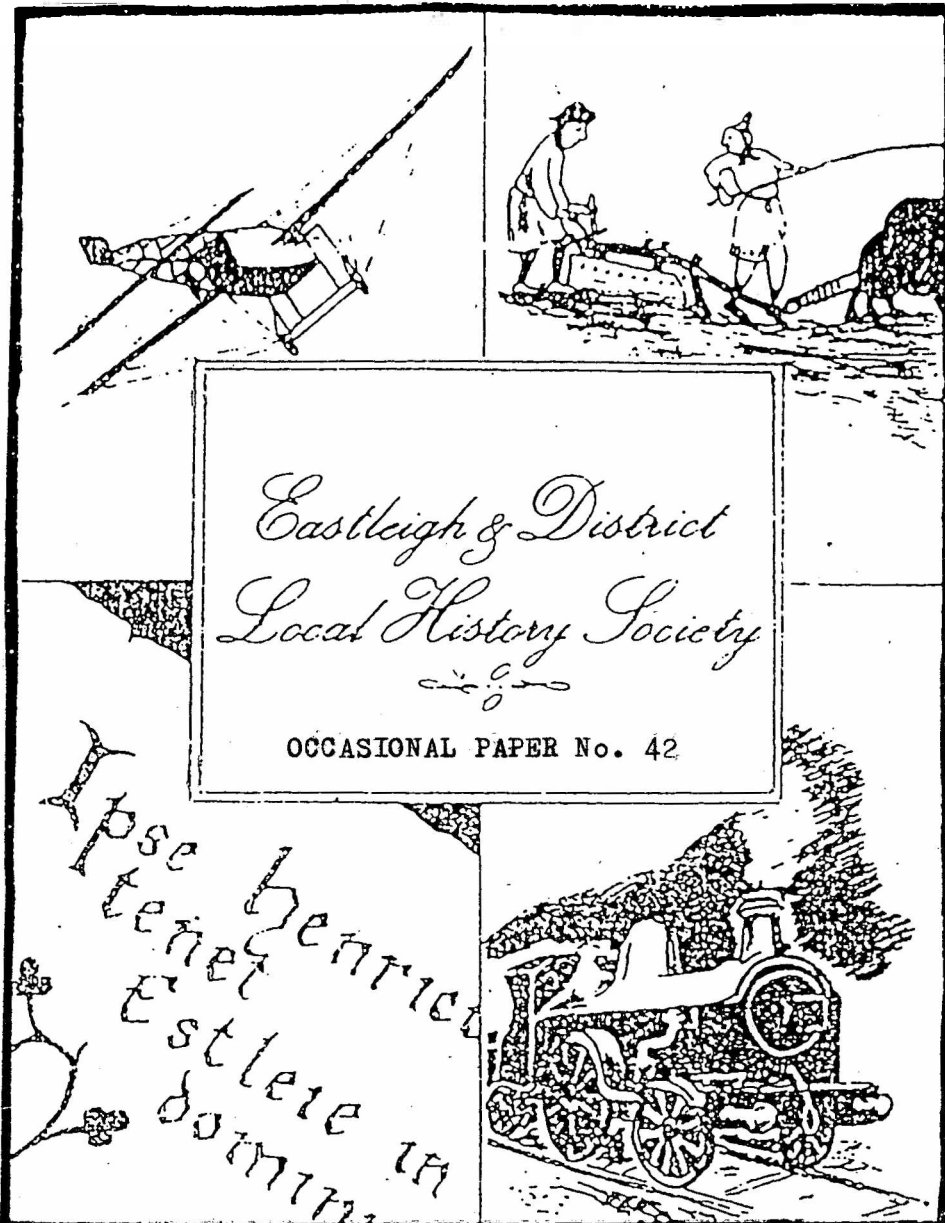


The Southampton Choral Union



Southampton Choral Union 1945

Twenty-First Anniversary

COMMEMORATION CONCERT
GUILDHALL — SOUTHAMPTON
Tuesday, 27th October, 1964
at 7.30 p.m.

