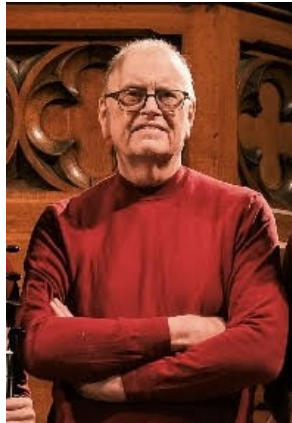




We asked some of our current and former members for their thoughts and memories



Our founder, **John Sloboda**

'I am delighted that the choir I founded in 1975 is celebrating its 50th Anniversary this year in such good health. I am happy to offer a few memories of the years when I was most closely associated with it.'

I arrived at Keele in October 1974 aged 24, as a junior lecturer in the Psychology Department. My previous six years as a student (Oxford and London) had immersed me in a very rich choral world, both as singer and conductor, and I was eager to use these skills to the benefit of the community. In June 1975 I organised a performance of the jazz cantata Captain Noah's Floating Zoo as part of Keele's annual Summer Festival, and out of that arose the idea of an auditioned 20-30 strong chamber choir to complement the much larger allcomers student Choral Society. Although based at Keele, the idea from the start was to involve local singers who were not members of the University ("town and gown"), and this has proved key to the choir's long term success, with more and more of the core membership being permanent local residents rather than transitory students. Indeed, Marjorie Seddon, the only founding member from 1975 still singing in the choir, is exactly such a local stalwart!

The first official concert of the Keele Chamber Choir was in around December 1975, although no-one can seem to remember the exact date, nor what was performed. From then on we rehearsed on campus weekly during term and put on three or four concerts a year. Although the majority of concerts were in the Keele Chapel, we aimed for at least one offcampus concert per year, sometimes combining with other choirs in a major project. Our repertoire was eclectic, ranging from Monteverdi to Britten, and our concert venues ranged as far as Worcestershire, being about the farthest possible to easily get home the same night.

For the first years, the organisation was incredibly "shoestring". I took rehearsals from the piano, so was both choir trainer and accompanist. Everyone was an unpaid volunteer, and we got the premises for free as a campus society, so the size of the audience didn't matter

very much to us, what mattered was that we got the opportunity to sing interesting repertoire together to a high standard. It was a very sociable affair, with post-rehearsal drinks in the Keele Postgraduate Association (KPA), then housed in the basement of Keele Hall, being an essential part of the evening's proceedings.

From the start, we involved local instrumentalists, ranging from a small baroque ensemble of half a dozen students (led by the late George Pratt of the Music Department), to ad-hoc chamber orchestras of a dozen or more, made up also of a mixture of students, staff, and local amateurs. Here I have to pay special tribute to the violinist of extraordinary musicianship and dedication, the late Hans Liebeck of the Keele Maths Department, who led most of our orchestral performances until I left the choir (and beyond).

The most remarkable project of those early years was our participation in a historic performance at the Victoria Hall Hanley in 1978 of Havergal Brian's monumental choral symphony *The Gothic*. The entire project was held together by a huge team of local organisers, and I was entrusted with the role of chorus master, bringing together 400 singers from no less than 12 separately coached local choirs, to complement the 170-player orchestra. It was a wild and bizarre (but hugely rewarding) experience which all who participated will no doubt remember for the rest of their lives.

A major turning point in the choir's history came when in 1985 I decided to put on the first performance of Bach's Mass in B Minor that the Potteries had seen since Malcolm Sargent had brought it there in the 1950s. The Keele Chamber Choir and its instrumentalist friends formed the nucleus of this performance, also at the Victoria Hall, but we needed to recruit a considerable number of additional competent singers. By making the performance a fundraiser for the charity War on Want, we were able to persuade everyone, including some professional or semi-professional performers, to offer their services for free, and we raised extra funds by selling a cassette recording of the concert (which I still have as a prized possession). The project required a substantial committee, with clearly defined roles, and that volunteer group became the essential support for gearing up the choir to a larger body of 40-60 singers capable of taking on larger choir and orchestra repertoire than a chamber choir could manage. And so, we changed our name to Keele Bach Choir, as an indication that works of the stature and proportions of Bach would be at the core of our repertoire.

