

A collection of historical data about the Society was published in 1996 as part of the 75 Anniversary Celebrations, but this contained a narrative for only the ten years 1946-56. The second 'Blue Book' published in 2011 on the ninetieth anniversary did contain a short history of the society from 1921 to 2011, but a detailed history of the first fifty years, which was too long to be included in the 'Blue Book', was promised as a separate document.

Oxford Harmonic Society, 1921-71 The first fifty years

Joe Wilson

1914-15 - A false start.

In January 1971, Harold Spicer, the organist at Manchester College, was interviewed by BBC Radio Oxford for their 'Someone in particular' series (Oxfordshire Oral History Archive 533-No11.). He said that in collaboration with Cuthbert Bates he founded Oxford Harmonic Society in 1913. He had moved to Oxford in 1910 and become an organ pupil of Hugh Allen who was organist at New College at the time. In due course Harold became organist at nearby Manchester College.

Two concerts were given in 1915. One was on Thursday 18 March in the Holywell Music Room. The first half of the concert consisted of solo items but the second was taken up entirely by a performance of Elgar's 'Banner of St George'. The review in the Oxford Times indicated that this was the Society's first concert. The proceeds were in aid of the Mayor of Oxford's Relief Fund, but the second concert, in Wadham Gardens on the 1 July was for the Oxford Motor Ambulance Fund. The format was the same, the first half consisted of Sterndale Bennett's 'The May Queen', accompanied by members of 'Dr Allen's Orchestra' and after the interval there were six solo items. ('Dr Allen's Orchestra' was an early name for Oxford Orchestral Society.)

An annual General Meeting was held on Tuesday 28 September 1915 in St Giles's Church Hall and reported in the Oxford Times of 2 October. The 1914-15 season was pronounced a success both in terms of members and of money (£4.9.4d balance, say £600 today). Nineteen members were present but only four were men. There was an appeal for new members, especially men, a vain hope in view of what to follow in the First World War. The work for the 1916 season was to be Coleridge Taylor's 'Hiawatha's Wedding Feast'.

There is no further mention of the Society in the newspapers for 1916 or later. Harold Spicer went to serve for 2 years in the Oxon and Bucks Light Infantry. When he returned he seems to have busied himself with his duties as organist and, with Alderman Benson, founded the Oxford Schools Music Festival that ran until 1960. He also taught music at local schools, gave organ recitals [broadcast by the BBC from Birmingham (1927-34)] and lectured for the Music Faculty who made him an honorary MA.

Cuthbert Bates reappeared rather later as the conductor of the Tudor Singers in a Subscription Concert in Oxford Town Hall on the 24 November 1932. Trevor Harvey, reviewing the concert in the Oxford Mail for the 25 November said they were a small well-trained body, but he was critical of Bates's conducting technique, as best he could see it in the dim lighting.

The origin of the current Oxford Harmonic Society

The current Oxford Harmonic Society evolved from The Iffley Glee Club, which was itself part of the Iffley Memorial Institute.

Iffley Memorial Institute

Iffley was a desirable (village) suburb downriver of Oxford that had been a pioneer in the Village Institute movement. The secretary's report at the third Annual Meeting held on Monday 5 July 1920 was recorded in the Oxford Chronicle (9 July). Sir George Forrest said that the Institute had been founded in 1917 as a memorial to those who had sacrificed their lives in the war and as 'a tribute to their gallant surviving comrades. It was intended to be a centre of village communal life and activity, the social centre where members of the community could meet on common and equal ground'. It already had a hall (which appears to have been made from corrugated iron), library and reading room. A billiards table had been found, but there was a great need for a piano. This brought the secretary to the Glee Club. 'During the winter some of the most delightful concerts have been given by the Institute Glee Club; it would be difficult to estimate the good work done by the club in developing musical ability in the village. Its success was mainly due to the great tact and energy of Mr and Mrs Cook. The concerts had been a source of revenue to the Institute'.

However the surviving comrades wanted influence more than tribute and a proposition to re-elect the committee 'en block' was lost. The following were then appointed; Capt. Allen, Messrs Jackman, Farnall, Burborough, Wakelin, Veal, Pearman, J Henwood and Watson'.

1921-23 - Iffley Glee Club.

The Glee Club seems to have 'gone public' (in the sense of having a concert reviewed) on the 28 July 1921. The Oxford Chronicle for the 29 July remarked, 'The Iffley Glee Club last night gave an excellent rendering of Edward German's *Merrie England* in the grounds of Sir George Forrest, in aid of the Iffley Institute. The Iffley Glee Club always attracts large audiences - Iffley has the rare gift of appreciating a really good performance.....At Iffley last night both the chorus and solo singers were well above the average..' The soloists were members of the Glee Club and four, Marjorie Adams, Freda Sotham, Harry Collier and Harold Cook (baritone) subsequently styled themselves 'The Iffley Quartet'. There was an orchestra of twelve led by Frank Townsend, comparable with that which an amateur operatic society might have in the orchestra pit. The conductor was not named.

Nearly a year later on the 1 June 1922, the Glee Club gave another al fresco concert, this time in the grounds of 'Beechwood' lent by Mr William Foster. The reviewer for the Oxford Chronicle this time commented, 'The concert version of '*Tom Jones*' (Edward German) is a curiously inconsequential medley of excerpts from the opera of that name.... and the only appeal is the purely sensuous one of the music itself. This is tuneful enough, if not overdeep in content; it was well within the range of the performers who acquitted themselves commendably. Iffley may well be proud of its Glee Club (*a formula to be repeated several times in the next few years*) which sings cleanly and with good tone and intonation, and moreover provided out of its own membership three of the principal soloists, viz Miss A Sotham and Messrs H Collier and H Cook.' Oliver West conducted, his wife was at the piano and Frank Townsend again led the orchestra.

On the 14 December 1922 there was a concert indoors in Iffley schoolroom, the reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle of the 15 December said, 'Sir C V Stanford's *Battle of the Baltic* was sung by this efficient little choir. The work was obviously well rehearsed and the singers obtained a good deal of variety in tone colour. Mrs H Cook conducted carefully and with

confidence'. Mrs West was the accompanist. It occupied only the first half of the programme. Then there were pieces for mixed quartet (the Iffley Quartet with Miss Adams standing in for her mother), male quartet (Messrs H S Rowles, Harry Collier, W E Harris and Harold Cook) and solos by Marjorie Adams, Miss H Vague (mezzo soprano), Oliver West (tenor) and Mr Jackman (bass, last heard of at the 1920 AGM).

The appointment of Reginald Jacques

Reginald Jacques had been wounded in the war and his wounds continued to affect his health throughout his life. Whilst convalescing in Oxford he met Sir Hugh Allen (now Professor of Music) who encouraged him to read music at The Queen's College. He would have been among the first music students required to live in Oxford during term time. In 1922 he was 28 and assisting Maurice Besly, the organist at Queen's, in the training of the choir and of the Eglesfield Musical Society. He had a good bass voice. Had he wanted to conduct a choir or orchestra of his own he would have had to look about in the absence of any vacancies in the well-established berths in Oxford. As an old soldier he may have had direct contact with the Institute, or with its President, the Provost of Oriel, or maybe Hugh Allen was an intermediary, taking up some chance remark by one of the parties.

Whether the Glee Club was actively looking for a new conductor, or merely receptive to a suggestion is not known. What we do know is that the former conductors were not unduly put out by the turn of events as they continued with the Club. Harold Cook was mentioned several times as a soloist and Oliver West (a lay clerk in New College Choir) was treasurer in 1931 and vice chairman in 1950.

1923 - Reginald Jacques's first concert, held in Oxford.

The concert of the 24 May 1923 was held indoors in Oxford, significant in view of later developments. The reviewer said in the Oxford Chronicle for the 25 May, 'If one may judge by the number of those present at their concert last evening in the YMCA hall, the Iffley Glee Club has no lack of supporters. The first and principal item of the evening's programme was Coleridge-Taylor's melodious *'Hiawatha's Wedding Feast'* to which the performers did full justice; ... Here, as throughout the performance, much was undoubtedly due to the able conducting of Mr Reginald Jacques of Queen's College'. Again there was a small orchestra (*led for the last time by Mr Frank Townsend*) and Mrs Oliver West was at the piano. The YMCA hall was on the first floor of their building in George St. By the 1960s the hall had become the Clarendon restaurant between the corner of the Elliston and Cavell department store (now Debenham's) and the alley way with the New Theatre.

'Hiawatha's Wedding Feast' takes only about 35 minutes to perform and again the programme was filled out with a number of part songs. These included works by Parry, Besly and Thomas Wood (organist at Exeter College), setting a precedent for the next decade when there were performances of works by Stanford and his pupils (Holst, Coleridge-Taylor, Howells and Vaughan Williams) as well as by Bantock, Boughton, Gardiner, Dyson and Warlock.

By the end of 1923 the Glee Club had become, briefly, the Iffley Choral Society, perhaps in recognition of its increasing size. The Oxford Chronicle for the 21 Dec said, "Iffley's large and talented Choral Society was responsible for the arrangement of a concert at Iffley schoolroom last evening.....the opening number was the unison song Holst's *'I vow to thee my country'* and was followed by one of the best renderings of the evening, that of

Vaughan Williams's '*Towards the Unknown Region*'. The choral works were followed by part songs from the Glee Party and the Iffley Quartet whilst Bertha Stevenson sang a solo. The accompanists were Vida Wiblin and G A Darlow.

1923 - First Concert in the Town Hall

The concert of the 20 December was repeated with a few additions ten days later. This was the first time Oxford Town Hall had been used and it was a 'silver collection' evening with the proceeds going to the YMCA Building Fund. The reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle (4 January 1924) greeted the occasion thus, 'The Iffley Choral Society have closed their old year with a red letter day, marked by their first concert in the Town Hall which took place on Sunday evening. This small but enthusiastic body of singers have done good work within their own borders hitherto, but the time has come for them to contribute to the musical life of the city, and judging by Sunday's performance they should have a useful career before them.'

One omission vexed the reviewer who wrote, '... then came '*Towards the Unknown Region*' by Vaughan Williams. This should have been accompanied by the orchestra, but by some mischance the band parts arrived too late to admit of more than one practice; in view of the technical difficulties therefore, Mr Jacques reluctantly decided that it was better to be content with a pianoforte accompaniment.... especially when he had a safe and competent pianist in Miss Vida Wiblin. Still, the change was in every way disappointing, and inevitably reacted to some extent on the choir who sang with less verve than their performance in other items showed them to be capable of....But this is comparison with an Allen-Bach Choir standard, the application of which is meant to be a sincere compliment to the Iffley singers.....Their final item was Mr Besly's '*Noel*'.... a work which was produced a week ago by the Royal Choral Society at the Albert Hall, and of which the 'Morning Post' says that 'it is one of the most satisfactory Christmas songs the age has produced, and indicates the healthy condition of British effort and the extent of the ability of this particular composer - a verdict I heartily endorse'.

Of the concert on the 6 April 1924 the reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle (11 April) said, 'It would have been almost impossible to have given such a concert without some reference to the heavy loss the musical world has just sustained in the deaths of Sir Frederick Bridge, Sir Walter Parratt and Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. It was therefore most appropriate to commence the programme with the motet '*O Lord support us*' (Besly) during the singing of which the audience stood as a tribute to their memory'

It was customary for at least some of the concerts, including Sunday evenings, to have free admission and to have a 'silver collection', the proceeds of the concert being given to a charity. Of this the reviewer said, 'the fact that admission is free does not warrant a section of young people annoying their neighbours and insulting the performers by incessant chattering and giggling. perhaps something might be done by reserving certain parts of the hall to ticket holders, in which case even gratis tickets could be withheld from undesirable applicants; but one valuable remedy would be really efficient stewarding'. Performing in a larger hall was beginning to demand more resources, such as stewards and larger orchestras.

1924 - Oxford Harmonic Society.

Seven weeks later the transformation was complete. It seems unlikely that the new name could have been taken up without the acquiescence of Harold Spicer since he and Reginald

Jacques were part of the same musical community. The reviewer of the concert given in the Town Hall on Wednesday the 25 June (Commemoration Week) for the benefit of the Headington Orthopaedic Hospital wrote (Oxford Chronicle 27 June), 'The Oxford Harmonic Society is an old friend under a new name - the married name so to speak, of the Iffley Choral Society, for having taken into partnership a considerable body of singers from the city, and found a local habitation also within the boundaries of Oxford, it was felt that the latter name would be a truer expression of the main geographical source of membership. But it is less the nominal role than the tradition and training of a choir that forms its personality, and these have happily remained unchanged; so we could still enjoy the full rich tone, the steadiness of pitch and the play of light and shade which in its earlier days the choir taught us to expect of it. The balance is not perfect, and its attainment is perhaps a little delayed by a laudable rule against poaching in the preserves of other choral societies, there is a good opening here for singers at present unattached, men, of course, being most needed and especially some heavy basses.'

He continued, '... they gave as their main work Parry's *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* with Messrs Burton and Louis Smith as the piper and mayor respectively. This was sung with much spirit and good realisation of its mingled humour and tragedy; there were a few small blemishes - the basses were not quite unanimous in their interjections'.

Thus the transformation into an Oxford choral society had been completed by way of a change in conductor, rehearsal room and name.

Domestic Matters

The new rehearsal room was probably the hall of the Cowley Road Methodist Church, on the corner of Jeune St., less than two hundred yards from the Plain. In the other direction there was just over half a mile of built up South East Oxford before reaching the line of Magdalen Rd/Howard St. Thereafter there was about half a mile of floodplain, allotments and marsh before reaching a slight ridge on which were Temple Cowley, Cowley and, nearest the river, Iffley. Through the middle of these fields flowed Boundary Brook, demarcating Oxfordshire and Berkshire. The gap was spanned by the Iffley and Cowley Roads and for those without bicycles there were the No.7 and No.6 motorbuses.

