

[Book Review]

A Choral Chronicle: The History of Worcester Festival Choral Society

Michelle Whitefoot

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Considering that the Three Choirs Festival is known to have been in existence for more than 300 years, it is surprising that the formation of SATB choral societies in Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester did not take place until the mid 19th century. Previously, when additional singers were required to augment the cathedral choirs of the three cities for larger-scale repertoire, they were recruited from London or the north of England. This book has been written to commemorate 160 years of Worcester's leading amateur chorus, which (in normal times) runs its own annual concert season and also contributes a contingent of singers every year to the Three Choirs Festival Chorus.

It is effectively an edited update, with the author's permission, of a 1996 history by Mary Parsons, but it also draws on recent research by Kevin Allen for his 2019 publication *Hugh Blair: Worcester's Forgotten Organist*, to unravel the slightly confusing story of its early years. It seems that Worcester Festival Choral Society (WFCS) was originally founded by the long-serving cathedral organist William Done, but failed to reach the standards expected; it closed down and was re-founded in 1888 with more oversight from the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral; Blair was appointed as its conductor in 1889. But the choir's archives are sketchy, and confusion with Done's Worcester Musical Society led to its centenary being mistakenly celebrated in 1970 instead of 1961 or 1988.

WFCS has had an extremely distinguished list of musical directors, including Elgar's great friend Ivor Atkins, who held the role for 53 years; David Willcocks, Douglas Guest and Christopher Robinson, who famously went on to King's College Cambridge, Westminster Abbey and St John's College Cambridge respectively; Donald Hunt 1975-97; Adrian Lucas 1997-2012; and more recently Peter Nardone 2012-2018, followed by Christopher Allsop for a year before the current incumbent Samuel Hudson took over in 2019, only to face the pandemic that curtailed his first season. The book deftly sketches the strengths of each of these very different characters and their contributions to the choir's development. Issues such as balancing interesting repertoire with programmes that will attract audiences, or deciding whether the west end or under the tower is the best place to position the choir, crop up again and again.

Michelle Whitefoot, herself a member of WFCS, has made good use of the available records (which include a rich selection of photographs) and tells an engaging story. It concludes with the choir's sing-through of Vaughan Williams's *Sea Symphony* in an empty cathedral on the night that should have been their last rehearsal before their performance in March 2020, heralding another hiatus in its history. However, Whitefoot vividly conveys the spirit of friendship and enthusiasm that characterises the choir, and feels confident that it can look forward to resuming its activities and continuing for many decades to come.

CLARE STEVENS