It was around that time that the late Professor Andor Gomme agreed to become the Choir's Chairman. Andor was a Professor in the English Department, but his interests and expertise extended way beyond English literature. He had a vast and comprehensive knowledge of the classical repertoire, and made many inspired suggestions for works we should perform. His most memorable contribution was creating the first modern performing edition of Bach's unfinished St Mark Passion, filling in recitatives and other movements from the composition of Bach's contemporary Reinhard Keiser. We gave the first performance of the Gomme Edition in March 1990, and then in June (in our London debut) at Holy Trinity Church Sloane Street, with guest conductor Nigel Springthorpe, who then went on with his own choir to make the first professional recording of the edition.

Because the majority of choir members in the early years were students, singing only for a few years before moving away, we decided to institute periodic “reunion weekends” when former and present members could join together, putting together a performance on the Sunday afternoon, and preceded by a reunion dinner on the Saturday night. The first of these was in 1985. A particularly special reunion took place in June 1990 as part of the celebrations of Keele’s 40th anniversary, when a 58-strong choir was joined by a 50-strong orchestra (made up entirely of past and present members of the University) in an all-Brahms programme, including his German Requiem.

My personal highlight of the 1990s was the performance we put on of Haydn’s *The Seasons* in June 1994. This wonderful work, somewhat overshadowed by his more performed *Creation*, has exquisite writing for both choir and soloists, and it is important to pay tribute to some of the wonderful soloists we have been able to draw from our own community, including Kate Snape, Ruth and Hester Gomme, Marjorie Seddon, John Cox, Nik Hancock, and John Cliffe, to name but a few.

By 1994 I had already indicated to the committee that I planned to step down from conducting the choir in 1995, having served it for 20 years. Being entrusted with a choir is a great privilege. It is also a great responsibility. My personal passion is choral singing, and for 20 years I had to deny myself any substantial opportunity to sing. There was just not the time to do both. Since 1995 I have hardly conducted, but have returned to the ranks of the 2nd basses of a wide variety of choirs and vocal ensembles, where I still enjoy the profound joys of ensemble singing. I was hugely enriched by my 25 years of conducting, most of it at Keele, and am relieved and delighted that my legacy has been preserved and developed under the batons of my hugely talented successors.

I was in a uniquely privileged position of having conducting and accompanying skills and energies without needing to be paid for my efforts, having a secure salaried day job as a university academic. This gave the choir a rather easy financial ride for its first 20 years, and I do not underestimate the “ramping up” in fundraising efforts that the move to professional paid conductors and accompanists entailed. That these efforts have been so successful is testament to the devotion and dedication of successive choir committees.

Conductors come and go, and it is a strong choir committee which holds things together and ensures continuity. We should all be immensely grateful for the support of the committee members who have performed this unsung service, in several cases over decades. For instance, Kay Williams, who joined the committee in my time, is still serving it today, 35 years later. I send my warmest congratulations to Glynis Brewer and her colleagues on the committee for holding the fort so successfully, and for taking the initiative to mark the 50th Anniversary by an enhanced programme of special events in 2025. Long may the choir prosper!

## Our Memories



**Marjorie Seddon (1975 - date)**

**I'm celebrating 50 years with Keele Bach Choir.**

One of the premier chamber choirs in Staffordshire celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. Keele Chamber Choir (as it was originally known) was established in 1975 by John Sloboda, a psychology lecturer and later professor at the University.

The choir is still going strong after five decades with around forty members drawn from across Staffordshire and surrounding counties, and I was at the first rehearsal! Yes! I've been singing with the choir for 50 years. I turned up in trepidation for the first rehearsal because I personally wasn't a member of Keele, but I found the most wonderful musical collaboration. It was one of those chance meetings that changed my musical life.