There is no voice from within the Institute to say what it felt about the loss of a source of income and the removal from Iffley of its local centre of musical development, but the next event indicates that relations were still friendly. A garden party (Oxford Chronicle 1 Aug 1924) was reported thus, 'The members of Oxford Harmonic Society which has given some noteworthy performances this year held a garden party in the grounds of 'The Priory', Iffley Rd. Oxford. During the afternoon the members took the opportunity of presenting the conductor (Mr. Jacques) with some recognition of his work for the Society (it seems doubtful if the conductor was as yet paid any honorarium). The presentation took the form of a handsome gold wristlet watch, on which was inscribed, 'From the members of OHS 1924'.

Mr. O. West spoke in appreciation of the work Mr Jacques had done to raise the Society to its present level. After Mrs Sotham had presented the watch, Mr Jacques thanked them all in an informal speech and said that if they all continued in the way they were now doing the Society had a future before it.

1924-25 - First performance of an oratorio.

The situation had then stabilised to the point where it is convenient to continue the history in terms of concert seasons. Of the performance on the 7 Dec 1924 the reviewer for the Oxford Chronicle (12 December) made much the same points as before, 'the work chosen by Oxford Harmonic Society for their winter concert was Parry's *A song of darkness and light*..... the choir, as usual, were well up to their workMiss Bertha Stevenson sang the solos with much sympathy, and one rather grudged the omission of the finest. It is a perennial difficulty with performances of this type that it is practically impossible to secure as much rehearsal for the band as the choir and there was occasional evidence that the players were less familiar with the work than the singers'.

On the 12 March 1925 the society visited Banbury on a Thursday evening to give another performance of *The Pied piper of Hamelin*, this time for the Infirmary Extension Fund. Frederick Burton remained as the piper, but the part of the mayor was taken by a promising broadcaster, Frederick Grisewood.

The important feature of the season came three days later when the Society performed an oratorio for the first time. The reviewer wrote in The Oxford Journal Illustrated (18 March), 'Mr Reginald Jacques led the Oxford Harmonic Society to its greatest achievement on Sunday when they gave a performance of Parts I and II of the *Creation* in the Town Hall to a crowded audience. The Oxford Harmonic Society has now grown to a very convenient size, possesses many good voices and shows generally keen musical intelligence,..... There was a small string orchestra and Dr H Ley, the cathedral organist, filled in the wind parts. The society was particularly happy in its soloists, Miss Bertha Stevenson, Mr Archibald Winter and Mr Frederick Grisewood and the rendering of this beautiful work makes one wonder why it is so seldom performed in Oxford.....More male voices are wanted to balance the choir, which is especially strong on the soprano side, and when that is accomplished the Oxford Harmonic Society will be a choir of which Oxford will have reason to be proud.'

However, the regular review in the Oxford Chronicle (20 Mar 1925) was more stern. 'And now after many years of oblivion the Oxford Harmonic Society revived *The Creation* for us last Sunday night. Mr Jacques and his singers are to be congratulated on their enterprise on letting us hear it again. There, unfortunately, congratulations must end, for it was not, in fact, a good performance. The choir sang accurately with good tone and good articulation, but it was monotonous and dead.....Mr Jacques took no long view of the music and even in a simple chorus like 'The Heavens are telling' made no serious attempt to dispose his climaxes or get his little orchestra to make the most obvious points' The critics appear to have had a dilemma, how to pay the choir the compliment of criticising it to a high standard whilst encouraging it to improve.

The fourth concert of a busy season was given on Thursday 24 June in the Holywell Music Room and included Parry's *Ode to Music*, Vaughan William's *In the Springtime of the year* and a number of cello solos.

1925-26 - Forty Singing Seamen.

The opening concert of the season was given on the 29 November and the Oxford Journal Illustrated said 'Handel's *Dettingen Te Deum* was the principal work performed by the Oxford Harmonic Society in the Town Hall on Sunday evening, and since this is a strong

choir, the vigorous passages, swelling to an exultation of praise, were adequately rendered. Mr Reginald Jacques, the conductor, seldom sacrifices rhythm to the spectacular effect and in consequence there was a strong rhythmic feeling throughout, unmarred by the various changes in atmosphere.....The *Brahms Song of Destiny* was unfortunately not characterised by the admirable enunciation of the *Te Deum* but was otherwise effective.' There was no orchestra, Dr. Ley accompanied on the organ.

An Oxford Festival of Music had been arranged for the week 3-8 May 1926 to celebrate the Tercentenary of the endowing of the Heather Professorship of Music. It included a concert by the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Adrian Bolt, a choral concert by Oxford Bach Choir, a concert by Oxford Orchestral Society, opera and ballet at the Playhouse (in Woodstock Rd) and folk dancing in New College gardens. In the Oxford Chronicle for the 14 May, a reviewer, under the title 'Oxford Harmonic Society –An interesting debut' wrote 'On Monday evening (10 May) the Oxford Harmonic Society gave a concert which though not actually included in the Heather Festival, was intended as a sort of coda to it. The main interest centred in *Forty Singing Seamen* a new cantata by Dr Thomas Wood which created a good first impression and was well received; but as a further performance with full orchestra is announced for (Thursday) the 3 June detailed criticism will be postponed.'

It seems that this performance was a dress rehearsal for the Society's appearance at the Oxford Subscription Concert in the Town Hall on that date. (Concertgoers had to go to London to hear professional symphony orchestras and the Oxford Subscription Concerts was a music club that aimed to bring such orchestras to Oxford once a year as well as presenting more frequent performances by professional quartets).

In the event the concert of the 3 June was postponed as the General Strike prevented Sir Henry Wood and the New Queens Hall Orchestra from travelling to Oxford.

Whereas there had been four OHS concerts in the previous season there were only two in this one, no doubt due to the extensive rehearsals for the Subscription Concert that never happened.

1926-27 - A Subscription Concert.

Reginald Jacques succeeded Maurice Besly as organist at Queens College in 1926 and the Society performed on the 9 December 1926 Besly's concert version of *Carmen*. This had a solo part for the Toreador only, but many choruses which suited the choir. The reviewer (Oxford Journal Illustrated, 15 December) wrote, '.... The members clearly enjoyed the chorus of street boys, discovered the sinuous rhythmical charm of the Sequidilla and swelled to the triumphant strains in the March and Entrance of the Banderillos, while they provided a magnificent chorus to the Toreadors Song which was sung with plenty of verve by Mr John Andrews who has a very fine voice and knows how to use it.' He and the choir sang other songs all to the piano accompaniment of Phyllis Edens who now appeared regularly as the Society's accompanist

At last on the 24 February 1927 came the rearranged Subscription Concert. The reviewer in the Oxford Journal Illustrated of the 2 March wrote 'Sir Henry Wood who was given an honorary degree at this university during last year's Music Festival conducted the orchestral items and Reginald Jacques (Queens) his own Society's venture. The programme apart from Dr Thomas Wood's *Forty Singing Seamen* was purely orchestral: *A Seaman's*

Overture-T Wood, Brandenburg Concert No 4-Bach, Siegfried's Journey to the Rhine-Wagner, and Symphony No3 in F-Brahms. The first performance of a *Seaman's Overture* by Dr Thomas Wood, which was only written last year, was naturally an interesting venture. The composer drew on his experience of childhood spent largely at sea and a youth passed amongst seamen, and it was their company which inspired him when he wrote this original and striking work, with a haunting suggestion of traditional sea songs and shanties. The splash of the waves was charmingly conveyed towards the end and the work closed as a dirge for those who had served the sea too long and were sacrificed to it in the end. Needless to say, the orchestra gave a most sympathetic interpretation of it, and the composer, sitting in the gallery was awarded an ovation.

Mr Reginald Jacques then led the Oxford Harmonic Society in a fine performance of *Forty Singing Seamen* also by Dr T Wood, a setting for Alfred Noyes's quaint ballad which is based on the medieval epistle of Pope Prester John. The Harmonic Society sang this work some months ago, but it was now given with orchestral accompaniment for the first time. Mr Jacques and his choir were very successful in their interpretation of this virile at times humorous composition and the enunciation was particularly good, Mr Herbert Haynor sang the all too slight baritone solo effectively.'

Hilda Best, a member of the choir, overheard Sir Henry Wood, standing at the back of the Town Hall during rehearsal, say of Reginald Jacques, 'That man will go far!' ('64 years a singing', Oxford Times, Friday, Jan 6 1989, p15).

The season was completed on the 20 May with a performance of *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* and some songs in the Arlosh Hall of Manchester College.

1927-28 - Christmas Oratorio and King Arthur.

The first concert of the season on the 27 November 1927 in the Town Hall was mainly a performance of parts of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*. The reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle (2 December) commented on the improved balance of the choir now that more men had joined, on the poor diction in Brahms's *Song of Destiny* and on the spirited rendering of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

The choir came to the most interesting part of their season when they preformed Purcell's semi-opera *King Arthur* and Thomas Wood's *The Ballad of Hampstead Heath* in the Sheldonian on the 1 March 1928. *King Arthur* had just been staged successfully in Cambridge by Denis Arundel using a new edition of the text and score that was later published by the Cambridge University Press. The abridged concert version used by the Society lasted about an hour, the solo parts being taken by Olwen Price, Edward Manning and Stuart Robertson. The reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle of the 2 March wrote, 'The chorus was vigorous and alert and gave Mr Jacques all he asked of them. The accompaniments were provided by a band led by Miss Underhill with the notable and admirable addition of a harpsichord lent and played by Mr R C Nicholson.

In *The Ballad of Hampstead Heath* the choir had a different and in some ways more exacting task. This is a setting of James Elroy Flecker's fantastic dream of a revel on the Heath, what time "Young Bacchus and his crew came tumbling down" and Dr Wood has interpreted its gay humour. It is scored for a large orchestra, but the parts are so cued in that a medium sized or even small band can furnish the accompaniment adequately: a good deal of percussion is necessary, for although the bells and celesta may be dispensed with, their

absence would be a serious loss to the climax of the revels and the subtle change therefrom to the scene where "far in a rosy mist withdrawn the God and all his crew.....smiled as they wept" – a passage of exquisite modulations.'

James Elroy Flecker was a student of Trinity College in 1904 and later joined the Consular Service.-- He is remembered principally for his poems from *The Golden Journey to Samarkand* (1913), though he himself never got any nearer than Constantinople and Beirut. Wikipaedia says that his early death in 1915 at the age of thirty one was regarded at the time as 'unquestionably the greatest premature loss that English literature has suffered since the death of Keats'.

The season concluded with a pleasant informal invitation concert in the Arlosh Hall on the 25 May 1928. Parry's *Ode to Music* and some motets were sung and music for the harpsichord was played by Mr Nicholson.

1928-29 – A second Subscription Concert.

The season followed the pattern of recent seasons with one major concert in March.

On the 22 November 1928 the Society gave another invitation concert in the Arlosh Hall including a new work, *In Honour of the City* by Sir George Dyson. This was a setting of a quaint old poem by William Dunbar. The reviewer in the Oxford Chronicle of the 23 November wrote, 'Its full effect could not, of course, be judged with only pianoforte accompaniment, as very full scoring is indicated, but some parts were impressive even so, and others promised to be under more favourable conditions. But composers will keep on writing for big orchestras that nobody can afford nowadays ...' .

The Society took part in the Subscription Concert on Thursday 7 March 1929 in the Town Hall. The London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Sir Hugh Allen, The programme started with *Symphony No4 in E Minor* by Brahms followed by *Brigg Fair* by Delius and then Professor Donald Tovey played his own piano concerto. Finally came the overture to *Prince Igor* by Borodin and two of the Polovtsian Dances sung by the Society. Hilda Best related that it was impossible to rehearse with the orchestra beforehand and that the conductor's final words to the choir just before he raised the baton were 'Just watch me and God help you!' The performance went off perfectly.

1929-30 – The departure of Reginald Jacques.

The OHS gave the 'Bach' concert in the Oxford Festival of Music on Wednesday 7 May 1930 in the Town Hall with the Oxford Orchestral Society and a quartet of first class soloists, Dorothy Silk, Muriel Brunskill, B Flegg and Stuart Robertson. The reviewer in the Oxford Times for the 9 May wrote 'The motet for double choir (*Be not afraid*) proved a severe test for The Oxford Harmonic Society but the final chorale provided a triumphant climax'.... *Come Jesus Come* in eight parts was not so exacting in vocal difficulties for the chorus and was given with accuracy and vigour, especially in the splendid final chorale...In the final cantata *Praise Jehova* the chorus again secured the honours'. The Oxford Orchestral Society played Bach's *Suite in D* and M Tucker joined them in the *Concerto in D minor* for piano.

This was the last time Reginald Jacques conducted the choir. The concert on Friday 9 May, the culmination of the festival, was a joint performance with Oxford Bach Choir of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and Butterworth's *Five Songs* and *Banks of Green Willow*.

The latter commemorated T Butterworth of Trinity College who was killed in 1916. Sir Thomas Allen conducted and Oxford Orchestral Society accompanied. The soloists were as before except that B Flegg was replaced by Keith Falkner. The size of Oxford Bach Choir at this time is not known, but it is surprising that they needed reinforcement unless the Friday afternoon timing restricted the turnout. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 16 May commented that with the orchestra there were over 200 performers. This was the Harmonic Society's first appearance in the Sheldonian.