VERDI'S

“REQUIEM MASS”

Soloists :

PAULINE TINSLEY - - - Soprano
MONICA SINCLAIR - Mezzo-Soprano
WILLIAM McALPINE - - - Tenor
JOHN HOLMES - - - Bass

SOUTHAMPTON CHORAL UNION CHOIR
Chorus Master — RONALD WELLS

BOURNEMOUTH SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
(Leader : Gerald Jarvis)

Conductor — AMBROSE CHALK

All Patrons will be advised of their Priority Booking.
Guild Cards will be accepted as payment for tickets for this
Concert.

PRICES: 7/6, 6/-, 5/-, 4/- and 2/6

Second Concert

GUILDHALL — SOUTHAMPTON
Tuesday, 15th December, 1964
at 7.15 p.m.

HANDEL'S

“MESSIAH”

Soloists :


ANN DOWDALL - - - Soprano
BARBARA ROBOTHAM - - Contralto
GERALD ENGLISH - - - Tenor
JOHN LAWRENSON - - - Bass
RODNEY SENIOR - - - Trumpet
D. CECIL WILLIAMS - - - Organ

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SOUTHAMPTON CHORAL UNION
TWENTY-FIRST ANNIVERSARY COMMEMORATION CONCERT
SOUTHAMPTON GUILDHALL
TUESDAY, 27th OCTOBER, 1964, AT 7.30 p.m.

Price Two Shillings

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THE SOUTHAMPTON CHORAL UNION

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE FIRST 25 YEARS

In the spring of 1943, the fourth year of the Second World War, I was asked by the Congregational Minister at Chandlers Ford if I would be able and willing to form a choir to sing Stainer's Crucifixion at the church on Good Friday. At that time there were practically no choral concerts at all in Southampton and, as organist and choir master at the Methodist Church, I was only too happy to accept the challenge. Although it proved to be very much a scratch performance owing to the limited time available for rehearsing an ad hoc choir, those who took part enjoyed the experience sufficiently to enlist my help in the formation of a regular choir. It was thanks mainly to the valiant efforts of Congregational Church choir members Stan and Margaret Bodey that this soon became established with about 30 voices as The Chandlers Ford Singers.

The experience had, however, made me think seriously about the possibility of forming a new Choral Society in Southampton. So in June of the same year, I advertised in The Echo to call together all who might be interested to come to a meeting at Swaythling Hall. The attendance of over a hundred people exceeded all my expectations and, after a lively discussion on the way ahead, my proposal to open with a performance of the complete *Hiawatha* was accepted enthusiastically, and the Southampton Choral Union (as it was originally called) came into being that same evening. Officers elected were Fred Benke as Chairman, Reg Bell as Secretary and H. C. Hackett as Treasurer, and the committee formed from this nucleus fixed the membership subscription at 10 shillings (50 pence); 50 years on, the present membership fee stands at £55 p.a.

Not long afterwards The Chandlers Ford Singers, keen also to sing *Hiawatha*, decided to join The Choral Union en bloc where they were received with open arms by members. All three parts of Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha* were performed at the inaugural concert held at Southampton Guildhall on 20th April 1944. The full orchestra was comprised of string players from Southampton's Northwood Orchestra, a full professional woodwind section and further string players, mostly from the LSO, together with a brass section supplied by the Southampton Police Band. All seats were sold, and it was rumoured that American troops stationed in the City were offering up to £1 for 5 shilling (25p) tickets!

The second concert in the Guildhall took place in January 1945 and was once again packed to capacity, despite the deep snow outside! The programme included Stanford's *Songs of the Fleet* and Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens*. On 19th December that year we gave our first performance of Handel's *Messiah*, with Basil Cameron as our guest conductor; although this oratorio was not repeated in 1946, it was performed again in December 1947, with Leslie Woodgate conducting, and this time it was broadcast on BBC Home Service. From that year on it became traditional for our Society to perform *Messiah* annually just before Christmas; it has always been very well attended and I came to feel that it was a tradition welcomed by the citizens of Southampton as ushering in the spirit of Christmas with its message of music.