Initially the appeal for me was the repertoire and the way that John Sloboda took the rehearsals. For me he was the perfect conductor. It was all about his style of training the choir and his musical integrity, which is continued with our present conductor Neil Taylor. The reason I am still singing with this choir after 50 years is that Keele Bach Choir challenges the musical ability of all its singers. This is especially true for our Golden Anniversary concerts! We hope you can join us.

## Marion Wood

Working on Machaut I made some first forays into Pythagorean tuning that has radically informed my approach to choir intonation ever since. Hearing the Bach Choir sing the St Mark Passion as an undergraduate was an enormously inspiring moment for me, and the opportunity to work with the Choir later brought me full circle. The St Matthew, and the collaboration with the Baroque Ensemble of the Birmingham Conservatoire were musical highlights for me, but what I most appreciate when looking back is the opportunity to be part of such a heartwarming community.



Please give my warmest greetings to everyone who remembers me. I will be in Ireland at a music camp on the evening in question, otherwise I would be furiously interrogating Easyjet!

## **Andrew Smith**

I served a year as chair in 1999-2000, following Andor Gomme's retirement.

I have some very happy memories from my years with Keele Bach Choir.

I joined for the Christmas Oratorio in 1997, a superb period performance under our then conductor Marion Wood. Another highlight was singing Brahms' Requiem four times in 1998: two performances in Keele chapel and two in Czechia. After a mammoth but memorable bus trip to Czechia with the Keele Philharmonic, a trailer full of instruments and great craic from some singers from the Belfast Philharmonic Choir, enlivened by tour guide and polyglot tenor Paul Brown, we gave our rendition in the splendours of the Casino Hall, Mariánské Lázně, and in the romantic setting of the Dvořák Hall, Prague, across a moonlit Vltava from the castle.

After KBC joined an impressive festival chorus of Staffordshire and Erlangen singers in The Dream of Gerontius for the finale of 1999's North Staffs Triennial Music Festival, I was asked to chair the choir for a year on learning of Andor Gomme's retirement. It was a time of transition as Marion Wood had moved to London and the choir had just engaged Christopher Hand from Worcester as conductor.

Pressures of work brought an end to my time with KBC, but not before I had time to enjoy singing a double Bach Magnificat concert (JS and CPE settings), thus bookending my time with two of the most joyous and singable (with practice!) of the works of the great JSB.



## **Chris Hand**

I have such happy memories happy memories of people, John Norris and Janet Brown and other NHS or OGS people including Geoffrey Walker and Ian Riddle, both accompanists. I was particularly pleased by the choir's singing in Bach's St John Passion and in Haydn's The Creation in which we were so well accompanied by the North Staffs Symphony Orchestra. It was very good to be conducting KBC with some many from my home area. I also want to thank Kay Williams for all she did, co-ordinating matters.



## **Matt Hamilton**

It's hard to believe it's not far off 10 years since I've conducted Keele Bach Choir. For a good while after I left I got a strange twitchy feeling around 6pm on a Thursday, as if I really ought to be doing something fun and musical with some very lovely people somewhere...



I have only fond memories of my time at KBC - I arrived as a pretty inexperienced young conductor, and the help and support I received from committees and choir members was invaluable. I particularly valued how fearlessly the choir threw themselves into some of my more off-the-wall repertoire choices, and as often as not introduced me to some wonderful pieces that I didn't know. Certain bits of the repertoire will always be connected to this choir for me - Vic Nees' (not Vic Reeves) Magnificat; Gabriel Jackson's Requiem; Respighi's Lauda to name just a few. Mostly, though, my abiding memory of the choir is of the great people who committed so much of their lives and skills to it, whether from the university or wider local area. It was a real privilege to be part of this positive and cheerful musical community - congratulations of 50 years!