In October 1930 (probably about the time of the Annual General Meeting) a notice of Reginald Jacques's resignation as conductor appeared in the press. The proximate cause was the resignation of Guy Warrack as conductor of the Oxford Orchestral Society (He subsequently conducted the BBC Scottish Orchestra from 1936 to 1945 and then the Sadlers Wells Ballet Orchestra). Reginald Jacques conducted the OOS until 1936. On strictly choral matters it should be noted that he became conductor of the (London) Bach Choir in 1931 and continued there till 1960. Speaking on Classic FM on the 25 March 1998 upon his retirement as conductor of the Bach Choir, Sir David Willcocks said that when he took over in 1960 the choir 'obviously adored' Dr Reginald Jacques who was then their conductor. Of his musical taste Arthur Jacobs, probably thinking of his time with the Bach Choir, said 'Jacques represented a traditional type of English choral leadership, whose characteristic approach to Bach (massive, devotional and in the vernacular) was challenged by his younger contemporaries but forged a strong bond between amateur choral singers and their audiences,' (The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Ed Stanley Sadie, 2nd Ed. Macmillan 2001, Vol. 12, p741).

The Second Decade 1931-41

Three New College organists.

1931-33 - John Dykes Bower.

Oxford Harmonic Society had not been overlooked in these moves. John Dykes Bower had come from Truro Cathedral to be organist at New College in 1929 (in place of Sir William Henry Harris who had gone to the cathedral) and he became conductor of the Society in late 1930. His first concert was on Sunday 8 February 1931 in the Town Hall.

Handel's *Acis and Galatea* with orchestral accompaniment was performed first and then Brahms's *Neues Liebeslieder* waltzes with two pianos played by Mary Wiblin and Phyllis Edens. The review in the Oxford Mail of the 9 February 1931 was mainly about the soloists, but it also revealed that Reginald Jacques had had a noticeable personal following in the choir. It said, 'In spite of a reduction in the numbers, especially amongst the sopranos....Mr Dykes Bower may congratulate himself upon the performance, sharing the honours with soloists, choir and orchestra...'

The next concert was also a performance of a substantial work. The *Mozart Requiem* was given on Sunday 17 May 1931 in New College Chapel, which was now more readily available. The reviewer in The Isis of the 21 May noted that, 'there was a string orchestra supplemented by Dr Harris who filled in the wind parts on the piano. Consequently some significant points such as the trombone entry before 'Tuba Mirum' were lost.' The Oxford Mail of the 18 May, after commenting on the drawbacks of placing the choir in the ante

chapel, said, 'Mr J Dykes Bower who conducted, gave a sensitive reading of the work, and the performance of both choir and orchestra, the latter led by Miss Venables, suggested infinite care at rehearsal. Mr Dykes Bower knows what effects he wants and gets them.'

Professor Einstein was in the audience and the reviewer said, 'To see the celebrated man many discovered on this occasion that they had no need to sit through an hour's lecture in German, which they could only dimly understand'.

The Annual General Meeting was held in St Aldate's Rectory Room on Wednesday 14 October 1931 and this and those in 1932 and 1933 were reported in the Oxford Mail of the next day. The individuals elected had all been noted at the garden party on the 1 August 1924, Sir Hugh Allen as President, numerous vice presidents. Alderman E B Lewis as chairman, Mrs Birt as Secretary, Miss E Morley as Assistant Secretary and Mr Oliver West as Treasurer. There were nine other committee members, five of them men. Significantly there was a collector, first Mr C Wale and in 1933 Mr E Barwick. Presumably silver collections were still being made, but even so the first AGM was told of a very satisfactory balance of £9 2s 8d (about £500-600 in present day money) more than for many years!

The annual general meetings were all held on the second Wednesday in October, but the second and third used the Society's new headquarters, Taphouse's Music Rooms. Charles Taphouse & Son's music shop was at 3 Magdalen St. sandwiched between Elliston & Cavell's main store (now Debenham's) and their other shop on the corner of Magdalen St. and George St. The photograph in the second Blue Book shows that the Music Rooms had a separate entrance which could be used out of shop hours. On the third floor there were two large rooms and on the fourth, three box-rooms with pianos. The large rooms could not have held more than 40-50.

On the 6 November 1931 the Oxford Times published an article on 'Oxford's Place in the World of Music'. This is too large to be reproduced here, but it is invaluable in that it traces Sir Hugh Allen's efforts to mingle town and gown, gives a contemporary survey of musical life in Oxford and places important figures in context. College organists apart, it mentions local singers: Mr A Louis Smith, 'a bass of considerable power who conducted West Oxford Choral Society after Dr Harris resigned the conductorship', Frederick Burton, 'a Magdalen tenor who conducts WOCS' and most interestingly, George Thewlis 'the well known bass who conducts the East Oxford Continuation School Choir.'

The first concert of the 1931-32 season was held in a crowded Oxford Town Hall on Sunday 31 January. The choir sang *A Dirge for Two Veterans* by Charles Wood to words by Walt Whitman and *In Windsor Forest* by Vaughan Williams, a cantata adapted from his opera *Sir John in Love*. The orchestra played Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* and Susan Turner and A Louis Smith sang a number of songs. The review noted that the collection raised £17 1s 6d, over £1700 in present day money, but under £2 per head.

The three-day Haydn Festival opened on the 8 May with a performance of *The Creation*. The Oxford Bach Choir, Oxford Harmonic Society and Oxford Orchestral Society joined forces and were conducted by Dr Harris. John Dykes Bower was at the organ and Isobel Baillie came to Oxford to sing the soprano part. As it happened, Trevor Harvey wrote the review for the Oxford Mail and said, 'The most important people in performances of this kind are, of course, the chorus, and it can be said at once that they sang particularly well.' He

was also immensely impressed by Isobel Baillie's singing, she had, 'lovely tone, a controlled flexibility and the understanding of the music.'

The AGM on the 12 October 1932 passed off without any hint of what was to come. A few days after the end of Michaelmas term the conductor's appointment as organist of Durham Cathedral was announced and he resigned his post with the Society.

Nevertheless he remained in Oxford long enough to conduct on the 29 January 1933 the works he had been preparing the previous term, Bach's cantata *My spirit was in heaviness* and Vaughan William's *Benedicite*. The review in the Oxford Mail for the 30 January had a valedictory notice, 'Sunday evening's concert given by Oxford Harmonic Society in New College Chapel, under the conductorship of Mr J Dykes Bower served to remind Oxford music-lovers how great will be their loss through Mr Dykes Bower's departure from Oxford. He is a very distinguished musician. The choir regrets Mr Dykes Bower's departure, not only on account of his musicianship, but also on account of the great personal regard in which he is held. A cabinet gramophone and records were presented to him at the end of last term and he is choosing to regard this as his parting gift.'

Trevor Harvey, music critic of the Oxford Mail, had already agreed to take up the conductorship until some permanent arrangement could be made.

In the event he prepared and conducted just one concert, given on Monday the 22 May in the Wesley Memorial Church Hall. There was a thunderstorm that delayed the arrival of some of the orchestra and left some band parts missing, but the reviewer in the Oxford Mail for the 23 May thought that the performance of Parry's *the glories of Our Blood and State* was given 'a consistently good performance throughout'. Of the *Ballad of Hampstead Heath* he said, 'far from becoming hackneyed, is still too little known even in Oxford. It is by no means an easy work. Choir and orchestra achieved some brilliant effects in it.'

The Society is known to have rehearsed for some years in the old City of Oxford High School for Boys on the corner of George St and New Inn Hall St. (now part of the History Faculty) and the use of the Memorial Hall, next to the school, narrows down the probable date of the switch to the High School for rehearsals to the autumn of 1932.

1933-39 - Sydney Watson.

By the time of the AGM in October 1933 Sydney Watson had become organist at New College and had accepted the conductorship of the Society.

The society's first concert under their new conductor was on Sunday 11 February 1934 in New College Chapel. The reviewer in the Oxford Mail of the 12 February said of the performance of Verdi's *Stabat Mater*. 'No audience could fall asleep under such dramatic music. It was very effectively performed by choir and orchestra, who gently stressed each change of mood and subtly interpreted each nicely graduated effect'. It had been preceded by three choral hymns by Vaughan Williams and by Dowland's *Lachrymae 1599*. The latter was the earliest collection of printed orchestral music in England.

The summer concert on Thursday 7 June in the Wesley Memorial Church Hall led the reviewer to write, 'Dr Sydney Watson, the conductor, as might have been expected, chose some interesting and strong fare, which called for fine broad effects., good rhythm and no guesswork.....George Dyson's *In Honour of the City* for chorus and orchestra, is a

difficult work demanding discipline and familiarity before the necessary robust effects can be given. The choir realised the requisite light and shade as well as the broad effects and did not sacrifice tempo. The enunciation, however, was not always clear. The orchestra provided an interesting accompaniment and, like the choir, was responsible for good tone.'

Dr Thomas Armstrong, who had become organist at Christ Church and the conductor of the Oxford Bach Choir the previous year, sang in the choir and then joined Sydney Watson on two pianos to play Schumann's *Andante and variations for two pianos* and later, Somervell's *Variations for two pianos*.

On the 28 February 1935 listeners could have heard a recital by Rachmaninoff in the Town Hall, though the first two months of 1925 trumped this with performances by Rubinstein and Moiseiwitsch (of whom Rachmaninoff said was his 'spiritual heir').

1934-35 - The Bach/Handel Festival.

This year was another festival year, in this case the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of both Bach and Handel. After an opening afternoon service in the cathedral on the afternoon of the 5 May 1935 (sung by the combined choirs of Christ Church, New College and Magdalen College), there was an evening concert in the Town Hall given jointly by OHS, conducted by Sydney Watson and WOCS, conducted by Frederick Burton, with the OOS. OHS sang Bach's *Magnificat* of which the reviewer in the Oxford Mail of the 6 May wrote, '...a first rate performance...full of life and colour, and excellently well proportioned. The balance between choir and orchestra was admirable.' WOCS performed an abridged version of Handel's *Semele* which was 'vigorous and alert, without any pseudo-Handelian stodginess.'

On the 25 November 1935 OHS again combined with WOCS to provide the chorus for the fourth movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* at a Subscription Concert featuring the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. He was reported to have been 'very pleased indeed with the choir'.

1935-36 - Verdi Requiem.

There was only one performance per season for the next four years, which was understandable in the first two years as the Society made a big effort for each concert.

The performance of the Verdi *Requiem* in the Sheldonian Theatre on Sunday the 24 May 1936 was a landmark for the OHS as it was the first time they had promoted a large-scale work out of their own resources, not taking part in a Subscription Concert nor leaning on a festival. True the use of OOS, an amateur orchestra, greatly reduced the orchestral costs, but this was no more than the Oxford Bach Choir did as a matter of course.

The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 29 May wrote, 'The Oxford Harmonic Society gave one of its most important concerts in its history on Sunday afternoon.....Oxford has possibly more concerts than any other city of its size, but although many of these events are of interest musically, few are characterised by the fire and inspiration of Sunday's performance. Dr Watson was out for big effects and sharply heightened contrasts, which he achieved with an inspiration that did not flag..... Soloists, conductor, choir and orchestra received a great ovation, and conductor and soloists were called back time after time.'

A number of features of Oxford changed between 1933 and 1936. In 1933 Stephen Dorrill initiated a reconstruction of the New Theatre with an Art Deco interior which, when reopened in February 1934 was thought to be 'the most luxurious of its time in the country'. The Royal Oxford Hotel opened in 1935. Oxford Zoological Gardens had opened in 1931 on the site of the present Thames Valley Police Headquarters in Kidlington, many of the animals being donated by other zoos. By 1936 it was in financial difficulties and newspaper readers were urged to see their zoo whilst they could. In October the animals were moved to Dudley Castle by Dudley Zoological Society Ltd.

1936-37 - *The Dream of Gerontius*.

The 1937 performance of the *Dream of Gerontius* is entrenched in the Society's lore as the one in which the OHS, OOS and Abingdon Madrigal Society (presumably the semi-chorus) took up so much space that they were all placed on the floor of the Town Hall and the audience distributed to the stage and galleries.

The performance on the afternoon of Sunday 23 May was written up in the Oxford Mail (24 May) thus, 'Dr Sydney Watson has an undoubted capacity for producing the dramatic from both choir and orchestra....Nor did he achieve his results by merely arousing a vast volume of sound, as is frequently inferred when the word "dramatic" is applied to a musical performance. Such volume he certainly did draw forth-and admirably too-when he gave the orchestra and choir their head in, for example, the Demon's chorus. But it was rather in his treatment of the work as a whole that his dramatic conceptions became of greatest value.....Suffice it to say the choir was lively to its conductor's demands.'

The impressive line up of soloists, Astra Desmond, Steuart Wilson and Arthur Cranmer were also praised. The need to preface the work with a Bach cantata was not questioned.

1937-38 - *A Vaughan Williams Concert*.

A joint concert was given with the OBC and the OOS in the Sheldonian on the afternoon of Thursday 12 May 1938. The indications are that this was a Subscription Concert but with a local orchestra. Thomas Armstrong conducted the choral parts and Sydney Watson the orchestra in *The London Symphony*.

The concert opened with Vaughan Williams's *Benedicite*, of which the critic in the Oxford Times of the 13 May said, ' *Benedicite* forms a fine opportunity to show the quality of a large chorus.' Of his *Sancta Civitas* he said, 'an excellent contrast was afforded by the concealed choir under Mr. B Naylor. Some beautiful violin solos gave relief to the powerful choruses which heaped one climax on another. At the close a great ovation was awarded to Dr Vaughan Williams, Dr Armstrong, the soloists, choirs and orchestra.'

1938-39 - *Sirenes by Debussy*.

Sydney Watson became organist at Winchester during 1938, but he was back in Oxford on the 23 February 1939 to conduct OOS in the last Subscription Concert of the season. After the overture to Rossini's *Tancredi*, the main items were the Elgar *Cello Concerto* and Mendelssohn's *Scottish Symphony*. *Sirenes*, one of Debussy's suite of three nocturnes was also performed. This, evocative of the sirens and the sea, required a wordless female chorus (eight sopranos and eight mezzo sopranos originally) and the Society contrived to supply

them. The Oxford Times's critic said on the 24 February, 'in Sirenes a small orchestra was assisted by a choir with quaint and very pleasing effect.'