In 1949 we were invited by the Western Orchestral Society (now called the "Bournemouth Orchestras") to give a concert on 1st October at the Winter Gardens, Bournemouth; the musical standard achieved, as well as success at the box office, led to further invitations to contribute to the Winter Garden concerts. On 15th March the following year I was in hospital and the concert was conducted by D. Cecil Williams, a stalwart of music in Southampton and a friend of our Society; on that occasion the celebrated Harry Mortimer, was the guest soloist in Haydn's Trumpet Concerto in E flat and Mr Cecil Williams also conducted Tchaikovsky's 4th Symphony. On 8th November that year we performed Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise* with Ronald Hill as the tenor soloist; he had sung the *Flower Song* from Bizet's *Carmen* in the first half and this was the only occasion that I can remember when we had to repeat any item in a concert ... the audience would not let him go!

Other concerts that stand out in the memory from the first 25 years are those of March 1954 when we were joined by Dennis Brain who played the Mozart E flat Horn Concerto (and who sadly died only two days later in a car accident on the way back from Edinburgh where he had been playing the same work); of November 1956 when we performed for the first time in St Mary's Church (then recently rebuilt) at the invitation of D. Cecil Williams, then their organist, and which led to many more happy visits there for us; of that Elgar Centenary celebration concert at the Guildhall in 1957 when the choir was robbed of 70 of its members by a flu epidemic but still managed a creditable performance of Elgar's *The Kingdom* under the baton of Charles Groves! We were to enjoy singing with him again eight years later at the Winter Gardens when we performed Elgar's *The Music Makers* in May 1965. Sir Charles, as he later became of course, was always a friend to our Society and news of his untimely death last year saddened me, producing a deep sense of loss, not only in the wide world of choral and orchestral music, but also to me as a personal friend.

There are two other precious memories that I cannot neglect to mention; firstly, Janet Baker's appearance with us, singing the role of the Angel in Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* in October 1966, and her repeat visit to us two months later to sing *Messiah*; secondly, at one of the concerts at which we were to perform George Dyson's *Three Songs of Praise*, I had arranged for my mother to sit in the front row of the balcony, where she was joined by a gentlemen with whom she offered to share her copy of this work. "Thank you Madam" he replied, "but I really don't need it; I'm George Dyson and I composed it!"

From its earliest days the Society had rapidly grown to a complement of about 180 singers, a level that it maintained throughout the 25 years that I was privileged to be its Musical Director. Many people contributed to the build up and continuing success of the Society, and I know that I can only mention but a few of them. When Fred Benke (whom I mentioned as the founder Chairman) retired, his place was taken by Paul Ridsdale who remained Chairman until his retirement to the Scilly Isles; during that period we also lost the services of our loyal and hard working founder Secretary, Reg Bell, through illness then death, and Betty Beech took on the job. She was followed by Jim Varley, whose ability, hard work and tremendous enthusiasm brought to our ranks a renewed vigour for which the Society will always owe a debt of gratitude. Jim had the task of seating the choir for the concerts, and it was his idea to install the signal light at the back of the hall to give the choir its warning to stand or sit on cue. Joy Lane was an accomplished pianist who served us over many years and we were only robbed of her talents by her untimely illness and subsequent death. Ronald Wells joined the Society as a bass, and I soon discovered that not only was he a fine singer but an able teacher of choral singing; on my invitation he willingly became our chorus master, sharing the duties of sectional rehearsals with me; the valuable contribution which Ronald brought to the choir was not widely appreciated although his talent and ability were exceptional; it was a particular blow when he died whilst on holiday with me in France. My final mention must be of Richard Underhill; he was Treasurer of the Society for ten years and prior to that was responsible for administering the first Patron scheme, which was called the Patrons' Guild, and which provided much needed finance in advance of the time when concert expenses had to be met.

I am sometimes asked if there were any particular incidents from my concert giving days that stand out in my memory; so in conclusion let me tell you of just one of these. It concerns a concert at the Guildhall which began, as usual, at 7.30 p.m. I had conducted Elgar's choral arrangement of the National Anthem, followed by a lengthy orchestral overture, and had just raised my baton for the hushed opening of Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings* when I was taken aback by the sound of the Guildhall clock striking the hour of eight with most vociferous chimes! I could only glance despairingly to the heavens, causing some amusement to the audience, and raise my baton again when the chimes had died away - only to hear the sound of "Oh God, our help in ages past"! However, my anger was soon dispelled by the roar of laughter from the audience and after a short pause we were able to continue with the concert. To the best of my belief, from that day onwards the Guildhall clock is always silenced while concerts are in progress.

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June 1993



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