## **Jim Howell**

I joined the choir in March 1989. I had been to the performance of Monteverdi Vespers and was so impressed that I thought I might give it a go. My friend and colleague Denis Dixon took me to the next rehearsal and the rest is history. I had sung in a cathedral choir as a treble and played the double bass in high school, but had never sung as a bass. I took a break from 2003-2016 after Christopher Hand's tenure and so regrettably missed Matthew Willis and Matthew Hamilton. I was lured back in 2017 by Alison Hendricken just after Neil started.



## **Peter de Cruz**

I have been singing Bass with the Keele Bach Choir since 1984, when I took up a Law lectureship at Keele University. It was my neighbour Sue Whitehouse, who suggested I join the choir in which she and her husband, Roger, were members. It was a small chamber choir then and I thoroughly enjoyed singing under founder John Sloboda, who trained the choir to perform with confidence, musicality and authority. Over the years, the choir continued to build a reputation as a quality group which sang Renaissance repertoire *a capella* but also sang Baroque and more modern pieces, occasionally with orchestra. John Sloboda then decided to perform the Bach B minor mass with an expanded choir and a professional orchestra, and its performance was critically well received and enjoyed by the choir.



The choir has never looked back and following John's departure, it employed a series of professional conductors, while still employing up-and-coming young conductors to take some rehearsals. It has been my pleasure to have sung with some excellent singers in the choir with John Cox (tenor), John Cliffe (bass/ baritone), Richard Newman (tenor), and Marjorie Seddon (mezzo) among many memorable soloists. Marjorie joined in 1975 and still sings with the choir, doing solos and still gives recitals with other musicians. We have also had some excellent conductors, including our current conductor, Neil Taylor, who has broadened and developed the choir's repertoire. The choir continues to perform challenging repertoire and my lasting memory of the past forty years with the choir is of the variety of ancient and modern music we performed to a high standard, especially with orchestra, including works like Messiah. No other choir would have provided the opportunity for me to sing such classic choruses accompanied by a quality orchestra and professional soloists. Finally, my most cherished memory will be of the wonderful people I continue to meet through singing with the choir. Long may that continue!

### **Sue Coffey**

It was the quality of the singing that made me join KBC. I always thought it was a bit more special and had a certain quality of performance with high standards, and choir members had to be auditioned - we just didn't take anybody ! I was also attracted by the fact that the choir did a lot of interesting music that is challenging and not always mainstream".

### **Raya Cotton** (one of our younger members)

Having joined the Keele Bach choir only recently, I expected to come to a group of singers - instead I feel like I've joined a family! There's a real warmth to the community and I've been made to feel so welcome, and that's to say nothing about the fantastic repertoire that we get to sing that really challenges my ability and fuels my ambition. Keele Bach choir is a lovely group to be part of and I'm very happy I joined!

### **Pete Durrant** (accompanist and conductor)

I took over as accompanist of Keele Bach Choir in September 2012, after performing with them in their summer concert that year of Brahms Requiem. I took over as conductor for a term in autumn of 2016 where we performed a concert of 20th century English music, including the Ceremony of Carols by Benjamin Britten. I played as accompanist again from 2017 until April 2019 where my final concert was Brahms Requiem! One of my highlights of being with Keele Bach Choir was the opportunity to perform some solo piano music within concerts, and the one that stands out to me most was



the Americana concert of summer 2013 where I played 'Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues' by Frederic Rzewski. Moving to the present and I am now a staff pianist at RNCM and the head accompanist at junior RNCM, I regularly play with the Halle and BBC Philharmonic Orchestras and I play for St George's Singers, Nchoir, Halle training and youth choirs and RNCM chamber choir! Some of you may remember that I did an Ironman in 2018, I'm still enjoying exercise and triathlon, but I've only been doing shorter distance races these days, nothing that's going to have me racing for longer than 2 hours!! I am now married (in 2023) and living in the same house in Withington in Manchester that we bought in 2013. My dog, Toby, is now 11 and is still acting like a puppy all the time!

### **Kay Williams reminisces...**

Before I joined the choir properly in 1987, I was one of the singers at the memorable performance of Havergal Brian's 'Gothic Symphony.' It was so loud, I had no idea what notes I was singing and at one point, the brass, just behind us, almost blew us off the Victoria Hall stage, certainly a performance to remember.