Although Dr HK Andrews had arrived at New College in 1938 it is possible that he did not take up conducting the Society until Michaelmas term 1939. There exists from this time a copy of the Rules that cannot be later than the manuscript amendment of October 1940 which shows that Annual General Meetings were still held in October. The Hon. Collector was still present, but it seems inconceivable that some concerts like the Verdi *Requiem* or *The Dream of Gerontius* could have been financed in this way. There was also a requirement for two university representatives on the committee of twelve.

1939-41 - Dr H K Andrews, Wartime.

The advent of war posed two main problems for choirs. One was the shortage of male singers. Conscription affected only a restricted age-range, but the knock on effects were serious, as other men then had to work overtime to cover for their absence or do ARP (Air raid precaution) duty, or first aid or fire warden roles in the evening, which made them less inclined to attend rehearsals on other occasions.

The other problem was the threat of air raids at night. This resulted in a firmly enforced blackout, making movement after dark less inviting and requiring light proofed rehearsal rooms. Bombing became less of a concern as the war went on and it became clear that Oxford was not a target in spite of the presence of the motor works. To begin with concerts tended to take place during the daylight hours, i.e. on Thursday, Saturday or Sunday afternoons, but there were evening performance at the New Theatre in 1941, albeit starting at 6.00 pm. On the other hand there seems to have been a strong desire to escape the grimness of war, for even a short time, and whatever distractions could be promoted at weekends were very well attended.

The pre-war movement to perform Bach or Haydn with small orchestras and harpsichord continuo had presented an opportunity to Boyd Neel, Arnold Goldsbrough and Reginald Jacques (in 1936) to form professional string orchestras which, with the addition of a few wind instruments, could play works up to the time of Mozart authentically ((Oxford Concerts-A Jubilee Record, by Frank Howes. Basil Blackwell-Oxford 1969).

It was the Jacques Orchestra that Dr Andrews used to accompany the Society's performance of Bach's *St John Passion* on Sunday 5 May 1940 at 2.15 pm in the Town Hall. The critic in the Oxford Magazine for the 9 May wrote, 'This was Dr Andrews' first appearance as conductor of the Oxford Harmonic Society, and he is to be congratulated on a most successful performance. The choir was excellent in blend and intonation, and its singing was always alive and enthusiastic. The bass section deserves a special word of praise.'

Dr Andrews switched to the *St Matthew Passion* for the next concert on Sunday 9 March 1941 at 2.15 in the Town Hall. A critic writing in the Cherwell issue of the 13 March said, 'The performance by the Oxford Harmonic Society last Sunday came as a fitting climax to a term which has been very creditable indeed. Dr Andrews assembled for this work a better group of soloists than he did for last year's "St John Passion" and their performance was very fine indeed. Eric Greene, who has proved himself the best tenor in England for this type of music....'

The Third decade 1941-51 George Thewlis in the ascendant.

Although the choir at New College gained a high reputation under his guidance older choir members reported that Dr Andrews could not come to terms with the limitations of the Society, attendances fell at rehearsals and Sir Hugh Allen arranged an amicable separation before the start of the 1941-42 season.

At that time committee meetings were held in Sir Hugh Allen's rooms in New College on a Sunday at 12.15pm, he himself taking the chair. When the question of a new conductor arose, Hilda Best said that she suggested George Thewlis, and in due course it was agreed to approach him. George Thewlis had already been noticed in the 1931 survey 'Oxford's Place in the World of Music', he was a lay clerk at the cathedral, had conducted choirs previously and worked at the Bodleian Library where he was indefatigable in unearthing early music.

1941-42.

A remarkable charity event took place at 6.00pm on the 23 November at The New Theatre that showed diverse entertainers working in a common cause. It was for the Oxfordshire Red Cross Agricultural Fund and was billed as 'THE GREATEST ALL STAR ENTERTAINMENT EVER PRESENTED IN OXFORD'. The first half featured an overture by the New Theatre Orchestra and then a variety show compered by Richard Murdoch and including Arthur Askey, Celia Lipton, Jack Warner, Adelaide Hall, Bobby Howes, Pat Kirkwood, Florence Desmond and Flanagan & Allen.

The second half was given up entirely to the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. The New Theatre was a first port of call for shows finishing their London run and Stanley Dorrill had no doubt used his good relations with the London impresario Jack Hylton to assemble such a cast. The theatre was full and as the cheapest tickets were 15/- (say £40 in present money) a big sum of money must have been raised.

The debut of George Thewlis as the Society's new conductor for the performance on Saturday 6 December 1941 at 2.30 in the Town Hall was not mentioned by the reviewer writing in the Oxford Mail of the 8 December, '...a fine performance of Mozart's *Requiem Mass* by the Oxford Harmonic Society and the Jacques String Orchestra under the conductorship of Mr George Thewlis.....the choir sang it with obvious enjoyment and a sense of its grandeur.'

The programme has a note that rehearsals for the *St Matthew Passion* would begin the next Thursday in the Holywell Music Room. It is likely that the room had been used for rehearsals since the beginning of the war.

The actual performance of the *St Matthew Passion* was on the 8 March 1942 in the Town Hall. Isobel Baillie and Eric Greene were among the soloists, the choir's part was reviewed in the Oxford Mail for the 9 March as follows, 'The choir obviously enjoys its work to the full. They will enjoy it even more when they can bring to it their complete musicianship.....The smaller parts were taken by various members of the chorus. This produced some startling variety of both voice and diction and an occasional excitement to the performance. The

Harmonic Society, now some hundred strong, considerably outbalanced the orchestra in the larger choruses.... The whole performance brings great credit to Mr Thewlis. It is the biggest of his conducting experiences.'

1942-43 - *Messiah*.

The Society's first performance of Handel's *Messiah* was given on the 7 March 1943 at 2.30 in the Town Hall. This was the full version and George Thewlis assembled an augmented chamber orchestra and again engaged Isobel Baillie and Eric Greene. The critic in the Oxford Mail for the 8 March wrote, 'The chorus, fresh of voice and full of spirit at the end of the three hours performance sang with real feeling and power.' The Oxford Magazine commented, '..if any be singled out for special praise it must be the eight stalwarts who sustained the tenor'.

There had been a great demand for tickets and they sold out so a repeat performance was given one week later. Understandably Isobel Baillie and Eric Greene could not be rebooked at one week's notice, but their replacements were the only changes

The published ticket prices, (5/- Reserved and numbered, 3/6 and 2/6 unnumbered) make it possible to estimate that a full house of over 1000 (quite feasible under the old seating system) would have yielded an income of between £150-160 (£7500-£8000 in today's money) The second concert is more problematic, since later experience shows it was unlikely to have been another sell out. At the end of the season the treasurer reported a balance of £115 of which £105 was profit from the *Messiah*. The balance from the previous season (£10) indicates that little profit had been made from the performances of the Bach Passions even though the Town Hall had been 'full', probably due the engagement of fully professional orchestras. The secretary reported in 1943 that 'the ban on the use of seats in the gallery in the Town Hall (slower to evacuate in an emergency) has been re-imposed', so this might have been a limitation as well.

A summer charity concert was given in Keble College chapel on Thursday 24 June 1943, setting a pattern for the next few years. This was in aid of the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmens' Families Association. The choir sang Palestrina's mass *Assumpta est Maria*, Eric Greene sang hymns and other solemn pieces for tenor whilst Thomas Armstrong accompanied him and played pieces on the organ. Of the Mass the critic in the Oxford Times of the 25 June said, '...and the brightness of the soprano voices emphasised its beauty and added lightness to the background.'

1943-44 - *Elijah*

The committee debated on several occasions what orchestra should be engaged for Mendelssohn's *Elijah* on Saturday the 11 March 1944. With £120 in hand it was possible to have both a large orchestra and a professional one. The London Symphony Orchestra was chosen, though this required a performance on a Saturday night to ease rehearsal problems. The reviewer in the Oxford Times for the 17 March was greatly taken by the performance of Henry Gill as Elijah, and after complimenting Margaret Ritchie he said of Peter Pears (from Sadler's Wells Opera), 'Peter Pears has a distinctive tenor voice and sang most effectively.' Of the choir he said, 'The choir, depleted since the war, but still

containing a number of good fresh voices, sang the choruses with obvious enjoyment and no little artistic skill. The mounting climax of praise (sic) to Baal was well done.'

The summer concert was given in New College Chapel on Thursday 8 June in aid of the Women's Land Army Benevolent Fund. This time the choir sang Palestrina's *Missa Papae Macelli & Exultate Te*. Dr Andrews played three Choral Preludes by Brahms and joined with May Harrison in performances of Bach's *Violin Sonata* and the second movement from Brahms's *Violin Concerto*.

1944-45 - *Acis and Galatea*.

Audiences of the time seem to have expected more for their money than current ones, for when the Society gave its next concert on Sunday 11 March 1945 Handel's *Acis and Galatea* was prefaced by Vaughan Williams's *Festival Te Deum* and Bach's *Magnificat in D*. The critic writing in the Oxford Mail of the 12 March said, '... a fine performance of Dr. Vaughan Williams's *Festival Te Deum* and a moving interpretation of Bach's *Magnificat*... Sometimes the able and vigorous Boyd Neel orchestra was a little louder than the strength of the choir justified, but the final choruses including the *Gloria* were well done.'

The date of this concert had had to be altered and the secretary was directed on the 29 October 1944 to write to the Secretary of the Bach Choir 'rebuking her for arranging the Bach Choir concert with complete disregard for the arrangements of other societies.' In February 1945, shortly before the concert the committee agreed that 'the conductor should receive an honorarium of £25 as a token of the Society's appreciation of all his hard work on behalf of the Society'. This was the first mention of such a thing, all four of the previous conductors had well paid positions in colleges. Although there was a heavy loss on *Acis and Galatea* the society still had a balance of about £45 (say £1500) before the last concert.

This time the summer concert in Keble Chapel on Thursday 14 June was in aid of the Oxford Eye Hospital Rebuilding Fund. The reviewer in the Oxford Magazine said, 'The Oxford Harmonic Society's rendering of the principal work, Jacob Leo Hassler's mass, *Dixit Maria* with Mr George Thewlis conducting, was outstanding.' Alec Wyton played a number of preludes and a toccata on the organ.

1945-46 - *Back to Messiah*.

The Society went back to performing *Messiah* for its first peacetime concert on Sunday 25 November 1945, no doubt to make some money (OOS provided the orchestra), and thereby started a tradition of *Messiah* concerts in November that went on for twenty seven years till 1972. Two opinions about soloists emerged in committee, one to get soloists of the highest standing the other to 'engage artists who demanded a smaller fee, so long as they give a musicianly performance and exhibit no vibrato, tremolo or wobble because we would be likely to have a full house for the *Messiah*' anyway. The artists engaged, Joyce Gow, Gwendoline Hansen, Bradbridge White and Desmond D'Arcy were described as 'excellent' so it is not clear which view prevailed.

The second and last concert of the 1945-46 season took place on 19 May 1946 and included Mozart's *Requiem*, Haydn's *Te Deum* and Bach's *Jauchzet Gott*. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of 24 May said, 'Seldom is a conductor so happy in his choir, orchestra and soloists as Mr George Thewlis was on.....the Boyd Neel String Orchestra augmented with wind instruments and four singers of good voice and considerable artistry, Miss Joyce Gow, Miss Eileen Pilcher, Mr Tom Purvis and Mr Victor Harding. Together they made the

performance a real imaginative piece of interpretation. The choir must be congratulated on its approach to this magnificent work...' Ivor Keys was at the organ.

Both Oxford Bach Choir and West Oxford Choral Society celebrated anniversaries in 1946. The Fiftieth Anniversary of the Bach Choir was tempered by the tragic death of Sir Hugh Allen, who had been their conductor from 1902-26, knocked down and fatally injured by a motorcyclist near the Martyr's Memorial one misty evening in February. Oxford Choral Society (formerly West Oxford Choral Society) had a Fortieth Anniversary Dinner, the first one under the new name.

November 1946 – Peacetime.

By now the entertainment industry was once again in full swing and there were high attendances at football and cricket matches, at theatres, and at musical events as people reacted to post-war austerity. Though newsprint rationing was still in force, the Oxford Times for 1946 had regular advertisements for cinemas, The Playhouse, The New Theatre and dances three times a week at the Carfax Assembly Rooms (re-opened in December 1945), but only infrequent notices for classical concerts. By 1948, however, classical music had caught up and there were advertisements for choral and subscription concerts, recitals and visits by the Hallé Orchestra.

The Society has full financial records from this time forward so that concerts and money both have their mention, which is as it should be, as there is always a tension between artistic aspiration and financial resources. In this context the last sixty years of the Society's history (1948-2008), have been quite unlike the first twenty-five years when prices actually fell for a time. Thus the Cost of Living Index peaked at 123 (June 1947 =100) in November 1920 and then fell steadily till it bottomed out at 67 in June 1933 at the nadir of the recession. By June 1947 (when the present Retail Price Index started) it had risen to 100, having been controlled at 98.9 during the war years.

Since then there has been a continual increase in prices and any sums of money mentioned need adjusting to present-day costs to show their true impact. When working out a factor for correcting to present-day expenditure, it is not immediately obvious which inflation index to use. The arguments for using the mean of the Retail Price Index (increased by a factor of 20) and Wage Index (increased by a factor of 40-50) are rehearsed in the Society's 'Blue Book' of 1998.

The annual performance of *Messiah* meant that to begin with the only financial consideration was whether the profit on the *Messiah* would cover the losses on the remaining concerts in the season, assuming the membership subscription was set high enough to cover the other running costs.

1946-47 - *Messiah* and a *Bach* concert.

Rehearsals had been held since about 1943 in the old Lecture Theatre in the University Museum (see the photograph in the second 'Blue Book' of 2008). It was the most satisfactory rehearsal room the Society has had. The student benches were steeply raked in a 140-degree fan round the demonstration bench so that everybody could see the conductor and be only a short distance from him. Even so the theatre was large enough to

take the Bach Choir (up to 400 members then) on a Monday night, though they packed it right to the rafters. The bench and blackboard were on the inner wall backing on to the balcony and were flanked by the entrance doors so that latecomers had to enter in full view of the choir. Very few were late. The piano (its maintenance was shared with the Bach Choir) was kept on the upper balcony and wheeled in for rehearsals.

The 1946 performance of the *Messiah* on 24 November played to an estimated audience of 970. The combined cost of the soloists (Elsie Suddaby, Eileen Pilcher, René Soames and George Pizzey) and selected members of Oxford Orchestral Society with professional stiffening was £120 (£3600) and a profit of £78 (£2400) was made. This time Ivor Keys played the continuo and Basil Thewlis (George's son) played the organ. The reviewer said, 'A three hour performance from the composer's own markings. The choir has now its larger complement of men's voices to its fairly strong feminine section and all sang competently with a sense of discipline and good enunciation'.

The second concert on 11 May 1947 consisted of the Bach Cantatas, No.11 *Praise Jehovah* and No.190 *Sing to the Lord* as well as the four *Coronation Anthems* by Handel. The soloists (Elizabeth Cooper, Eileen Pilcher, Eric Greene and Arthur Cranmer) and orchestra (Oxford Orchestral Society plus professionals) cost £124 (£3800), virtually the same sum as for the *Messiah*. However, a sizeable audience of about 440 produced an income of only £119 (£3600), slightly less than half that of *Messiah* and a loss of £62 (£1900) resulted. Coupled with a loss on the general running of the Society of £14 (in spite of 126 subscriptions) this almost exactly cancelled the *Messiah* profit.

1947-48 - Broadcast Concert and Oxford Festival of Music 1948.

Unusually, the first work was not the 'Messiah', but a joint concert with the Oxford Madrigal Society on 31 October that was broadcast by the BBC. The advertisement in the Oxford Times gives a precise timing, presumably because this was a live broadcast. Margaret Field-Hyde (soprano) and René Soames (tenor) were well known soloists and Thomas Hemsley (bass) makes an early appearance. One work (Lalande's *De Profundis*) was given its first performance in England, the other (Victoria's *O Quam Gloriosum*) its first in Oxford. This was in keeping with a promise George Thewlis had made to Dr Andrews when he took over the choir in 1941 that he would introduce new works as often as possible. The penalty was that only 198 people attended the concert and the BBC fee of £80 (£2430 in current money) was nearly twice the ticket income. The Society had to meet a deficit of £60 (£1830), and to its embarrassment, there was nothing to give to the Mayor of Oxford's War Memorial Fund.

On 16 November there was an audience of 1134 in the Town Hall for a performance of the *Messiah* that realised a surplus of £109 (£3200). The soloists (including Isobel Baillie) cost £65 (£1900) and the 'New Oxford Orchestra' £81 (£2370). As the choir had only 90-110 members and the orchestra was small it was not considered necessary to have an extension to the platform at the Town Hall and the conductor, soloists and orchestra were crowded on the platform whilst the choir were confined to curved benches on the raised steps at the rear. This allowed the audience seating to come right up to the platform increasing the seating capacity to over 1000, permitted by the more relaxed fire regulations which were then in force.

The Annual General Meeting was held in December. George Thewlis was paid an honorarium of £50 (£1460) for conducting and he ran the Society in close collaboration with

the new secretary, Margaret Herd. The Society had also a new president, Professor Westrup having succeeded the late Sir Hugh Allen. The financial year ended on the 30 September, Aubrey Wale was treasurer and the annual subscription ten shillings (£14.60). The subscription had only to pay for the general running of the Society (General Account), but it was too little and the 47-48 season showed a loss on the General Account of £30 (£880). The costs included the purchase of a hood and gown for £18 on the occasion of the award of an honorary MA to the conductor. The Oxford Times of 14 May said, 'In Convocation on Tuesday an honorary MA was conferred on George Thewlis, singer, senior lay clerk at Christ Church and conductor of both Oxford Harmonic Society and Madrigal Society.....highlighted Mr Thewlis's antiquarian studies of Oxford and that he was preparing a history of Oxford Music.'

The remainder of the season was a performance of *Solomon* (William Boyce) together with *Awake my Lyre* (John Blow) and *The King shall rejoice* and the *Dettingen Te Deum* (Handel). This was on Sunday 9 May and opened the Oxford Festival of Music 1948. The soloists were Margaret Ritchie, Joan Gray, René Soames and Thomas Hemsley, the orchestra was the Boyd Neel String Orchestra, Basil Thewlis was at the organ and Dr Westrup played the continuo part. The critics were divided on the merits of *Solomon*, the Oxford Mail described it as 'a charming work', but the Times said, 'The main item on the programme was Boyce's *Cantata Interminata Solomon* based on a lamentable but often amusing version of portions of the Holy Scriptures. The music was quite undistinguished, but inoffensively pleasant and would have made an excellent entertainment for 20 minutes or so. Unfortunately it went on for 80, which taxed the patience of the most ardent Boyce fans'.

The Festival offered guarantees against losses so the Society's deficit was limited to items that fell outside the time limit for claims. The large profit on the *Messiah* did not quite cover all these losses and the Society ended slightly down on the season carrying forward £49 (£1430).

1948-49 - A cash flow crisis.

The audience for the 1948 *Messiah* was a record for any single Harmonic Society concert (1181) and a handsome profit of £134 (£3780) was made. The New Oxford Orchestra did not reappear, the Oxford Orchestral Society was used. (Local professionals hired to strengthen the orchestra were paid two guineas [£59] or three guineas if they were leader or a principal [£89]. London professionals were paid at least four guineas [£118], but there were no provisions for travelling expenses.)

The performance on Saturday 21 May 1949 of *Te Deum* (Vaughan Williams), *Missa Brevis* (Kodaly) and *The Music Makers'* (Elgar), with Muriel Brunskill as alto soloist, was quite a different story. Only 204 people were present and, as a section of the London Symphony Orchestra had been hired to play, a record loss of about £220 (£6200) was made. The reviewer said, 'In an ambitious and interesting programme that deserved more support there were occasional faults of choral and orchestral balance.....and a decided difference in quality between male and female sections of the choir; but generally one felt that the amount of work put into the concert was worthwhile.'

A few days after the concert the secretary negotiated an overdraft of £100 (£2820) with Barclays Bank, on the strength of the National Federation of Music Societies (NFMS) guarantee of £100 still to be paid. (This seems to be an early example of money offered

through the NFMS by the newly formed Arts Council.) This guarantee awaited the production of audited accounts. To bring this forward, the end of the financial year was changed from 30 September to 30 June. After three years of running on an even keel the Society was dependent on the eventual payment of an NFMS guarantee to restore its solvency.

1949-50 - Two Messiahs, Judith and a Bach Commemoration Concert.

In August 1949 Barclays Bank reported that the overdraft stood at £96.12.7 and they renewed it for a further three months. The cash flow problem had been exacerbated in June by the Oxford University Press printing 200 scores of the oratorio *Judith* (more than enough for choir), which together with the copying of complete scores and the printing of 720 twenty-page programmes produced a record bill for music printing of £104 (£3000).

To recover the financial position it had been decided to perform *Messiah* twice in 1949. This was done on Sunday 27 November and Friday 9 December to audiences of 1105 and 965 respectively. The combined audience of 2070 was a record for any one work given by the Society, as was the profit of £224 (£6700). The overdraft was paid off well before the NFMS grant was received. The orchestra on both occasions was selected members of Oxford Orchestral Society plus 13 local professionals.

The Arne/Bickerstaff oratorio *Judith* was performed on 19 Feb 1950, The soloists were Tara Barry (*Judith*), Thetis Blacker (*Abra*), Eileen Pilcher (*Ozias*) and Philip Hattey (*Holofernes*). Oxford Orchestral Society together with part of the Kalmar Chamber Orchestra accompanied. Professor Westrup played the harpsichord continuo. The work had been promoted extensively (63 tickets were sold to schools and 101 by the choir [as against the usual 25 or so]) and the reward was an audience of 498. The performance was well received, the Oxford Mail wrote 'Oxford is fortunate in numbering among its musicians Mr George Thewlis who, combining enterprise with research and untiring labour, gives us unique performances of neglected works, in recent years pieces by Boyce and Lalande, yesterday a more ambitious venture Arne's *Judith* (last performed in 1773) with libretto by Isaac BickerstaffeThe chorus sang extremely well, with clear tone, fine attack, and good ensemble, qualities which this mainly homophonic writing demands'.

As part of a series of five concerts given to commemorate the Bicentenary of Bach's death, the Society performed on 14 May the *Magnificat in D*, the *Ricercare* from 'The Musical Offering' and Cantatas No.11 *Praise Jehovah* and No.190 *Sing to the Lord*. (The last two had been performed previously in a Society concert in May 1947.) The soloists included Ena Mitchell, Eileen Pilcher and Thomas Hemsley. Serial as well as single tickets were sold for these concerts and about 550 people attended so that the total for the season was nearly 3120. This is a record, but it was exceptional even for that time, being boosted by about 1,000 for the second *Messiah*.

1950-51 - Bruckner's Mass in E Minor and a Festival of Britain Concert.

The Society again gave two performances of *Messiah*, but with not the same success as the previous year. One thousand people turned up on 26 November and a profit of £124 (£3250) was made. However only 650 attended on the 8 December and there was a loss of £18 (£470). This was the last time that two performances of *Messiah* were given.

Bruckner's *Mass in E Minor* for 8 part chorus and wind instruments was given its first performance in England on Sunday 25 February 1951 together with *King of Glory* (Herbert

Howells) and *O clap your hands* (Vaughan Williams). The reviewer said in the Oxford Mail, 'The first introduction of Bruckner to Oxford by George Thewlis, the Oxford Harmonic Society and the wind section of the Kalmar Chamber Orchestra.....was an important event for which more of the city's musical public should have been grateful. It was worth doing and well done. The E-minor Mass scored for 8 part chorus, always an exacting disposition for a small choir.....cannot be easy to perform and not convincingly so unless its qualities and idiom are gladly absorbed. It was here that the Harmonic Society failed through lack of surrender to the inward feel of the work. Only by the conductor's firm grip were nobility and simpleness saved'.

In February 1950 the Society had received an invitation from the Delegacy for Extra-Mural Studies (Rewley House) to take part in a 1951 Festival of the Arts in Oxford in the first two weeks in July which would be part of the 1951 Festival of Britain. The topic was to be the Arts in England in the seventeenth century. This was to be a residential course with lectures and musical and dramatic performances by college choirs and University and other societies. There were to be two major concerts, one of sacred music performed by the combined college choirs and one of mainly secular music given by the Harmonic Society. The University, City and the Arts Council of Great Britain were supporting the Festival and the organising committee offered to meet the costs of orchestra, soloists, conductor and hired music. The works performed on 12 July were:

<i>Ode on St Cecilia's Day</i> (1692)	Henry Purcell (1659-1695)
<i>Begin the Song</i> (first performance)	John Blow (1649-1708)
<i>The Blessed Virgin's Expostulation</i> (solo)	Henry Purcell
<i>Early before the day doth spring</i> (madrigal)	Youll
<i>I prithee keep my sheep</i> (dialogue)	Nicholas Lanier (1588-1688)
<i>Why sight'st Thou, Shepherd</i> (dialogue)	John Jenkins (1592-1678)
<i>Oh Bonny Christ Church Bells</i> (round)	Henry Aldrich (1647-1710)
<i>Ode to Tobacco</i> (catch)	"
<i>When the cock begins to crow</i> (glee)	Henry Purcell
<i>Kept upon St Cecilia's Day</i>	John Blow
<i>In Nomine & The Cryes of London</i>	Orlando Gibbons (1583-1625)
<i>Tobacco</i>	Tobias Hume (1580-1645)

The soloists were: Isobel Baillie, Edwin Hetterley, Arnold Reason and Kenneth Gough and the Kalmar Orchestra played. There was a reasonable audience of 327 and the income just about balanced the Society's expenses for the concert. The reviewer in the Oxford Times said 'From solemn music to seventeenth century variety might reasonably describe the Oxford Harmonic Society concert'. Of the solemn music (the two works for St. Cecilia's day) he said 'Despite much accomplished singing by the choir and soloists these were in places both cloudy and heavy, with some indefinite entrances by the choir and blurred moments in the accompaniment of the Kalmar Orchestra, which was, however, generally accomplished throughout'.

The end of the financial year had been advanced to 31 March putting this last concert in the 1951-52 accounts and throwing the subsequent financial years out of synchronism with the concert seasons. The sum carried forward at the end of the concert season was a modest £20 (£520).

Fourth Decade 1951-61

High Noon to Sunset

1951-52 - One Messiah, Elijah and a Monteverdi Mass.

Messiah was performed on 18 November to an audience of 1021 and a comfortable profit of £100 (£2380) was realised. The second major concert on the 24 February 1952 was *Elijah* that had last been given in 1944. Isobel Baillie sang soprano for the second consecutive concert, Alexander Young was the tenor and Dennis Noble sang *Elijah*. There was an encouraging audience (673), but the modest loss of £32 (£760) again showed the break-even point in the Town Hall to be over 700.

On the 28 April 1952 the conductor wrote to the treasurer about some expenses and a meeting at the Arts Council that he had attended. The final paragraph was 'The question has been raised about a lack of Chairman at the Committee meetings, and I feel we ought to meet tomorrow to elect someone to the position. There is also a lot of business to discuss before the next meeting, so I hope you will be able to lend your aid to the proceedings.' The implication was that the Society had been without a chairman for some time at least, possibly since 1946.

When a third concert had been given (alternate years since 1946) it had been on a substantial scale and always linked to a commemoration or a festival. No such connection was available in 1952 and a departure was made by giving a small-scale concert in Merton College Chapel on 12 June. (Another four concerts were given in Merton in the years up to the 1961-2 season when New College Chapel became available on the appointment of David Lumsden as conductor.) The programme included the first performance in England of Monteverdi's *Mass for four Voices*, and first performances in Oxford of *Jesu, Joy and Treasure* (Buxtehude) and of the fantasia on *Ein Feste Burg* by Praetorius as well as Allegri's *Adoremus in Aeternam*. The accompaniment was provided by Ronald Perrin at the organ and six string players. One hundred and seventy five people turned up and the modest cost of the concert meant that only a small loss of £10 (£238) resulted.

The modest losses on the second and third concerts meant that in spite of the continuing loss on the General account (though the subscription was raised to 15 shillings [£17.80]) there was a useful surplus on the season of £60 (£1430) and the sum carried forward was a record £80 (£1900).

1952-53 - A Coronation Concert.

Dr Basil Thewlis resigned as accompanist at the end of the 51-52 season, having given his support to the Society since 1946 or earlier. He was employed as a physicist at AERE, Harwell and was replaced by Dr Norman Large who by chance worked in the Chemistry Division at Harwell.

The Society's Thirtieth Anniversary Dinner was held on 15 October 1952 at the St George's Restaurant, George Street. There were seventy-eight present and Prof. Westrup made the main speech. The cost of the dinner was twelve shillings (£13.50).

For the first time the audience for a single performance of *Messiah* fell below 1,000 with an attendance of 993 (November 30, 1952). Whilst in most respects a standard performance, the orchestral costs jumped from an average of about £33 to £100 (£2250) and the profit was a rather meagre £31 (£700). This was unfortunate in view of the Coronation concert that followed on 28 February 1953. The works performed were:

<i>Agincourt Song</i>	attrib. John Dunstable (c.1385-1453)	Henry V
<i>O Lord, grant the King a long life</i>	William Child(1606-97)	Charles II
<i>Here's a health unto his Majesty</i>	Jeremy Savile	Charles II
<i>Music for his Majesty's Sackbuts</i>		
<i>And Cornetts</i>	Matthew Locke	Charles II
<i>Let thy hand be strengthened</i>	John Blow	James II
<i>Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem</i>	Henry Purcell	William & Mary
<i>Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem</i>	Jeremiah Clarke	Anne
<i>Here's a health unto the Queen</i>	Walsh's "The Dancing Master"	Anne
<i>Rule Britannia</i>	Thomas Arne	George II
<i>Zadok the Priest</i>	Handel	George II on
<i>Coronation March</i>	Elgar	George V
<i>Festival Te Deum</i>	Stanford	George V
<i>Festival Gloria in B flat</i>	Stanford	George VI
<i>I was glad when they said</i>	Parry	Edward VII on
<i>Crown Imperial March</i>	Walton	George VI
<i>Flourish for a Coronation</i>	Vaughan Williams	George VI

Although there were no soloists, the orchestral costs were relatively high at £80 (£1800) and the small audience of 250 ensured that a large loss of £110 (£2480) was incurred.

The review said, 'The musical researches of Mr George Thewlis are carried on with the enthusiasm of a candidate for PhD (sic), but they are none the less pleasurable for that, combining, as they do, not only learning and the occasional new found delight, but the labours of the Oxford Orchestral Society and the faculties of the Oxford Harmonic Society in no small degree. His latest thesis, conducted by him with the same combination in the Town Hall on Saturday illustrated both Coronation music of the past 600 years and therewith the growth of the orchestra and his impresario determination to come in early on this year's solemnity, festivity and fun.'

A small scale concert was given in Merton Chapel in May 1953. The works performed were *Missa Quarti Toni* by Victoria and *Ascendit Deus* by Peter Philips. Only 100 people attended, but the expenses were so minute that a small profit of £4 was realised. The small profit on *Messiah* and the large loss on the Coronation concert coupled with the usual loss on the General Account meant that the sum carried forward to next season was a meagre £5 (£113). At the end of the financial year (31 March) there was an actual deficit as the NFMS guarantee of £48 (£1080) had not yet been received.

1953-54 - The Bruckner Requiem in D.

Isobel Baillie was booked to sing in the *Requiem*, possibly in an attempt to attract a larger audience, so Ena Mitchell sang in *Messiah* (29 November) along with Nora Carstairs, Alexander Young and Roger Stalman. The orchestra reverted to selected members of Oxford Orchestral Society plus professionals. The audience slumped to 778,

demonstrating an Isobel Baillie effect in reverse, at least as far as the *Messiah* was concerned. Although the concert costs were no more than average, the diminished income resulted in a very poor profit of £27 (£600).

Conscious of the slender reserves and the expected loss on the Bruckner, the committee arranged a Christmas Draw that realised £26 (£570) and a Jumble Sale that produced £25 (£550), nearly trebling the reserves in two strokes.

The first performance in England of Bruckner's *Requiem in D* was given on 7 February 1954 along with Haydn's *Te Deum Laudamus in C-major* and Handel's *Ode on St Cecilia's Day*. The soloists were Isobel Baillie, Grace Bodey, Alexander Young and Kenneth Gough and Oxford Orchestral Society appears to have provided the players. A modest audience of 324 were present and, although the concert costs were not remarkable, a large loss of £110 (£2430) was recorded. Clearly a famous name does not make an unfamiliar work attractive.

The Oxford Times review said, 'Oxford and indeed this country, is again indebted to George Thewlis and the Oxford Harmonic Society for giving us the first English performance of a notable composition by a great musician, Anton BrucknerThe chorus did not allow lustiness to overcome sensitivity and achieved a good balance throughout, their articulation, usually good in this society, enhancing their reputation in this respect.....generally, the orchestra employed, recruited from the best local professionals, professional enthusiasts from farther afield.....and young University musicianswas of such an infinitely better standard than that which the Harmonic Society usually has, that it should effect a much needed reforming the standards of local orchestral playing.'

Another small-scale concert was given in Merton College Chapel on 27 May. The works performed were *Songs of Farewell* (Parry) and *Missa Douce Memoire* (Lassus). There were only 82 people in the audience, but the loss of £4 was trivial.

The loss on the *Requiem* was more than offset by the NFMS guarantee of £60 (£1320), the profit on the *Messiah* and on the General Account, and there was a small increase in the balance carried forward.

1954-55 – Samson.

This season Isobel Baillie was the soprano soloist in *Messiah*, 1007 people turned up to hear the performance and a profit of £95 (£1990) was made. This was the last time an audience of over 1000 attended any of the Society's concerts.

Handel's *Samson* was not performed until 15 May 1955, the end of the financial year being shifted to 31 May to take it in. The soloists were A Russell, N Thomas, W Macalpine and Kenneth Gough. Only 155 people turned up and loss of £110 (£2300) was recorded.

A review in the Oxford Mail of the 16 May said, 'The Harmonic Society's performance of 'Samson' in Oxford Town Hall had a sparse audiencefirst performed in Oxford on 14 April 1749 as part of the celebrations to commemorate the opening of the Radcliffe Camera. Then the audience was 1000 and the tickets ten shillings and sixpenceMr. Thewlis's conception of the work was sufficiently flexible to allow the dramatic elements full play and yet well in keeping with the traditions of oratorio - in which he is so well versed.William McAlpine was one of the best tenors heard in Oxford for some time and Nancy Thomas was also most impressive.'

A handwritten account for this concert from C Taphouse & Son is the last in the possession of the Society. The shop and its music rooms have already been mentioned. On the first floor was a box office where tickets for all Oxford events and London theatres and shows could be had. There were also booths where long playing records could be heard before purchase. Taphouse's was, however, much more than a music shop and box office: the accounts show that they often acted more as concert promoters placing advertisements in newspapers, arranging stewards, paying the University Marshall and often paying some of the orchestra professionals. Eventually the largest practice room was converted into a television repair shop, but the box office continued to operate until 1982. Finally the shop was sold and activities moved to the Westgate Centre, but in 1987 this shop was also closed and Taphouse & Son was no more.

Bill Lockett had taken over from Aubrey Wale as treasurer at the beginning of the year and had seen a season in which the small loss on the concerts was covered by the NFMS grant, but in which the General Account had done no better than balance even though another Christmas Draw had raised £25 (£525). George Thewlis proposed to perform the third Bruckner Mass (the symphonic one in F minor) with a professional orchestra in 1956 and Mr Lockett was opposed to this. He resigned the following November.

1955-56 - Bruckner's Symphonic Mass in F Minor.

The 1955 *Messiah* marked Isobel Baillie's last appearance with the Society in that work. The other soloists were Jean Allister (who when she sang in the Verdi *Requiem* in 68-69 commanded nearly six times the fee), James Armstrong and Geoffrey Walls. The audience numbered 878 and a passable profit of £79 (£1570) resulted.

The *Mass in F-minor* was not easy to learn and the performance was rescheduled for May 1956. A representative from BBC Midland Region came to an early rehearsal to hear the work with a view to broadcasting it. The choir could not do themselves justice at this point and the concert was not broadcast, though the BBC were sufficiently interested to mount their own performance later. The concert began with *Songs from the Bavarian Highlands* by Elgar and then the first performance in England of the *Symphonic Mass*. The four young soloists who had rehearsed together (it was in nobody's repertoire) were Patricia Kent, Jean Allister, Edgar Fleet and Ian Patterson. The Capriol Orchestra came from London and cost £168 (£3340) and a representative of the Austrian Embassy was present. Sadly only 246 people turned up and a loss of £208 (£4140) was made, the second largest after *The Music Makers*.

The reviewer, FWD, said, 'In attempting the Bruckner work, which bristles with technical difficulties a body such as the Harmonic Society set themselves a task which, on the whole, they accomplished with a considerable degree of success. The operative word is 'symphonic' and no society performing it can afford to ignore it for Bruckner's correlation of

chorus to orchestra and to soloists (who are really employed more like concertante instruments than those one often hears in masses and oratorios) is implicitly indicated almost throughout the whole work.

It was necessary therefore to employ an orchestra which was capable of being something more than an outsize continuo instrument and the Capriol Orchestracontributed some richly phrased playing of fine tonal quality which not only underlined, but also highlighted the singing of the chorus. The choir, while occasionally getting a little too strident and throwing the symphonic nature of the work out of balance, acquitted themselves with considerable distinction under Mr Thewlis's patient, if at times too kindly, conductorship.'

Thus were completed first performances in England of all three of Bruckner's Masses.

Miss E D Bott had taken over as Treasurer and she was faced with a difficult financial situation. In 1946 and 1947 profits from *Messiah* had funded all other losses, but from *The Music Makers* onwards Arts Council guarantees (via the NFMS) had been used to fill the gap. Now it was imperative that the General Account ceased to make losses comparable with the sums carried over each year as these would quickly make the Society bankrupt in the absence of a profit on the concerts.

Not only did the General Account relapse into loss in 1955-56, but the concert loss exceeded the NFMS guarantee as well. At the end of the season the Society would have had a deficit of £54 (say, £2000) when the conductor's honorarium was paid, had it not received a cheque for £100 (£4000) from Dr Andrews. The committee were suitably grateful for this and asked to be allowed to treat it as a loan that they would repay at the first opportunity.

1956-57 - Two Concerts in One.

There were only two concerts in this season. Patricia Kent's singing in the Bruckner Mass had been well received and she replaced Isobel Baillie in the *Messiah* at a considerable saving in cost. However, the audience at the performance on the 17 November fell by 10% to 802 and the profit declining to £56.

The second concert on the 17 May was a concatenation of choir pieces intended for the 21 February and a (presumed) farewell recital by Isobel Baillie who graciously came with her accompanist, Wainright Morgan, for no more than her expenses. The choir contributions included a 'thank you' in the performance of four motets by Dr Andrews. The critic in the Oxford Times for the 17 May noted that they made great demands on the singers in places and were not for prentice voices. Isabel Baillie also sang some duets with George Thewlis and the brilliant university pianist, Colin Sherratt (an infant prodigy who was denied a concert career by ill health), played a Beethoven Sonata and three preludes and fugues by Bach.

This somewhat unfocussed concert attracted only 173 people and made a loss which almost exactly cancelled the profit on the *Messiah*. Fortunately another jumble sale and Christmas Draw contributed to a surplus on the General account of £41 and the balance carried forward rose to £88.

1957-58 – Heather Harper.

George Thewlis consulted Professor Westrup about who should be the soprano soloist for *Messiah* and he recommended Heather Harper as she had made a notable debut in the University Opera Club's production of Verdi's *Macbeth* in December 1954. 'FWD' writing in the Oxford Times of the 22 November 1957 knew her quality immediately, 'Even as one raised in what may be termed the Isobel Baillie school of *Messiah* soprano singing, I have not heard a performance of the soprano part in the *Messiah* which was at once so stimulating and satisfying as that of Miss Harper.'

The main work in the concert on the 23 February 1958 was Haydn's *Seven Last Words On the Cross*. 'WAC' in the Oxford Mail of the 24 February wrote that 'After completing the work Haydn said that it was no easy matter to compose seven adagios to follow one another without fatiguing the listener.....but where so much is in one mood every possible chance must be grasped...this is not to suggest it was not a good performance...but a little more attention to the matters of contrast and balance would have made it a very good performance.' The sought after audience seemed to have sensed the problems and only 137 turned up, a record low for any of the Society's concerts in the Town Hall, and there was a substantial loss of £89.

However, a projected profit on the General Account of £52 (the subscription had at last been raised to £1) and of £65 on the *Messiah* emboldened the committee to pay back Dr Andrews's loan before the end of the season. Dr Andrews insisted on making a donation of £20. The final concert of the season, a performance of Palestrina's mass *Aeterna Christi Munera* in Merton Chapel made a small loss and so a balance of £26 was carried over to the next season.

1958-59 – The Masque in Diocletian.

George Thewlis had been a widower for many years, but he and the Secretary, Miss Herd, returned for the new season as man and wife. Most members of the choir wondered why it had taken so long.

Heather Harper sang again in the *Messiah* and continued to do so each year until 1964. In spite of her presence the audience declined to 765 and only a small profit of £33 was made.

The main part of the Handel-Purcell Commemoration Concert on the 12 February 1959 was Act 5 or the '*Masque of the Triumph of Love*' from Purcell's semi-opera *Diocletian*, itself based on a play of 1622 by Beaumont and Fletcher. Whilst the male parts were sung by Arnold Gold and lay clerks from the cathedral and colleges, Isobel Baillie came and sang the soprano part for her usual fee, very likely because the conductor felt he needed one famous name to draw an audience. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 20 February said, 'her technique and musicianly qualities have lost nothing with the passing years...she still has a voice of often astonishing purity.' For him however, the most attractive feature was Sydney Watson's playing of Handel's *Organ Concerto No1 in G, Opus 4*.

The season concluded with a performance of the *Missa Brevis* and other choral pieces in Merton Chapel on the 28 May.

Although 393 people attended the Handel-Purcell concert a substantial loss of £82 was made. The NFMS guarantee covered the overall loss on concerts but the General Account

relapsed into deficit. The membership declined from 110 to 82, an all time low since before the war, and no fundraising was scheduled, so the balance carried forward was only £16.

1959-60 – *Elijah*.

The University Museum Lecture Theatre was closed before the start of the 1959-60 season in order to reconstruct it in its present orientation and rehearsals were shifted to the hall of the Boy's High School in George St. The season was a short one for only 15 rehearsals were deemed necessary, but the membership rose to 92. There was a social and a Jumble sale and the General Account for the year showed a healthy profit of £50.

The accompanist, Norman Large had retired at the last AGM as he was now living in Reading and Professor Westrup found a willing postgraduate music student, Anthony Crossland, who subsequently became assistant organist and then organist at Wells Cathedral, retiring in 1996.

Heather Harper was joined by Gerald English for the *Messiah*, the audience advanced to 797 and the profit to £53.

Elijah was performed in the Town Hall on the 28 February 1960 in the Town Hall. Owen Grundy sang *Elijah* and the reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 4 March felt that although he sang intelligently he lacked the power to project his singing to the gallery. The reviewer praised Andrew Gold the tenor and said that 'most of the choruses were splendidly sung with good balance and intonation and an impressive weight of tone.'

An audience of 310 was not a great encouragement and a loss of £90 was made so that the sum carried forward to the next year crept up to £29.

1960-61 – *George Thewlis's final season*.

The hall of Oxford Boy' School had been available for one year only and the Society moved to the more expensive Northgate Hall nearby in St Michael's St.

Iris Kells had been noted after singing in the Covent Garden visit to the New Theatre in 1959 and she was asked to sing the soprano part in the *Messiah* alongside the tenor Gerald English. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 25 November 1960 said 'possessing a voice of delightful brightness and clarity she delivered the soprano arias nimbly and expressively.' The choir showed a considerable improvement over the previous year. The audience, at 781, was roughly the same as the previous year, and the profit advanced a little to £60.

Heather Harper sang with Duncan Robertson in the second concert of the season, Haydn's *St Cecilia Mass* with Mendelssohn's *Hymn of Praise*. The critic in the Oxford Times (3 March 1961) observed that whilst for the most part the choir responded well, some old failings were apparent. Staggered entries flagged, the basses were loud but woolly and whilst diction was generally very good, 'towards the end of the *Hymn of Praise* there was a conspicuous lack of final consonants, most unfortunate in the line "On him we place our Trust"'. The audience numbered only 233 and a painful loss of £142 was made.

George Thewlis's final concert was in the Holywell Music Room on the 18 May 1961. The reviewer in the Oxford Times (26 May) noted that the occasion warranted a larger audience (it was 96) though it was a distinguished one including Professor Westrup and two previous

conductors, Drs HK Andrews and Sydney Watson. Elizabethan composers, who always delighted George Thewlis, were well represented in the vocal part of the programme and in his solos he sang 'in a clear fresh baritone which certainly did not suggest that he had been singing before the public, since his boyhood days for 62 years'.

The Kirby Trio gave an 'elegantly phrased and round toned account of *Divertimento* by Karl Ditters von Dittersdorf and shapely playing of Schubert's *trio No 1 in B Flat* and of Gordon Jacob's two lusty *Shakespearean Sketches*'. Anthony Crossland played organ solos by Brahms and Orlando Gibbons and the evening was brought to a resonant conclusion by the choir singing Richard Deering's fancy *The Cryes of London*.

A week later a reception was held at the Cadena Cafe in Cornmarket St. Professor Westrup made a valedictory speech and presented to the conductor and his wife tokens of the Choir's affection for them.

The higher charge for the Northgate Hall had driven the General Account into deficit (£10) yet again in spite of the membership rising to 106. Even with the support of an NFMS guarantee of £70 the Society carried forward a small deficit of £7 to the next season. The Treasurer had no difficulty in getting the members to agree to a rise in the subscription from 20/- to 30/-.

1961-71

The establishment of Committee Governance

1961-63 - David Lumsden.

At the Annual General Meeting on the 31 May the Society elected Dr David Lumsden, organist at New College, as the conductor for the 1961-62 season. This, and the advent of a more assertive committee marked a new chapter for the Society.

The author had joined the committee in 1957 as a result of assiduously helping to wheel the piano in and out at each rehearsal, and became Treasurer in 1959 mainly on the grounds that a scientist must be numerate. Whatever had been the procedure when Sir Hugh Allen was chairman, the Society had not had a chairman from 1946 till 1952 and the author gained the impression that the concert programme was arranged between the Conductor and Secretary, run before the Treasurer to establish the limit on expenditure and then put to the committee to approve in one of their half hour meetings. If there were a short fall they would be asked to run a jumble sale.

The new committee was strengthened by the election of a new secretary, Frank Garside, a mathematics master at Magdalen College School and later Lord Mayor of Oxford and by the previous election by the committee of Rosalind Noyce as chairman. Rosalind had been secretary to the Principal (Vice Chancellor) of Glasgow University and was then an Assistant Registrar in the Oxford University Registry. She was well versed in committee procedure, clear thinking and of firm views which could, if need be, be expressed in a commanding voice. That this committee worked harmoniously with Dr Lumsden was due to the fact that he was relatively new to Oxford and also amenable to discussing concert programming and general policy at length. Committee meetings were held on a separate night from rehearsals. This more corporate way of running the Society has persisted, with fluctuations, to the present day.

Anthony Crossland having left Oxford, David Lumsden installed Harry Diake Johnstone as his postgraduate accompanist.

The conductor had been forewarned that the annual *Messiah* was a necessity and it took place on the 19 November with Heather Harper and Gerald English as the notable soloists. This was the first use of the new Watkins Shaw edition and the reviews noted the improved performance of the choir, the brisk rhythms and well-defined beat. The attendance rose by more than a hundred to 907 with a pleasing jump in the profit to £94.

Bach's *St John Passion* had not been performed by the Society since 1941, and of the performance on the 11 March 1962 Bryan Kelly wrote in the Oxford Mail the following day 'Dr Lumsden conducted his forces with complete control...the performance as a whole gained by being driven, as the intensity of the work was sustained and he drama heightened.... the singing of the chorus was always firm if not exciting. The soprano and contralto sections lack real carrying power but the tenors and basses sing with full rich tone'.

New College Chapel was now available and the Society performed Britten's *St Nicholas* there on the 27 May 1961. Bryan Kelly wrote in the Oxford Mail on the 28 May, 'the colour and freshness of the score were realised to the full, the choral singing reached a very high standard and the varying moods of each section were well sustained....Gerald English sang his solos with sensitivity... The orchestra seemed to enjoy taking part and played with firmness and precision....The Harmonic Society is increasing its strength, this must be due in no small way to Dr Lumsden's inspiration and enlightened approach.'

Audiences of 429 and 476 for the last two concerts suggested that the reputation of David Lumsden and the ambience of New College Chapel were helping the choir to turn a corner, nevertheless, a losses of £71 and £70 respectively soaked up the profit on the *Messiah* and a good part of the NFMS guarantee. There were no fundraising events and the General Account just scraped a profit of £1, so the deficit carried forward fell to £6.

A summer coach outing on Friday 1 June took the choir to hear a performance of Britten's *War Requiem* in Coventry Cathedral. The world premier had been the previous evening and this second performance had the same soloists, Heather Harper (who took the soprano part at ten day's notice, Galina Vishnevskaya having been refused exit papers at the last moment), Peter Pears and Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Meredith Davies conducted the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Coventry Festival Chorus and Benjamin Britten conducted the Melos Ensemble.

1962-63 – the B Minor Mass and farewell.

The annual *Messiah* was performed on the 25 November. The reviewers commented on the steady improvement of the choir, the continuing excellence of Heather Harper, a renewed spirit in the orchestra, the brisk tempi set by Dr Lumsden and the effort that he had put into preparing the work. The audience increased to 930, but as both the cost of soloists and orchestra rose noticeably the profit fell to £74. Lionel Pike was the postgraduate accompanist for the next three seasons.

The Society gave its first performance of Bach's *Mass in B Minor* on the 19 May 1963 in the Town Hall. The reviewer in the Oxford Magazine Commented on the humanity and warmth of Dr Lumsden's interpretation of the work, adding 'His tempi were extremely well judged and the emotional transitions as in beautifully done.' W A Chislett in the Oxford Mail of the 20 May said 'Dr Lumsden secured singing from his choir of a quality most of its members would have thought impossible a very short time ago.'

Parts of the concert where only the choir was singing were recorded on tape for study and later selected choruses were transferred to vinyl disc and sold at cost to members of the choir only. This was done by Colin Sanders an enthusiastic fifteen year old schoolboy at Magdalen College School. Six years later he founded Solid State Logic at Stonesfield to manufacture electronic control systems for church organs and subsequently to become the world's largest manufacture of fully featured consoles for the recording industry. He was killed in a helicopter crash near Souldern (Banbury) in 1998.

The feeling that the choir had turned a corner and was on an upward path made it all the harder to accept Dr Lumsden's announcement in March that he would have to resign on medical grounds. The choir understood perfectly that the back pain he was suffering made it necessary to restrict his conducting to his professional duties only, and they sympathised with him, but it seemed to them that a better future was now at risk.

There were 495 in the audience for the *B Minor Mass* the largest number for a non-Messiah concert since *Elijah* in 1952. Nevertheless a loss of £106 used up all the profit on the *Messiah* and £32 from the NFMS grant. A modest profit of £30 on the General Account (113 members) brought the balance carried forward into positive territory at £24.

1963-71 - Richard Silk.

David Lumsden had been in Oxford but a short time and had not able to give a strong recommendation about whom the committee might approach, so for the first time in its history the Committee had to act on its own initiative. After one abortive negotiation they resolved in April to ask Richard Silk to take the post and he agreed. In the meanwhile he reinforced the tenors by joining them in rehearsing for the *B Minor Mass*.

Richard had read music at Cambridge, studying under John Dykes Bower, Thurston Dart and Raymond Leppard. His first appointment appears to have been as Director of Music at Magdalen College School in 1959.

His first concert was, of course, the *Messiah*, on the 24 November 1963. The reviewers were at one on the excellence of Heather Harper and Gerald English, the good playing by Oxford Orchestral Society and the good singing by the choir, but interest centred, naturally, on the conductor's approach. Here the critics were divided, but one did feel the tempi were too slow for a performance of the uncut work. Heather Harper was now an internationally recognised singer and her fee was nearly twice what she asked six years ago in 1957 (which gave the committee pause for thought) but nevertheless the profit of £80 (on an audience of 913) was slightly up on the previous year.

The second concert on the 1 March 1964 (Handel's *Jeptha*) introduced the counter tenor James Bowman to the Society's audiences. The critics exhibited the same spread of opinion as before, the soloists Marion Milford, Kenneth Bowen and James Bowman were liked, the

choir sang well but the orchestra seemed uncertain about the conductor's intentions. However, his conducting was thoroughly approved of by a third reviewer.

The critics noted the poor attendance (231) and one deplored the lack of curiosity in Oxford audiences. Not surprisingly a resounding loss of £170 resulted.

The third concert was a performance of the Mozart *Requiem Mass* in Magdalen College Chapel on the 21 May 1964. The reviewer in the Oxford Magazine felt that the performance had been 'fairly inadequate' and that the choral singing was 'insecure and ragged'. The author recollects that some in the choir felt that there had not been enough rehearsals. An audience of 394, combined with the use of local soloists restricted the loss to £30.

The total loss of £120 consumed the NFMS grant of £75 and made inroads into the profit in the General Account £88 (two jumble sales) so that the surplus carried forward rose to just £66.

1964-65 – Poulenc and Honneger.

Whilst some reviews in Richard Silk's first season had been equivocal, the reviewer in the Oxford Times on the 20 November 1964 said 'I enjoyed Sunday's *Messiah*.....partly because the performance had many points to admire'. A new soprano soloist, Susan Longfield, partnered Gerald English and was described as having 'a beautiful voice'. The audience fell to 741 and the profit crashed to £12.

At about this time Dr Lumsden borrowed the choir for two demonstration rehearsals of Lennox Berkeley's *Missa Brevis* extracts of which were recorded and used in a BBC Radio Three programme "For Amateur Choirs" broadcast on the 2 December.

The performance of Honneger's *King David* and Poulenc's *Gloria* on the 28 February 1965 had been the subject of much discussion in the committee beforehand as it was seen as dangerously expensive by the treasurer and agreed only after the conductor gave up his honorarium for the year and the committee accepted that they would be personally responsible for any deficit at the end of the year. Heather Harper was engaged as the famous soloist in the hope of increasing the audience. The critics felt that both works were performed well by both choir and orchestra, and they again admired Heather Harper's singing. One reviewer deplored the lack of curiosity by Oxford music goers and an audience of only 245 led to a record loss of £284 (not helped by the fact that Heather Harper's fee was now nearly three times her 1957 fee)

The final concert of the season was a performance of Bach's motet *Jesu Meine Freude* and Britten's *Rejoice in the Lamb* together with Handel's *Organ Concerto in D* in the University Church of St Mary on the 20 May. Lionel Pike's organ playing was greatly admired.

In October 1964 the Secretary had reported to the committee that he had heard that there was a good chance of getting a subsidy from the City Council and the Treasurer had promptly put in an application. Just before the last concert he reported that the Society had been given a grant of £50 for this year and promised £100 for 1965-66. Including this grant the General Account showed a profit of £144. This together with an NFMS guarantee of £78 and profits of £12 on *Messiah* and £6 on the third concert did not meet the loss on the Honneger/Poulenc concert and the balance carried forward to the next year subsided to £24, not as bad as it might have been.

1965-66 - Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms.

Susan Longfield was again engaged for the *Messiah* on the 21 November 1965 and James Bowman was introduced as the male alto. The soloists were considered to be excellent, James Bowman 'sang the alto solos with a forthright beauty' according to the reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 26 November, though he admonished the Society saying 'This year's *Messiah* suggested the very common habit of otherwise painstaking amateur musicians of practising too little a work that is thought to be well known to them.' The audience revived to 881 and the profit to £65 with the aid of an increase in ticket prices.

John Langdon, who had been organ scholar at King's College Cambridge had taken over as accompanist, the last postgraduate to do so. He is remembered for joining Richard Silk at the piano at the Christmas party in the University Officers' Training Corps headquarters in Manor Rd. where he and Richard sat on the floor with their backs to the keyboard, crossed their hand above their heads and played a duet.

To help contain losses, the second concert was Haydn's *Creation* given on the 27 February 1966 in Oxford Town Hall. The soloists were Hazel Holt, Ian Partridge and Christopher Keyte. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 4 March said, 'The performance...caught the spirit of the work and explored much of its detail. It is seldom that we hear soloists who are so well matched in tonal quality and musical intelligence and in sheer efficiency.... their uniform ease of delivery made for relaxed and telling performance.'

There was a good audience of 421 and the loss was contained to £86. This was somewhat undone in the third concert. Mindful of the attraction of a college chapel it was given in Magdalen College on the 26 May and consisted of Victoria's mass, *O Quam Gloriosum est Regnum*, Schutz's *Magnificat* and Stravinsky's, *Symphony of Psalms*. It was noted that the choir was least confident in the 'a capella' piece, but progressively better in the Schutz and Stravinsky as the orchestral support became stronger. Unfortunately there were only 226 in the audience and a discouraging loss of £115 was made. Nevertheless another profit of £144 on the General Account and an NFMS guarantee of £80 boosted the sum carried forward to £112.

1966-67 - Vaughan William's A Sea Symphony.

As they had been well liked for their singing in the *Creation*, Hazel Holt, Ian Partridge and Christopher Keyte were added to Pauline Stephen to make the quartet for *Messiah*. The performance on the 27 November was well received, the critic in the Oxford Mail said the next day, 'Sunday afternoon's *Messiah*.... showed a measurable improvement over last year's. The chorus followed Richard Silk's clear and incisive beat better: the orchestral intonation was spot on, helped by an admixture of players from the Capriol Orchestra of London; and the work as a whole displayed clear outlines and a sense of pace. The audience increased to 939, but the profit fell to £20 owing to the increased orchestral costs and the hiring of a harpsichord.

There was only one other performance in that season, that of the *Sea Symphony* and Purcell's *Ode on St Cecilia's Day (1692)* on the 21 May 1967 in Oxford Town Hall. The Reviewer in the Oxford Times said, 'An outstanding performance of *A Sea Symphony*....a remarkable sense of involvement propelled the societies through the taxing complexities of

this tremendous score with a vigour and spirited attention to detail that were quite magnificent.' Angela Beale and John Noble were described as 'exceptional soloists'. But the audience had no foreknowledge of this and only 256 of them turned up to hear an unfamiliar work resulting in a painful loss of £260.

The City Council increased their subsidy to £150 per annum for this and the next six seasons. This was a substantial sum, equivalent to about £2800 in present day money. This together with an NFMS guarantee of £95 neutralised the concert loss. A small loss on the General Account still left £105 to be carried forward to the next season.

1967-68 - Bach and Handel.

The *Messiah* was performed on the 3 December, rather later than usual. Hazel Holt and Pauline Stephens were retained, but Gerald English was available again and Brian Kay (who was the bass in the King's Singers in their formative years from 1968) was introduced. The Society had now found a permanent accompanist in Eleanor Matthews who continued till 1989. The reviewer in the Oxford Times thought this performance had some claims to be the best yet and said, 'The choir is certainly more flexible alert and determined ...florid passages and awkward dotted notes were tossed off with a light rhythmic freedom that must have been as invigorating to the singers as to the audience.' The audience of 959 was the highest between 1955 and 1980, but the orchestral costs involved in using a section of the Capriol Orchestra limited the profit to £35.

The concert on the 3 March 1968 used local soloists with the exception of Brian Kay and comprised Handel's *Dixit Dominus* and Bach's *Magnificat* and his *Violin Concerto in A Minor* (played by Melvin Cann). With the headline 'Below its usual standard' the reviewer in the Oxford Times said 'The Oxford Harmonic Society did not reach its customary high standard of performance in Sunday afternoon's Town Hall.' A modest audience of 342 led to a loss of £256, almost as high as that for the *Sea Symphony*.

The Society's last concert of the season was held in the City Church of St Martin and All Saints on the 30 May. The choir sang Byrd's *Mass for Four Voices*, Purcell's *Jehova, Quam multi sunt hostes* and were joined by organ and trombones for Bruckner's *Four Motets*. The trombonists of the Francis Reynolds Brass Ensemble and John Courtie, John King and John Armstrong (trumpets) then played pieces for brass ensemble by Samuel Scheidt and Bryan Kelly. Only 136 listeners turned up and a loss of £41 was made.

The concert loss of £261 was just balanced by the NFMS guarantee (estimated at £111) and the City Council subsidy, but a persistent loss on the general account (this time £12) brought the balance carried forward down to £93.

1968-69 - Verdi Requiem.

Like the last performance of this work in 1936 the *Verdi Requiem* represented a turning point in the Society's fortunes. In 1936 it was the first occasion on which it mounted such a large work out of its own resources, this time it boosted the membership and the reserves to new levels that were maintained thereafter.

Messiah was performed on the 1 December 1968. The reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 6 December said, 'The Oxford Harmonic Society's *Messiah* in the Town Hall last Sunday afternoon showed what can be done with intelligent rehearsal....The degree of melodic

detail to be found in the more florid choral passages was credit to a choir prepared properly to practise familiar music,' There were 916 in the audience, less than the previous year, and a small rise in costs squeezed the profit to just £15.

The committee had talked of a concert tour of local churches that in the end was reduced to two performances, one in St Mary's Kidlington in aid of the church and a second, a few days later, in the City Church of St Martin on the 8 March 1969 in aid of Guide Dogs for the Blind. The programme was the same in both cases, the choir sang Bach's *Cantata No.4 "Christ Lag in Todesbanden"* and two motets By Herbert Howells, Richard Silk and George Caird played the *Sonatina for oboe and piano* by Frank Reizenstein, and the Lorns Windass quartet played Haydn's *Quartet in D Opus 76 No.5*. The critic in the Oxford Mail of the 10 March thought the oboe playing the highlight of the evening.

The *Verdi Requiem* was performed on the 18 May 1969 in Oxford Town Hall. After praising the soloists the reviewer in the Oxford Times of the 23 May said of choir and Oxford Orchestral Society,' The *Dies Irae* was testimony to the abounding vitality of both societies and in this masterpiece of overwhelming contrasts was generous and moving.....The performance was conducted by Richard Silk, whose emotionally unexpurgated, wholehearted Verdi was a personal triumph.' A very pleasing audience of 546 nevertheless did not prevent a loss of £202.

Right from the beginning of the season new members had joined the Society in numbers such that by the end the customary membership of 90-100 had swelled to 123. Since then the membership figure has fallen below this but rarely. Similarly, with the aid of £50 from jumble sales and £150 from the city the General Account made a profit of £203. With an MFMS guarantee estimated at £123 this was enough to boost the sum carried forward to £230, which was then built up in cash terms for many years.

1069-70 - Five Tudor Portraits, Carmina Burana.

Hazel Holt and Pauline Stephens returned to sing in the *Messiah* on the 23 November 1969. The critic, writing in the Oxford Mail on the 24th, said ' There were many shortcomings in the singing... and one would have liked more vital treatments of Glory to God and some of the other climactic choruses. Against these should be off-set the good clear tone of the sopranos and an alertness to the conductor's wishes unusual in large amateur choruses.' There were 932 people in the audience resulting in a profit of £56.

The Second concert was on the 1 March 1970 in the Town Hall. John Veale writing in the Oxford Mail on the 2nd, said of the *Five Tudor Portraits* by Vaughan Williams, 'As an interpretation the performance left little to be desired and was clearly played, as it were, from inside the music - though there were blemishes in matters of detail.' Of Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana* he said,'(the societies) responded spiritedly to the composer's spurious earthiness and Richard Silk, the conductor, skilfully mitigated the repetitiousness of the music by means of graduated climaxes progressively gathering momentum through the innumerable repeats.' There was a middling audience of 358 and a massive loss of £278.

The concert on the 21 May was again held in the City Church. The critic in the Oxford Mail said 'The Harmonic Society itself must be congratulated on some expressive singing too. There are not many choirs of this size and type that produce such clear rhythms in pieces as diverse as Schutz's *O Bone Jesu*, Haydn's Little Organ Mass And Britten's *Festival Te*

Deum, and their sense of style showed them to have been well trained.' These works were interspersed by pieces played by the Windass Quartet and a consort of viols.

There was a loss of £21 on this last concert, but an NFMS guarantee of £129 and a General Account profit of £160 ensured nevertheless that the balance inched up to £276.

1970-71 - *Jephtha and The Damnation of Faust*.

The Society had received in March 1969 an invitation from the Organising Committee of the Radcliffe Infirmary Bicentenary celebrations to perform Handel's *Jephtha* on the 18 October 1970 in the Sheldonian, just as had been done for the first anniversary in 1771. The Bicentenary committee took the financial risk and did the ticket sales and advertising whilst the Society dealt with the musical matters. The soloists were praised and the critic in the Oxford Mail (19 October) said, 'After the variable beginning, the performance went from strength to strength becoming most compelling by the final act, with splendidly rendered choruses.'

This season was also the Society's Fiftieth Anniversary, and a brief history together with a comprehensive list of the works performed was inserted into each concert programme.

Messiah was given on the 29 November with Philip Langridge as the tenor. The critic in the Oxford Mail said. '...The choir showed excellent rhythmic control, preserved their clarity of texture in the fugal movements, and tastefully reserved their full volume for moments of climax, all the more effective for being sparing. Of the soloists Philip Langridge (tenor) gave the most powerful and dramatic performance, and sang with especially beautiful phrasing.' An increase in tickets prices and a peak audience of 952 resulted in a profit of £136, the largest for some time.

Early in 1971 the Society made a donation to the Susan Longfield Memorial Fund. She had sung the soprano parts in three concerts between 1963 and 1966 and sadly died of cancer in 1970 at the early age of 35. Subsequently the Susan Longfield Prize for female singers was offered at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama.

The Committee had discussed the advisability of singing Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* as it had much more work for the men than the women, but decided to go ahead. One critic (Oxford Times 5 March) under the headline 'Berlioz Roughly Handled' said of the performance on the 28 February 1971, 'Although it was considerably redeemed by the fine singing of the soloists, the performance as a whole lacked precision and sensitivity. The fault lay mainly in the orchestral playing.....The choir made a valiant effort but was lacking in ensemble and at its best the singing was wooden and dull.' There were 329 in the audience.

The final concert of the season was given in the City Church of St Martin on the 20 May. The separation of the singers from each other and the organ worked against a good performance of Vaughan Williams's *Benedicite*, but the addition of an instrumental ensemble for the final work, Bryan Kelly's *Stabat Mater*, made all the difference and it went off well. Between these works Mervyn Keeble and Eleanor Matthews played Poulenc's *Sonata for Oboe and Piano*.

The membership was 130, the highest in the Society's history and the profit on the General Account (including a jumble sale and the City Council subsidy) was £197.50, also the

highest ever. The loss on the Concert Account was, however, revised upwards after the draft accounts were presented at the AGM on the 26 May so that it is not possible to say more than that *The Damnation of Faust* lost over £300 and that the balance carried forward to the next season was £400.21, also a record.

Shortly after the AGM Richard Silk was told that his application for a lectureship at the Birmingham Conservatoire had been successful and he tendered his resignation to the committee. A meeting of the new committee was to be held on the 7 June, and at a further meeting on the 15 July it was decided to offer the conductorship to Peter Ward Jones, the Music Librarian at the Bodleian Library.

A Golden Jubilee Dinner was held in the Eastgate Hotel on the 30 October at which Richard was presented with his chosen gift, an electric drill, which he said would always make him think of the choir !

W A Chislett, writing in the Oxford Times, said, 'The departure of Mr Silk will be a serious loss to Oxford music, not only for Magdalen College School,.....but in the city generally, particularly for those who take part in choral music whether as singers or listeners. In his eight years as conductor of the Oxford Harmonic Society he has given some memorable concerts and in them has demonstrated the breadth of his musical knowledge and the catholicity of his taste.'