I remember too our visit to Great Witley in Worcestershire, where we performed Handel's 'Dixit Dominus' in the superb baroque church, near the ruined hall. The organ casing came from an organ that would have been played by Handel!

Other great memories are performances of Bach's wonderful 'B minor Mass', which I remember telling Matthew Willis sent me to heaven several times when singing! I first sang it in a performance in Birmingham Cathedral, which was attended by my music teacher from school, KEHS, Vivienne Bolton, who was responsible for introducing me to the delights of choral singing. It turned out that her son Rick, for whom I used to babysit, was also there, and, guess what, was married to Ann Sloboda, our then conductor John Sloboda's sister! The other performance I enjoyed immensely, under the baton of Matthew Willis, was in Keele Chapel, accompanied by the wonderful Northern Chamber Orchestra.



Another great memory was performing 'Messiah' in St. John's, Smith Square, London. We apparently had a very good review in the Evening Standard and an Indian gentleman was so enthusiastic, that he wanted us to go over to India to perform!

Other outstanding memories were of joining Ceramic City Choir in the Victoria Hall in Verdi's 'Requiem' and Vaughan Williams's 'Sea Symphony'. At one of these concerts, a lady from Ceramic fainted just in front of me and disconcertingly remained so for a very long time, until she could be taken into the fresh air!

But, of course, I have enjoyed everything the choir has sung under all its very different



directors and most importantly have enjoyed the camaraderie of the singers, who are important friends in my life.

### **Kathie Dixon remembers her and Denis's time with KBC (1975 - 2000)**

Since coming back to New Zealand in 2015, I feel my singing with KBC exists in some other far-off world, but I still remember our years in the Choir with warm affection. Prior to joining KBC, I had been choral singing as a tenor since the age of 13 in the 1950s. My husband Denis, in contrast, had his first experience of choral singing quite a few years later when he joined a Catholic choir in Exeter in 1966, not because he was a Catholic but because he simply liked the music! We both joined Bach Choral Society (the forerunner to Keele Bach Choir) in 1969. I am so proud to have sung in many major choral works with KBC, often with full orchestra. A particularly memorable and challenging performance for me was that of Beethoven's Ninth. For a curious personal reason, I had a major psychological fear of the scherzo. So when our conductor John (Sloboda) said he wanted to sing the work, I said that I couldn't do it. Undeterred, he insisted: 'try it'. Happily, I did try it and managed with some relief largely to overcome my issues with the music. Nowadays I can almost approach it with equanimity! Of course, we were lucky to enjoy the leadership of superb conductors during our time, initially John Sloboda and subsequently Marion Wood (under whose baton we tackled the arcane demands of Machaut's microtonality, acquitting ourselves reasonably well).



A highlight of our KBC experience was the magnificent Loire Tour. We sang in three different concerts and two of our French host organisers provided us with excellent audiences. But the need to do this somehow escaped the other host, so just before we were due to sing, we had to go out into the highways and byways to draw an audience in. It was quite something. Despite this hiccup, the tour was a great success and we were very well received. (KBC members may recall that a similar missing audience event occurred on the 2019 French tour! - ed.)

Denis and I completed a stint as joint treasurers of the Choir and were therefore committee members for a number of years. As you may have read elsewhere, Denis persuaded his colleague in Keele's Chemistry Department, Jim Howell, to join the choir as a fellow bass. After some 25 happy years singing with KBC, we finally left its ranks in 2000. Looking back, I am delighted to say that our membership of the Choir was a hugely important part of both Denis's and my life.

## **Madeline Griggs**

I've been singing with KBC for nearly two years now, initially as a substitute for 18 months but now finally as a full member. I love it - being part of the music we make fills me with joy. It is so fulfilling and therapeutic. I look forward to every Thursday evening rehearsal and am never disappointed by my experience there. The music choices are exciting and varied; people are friendly and welcoming and Neil's various stories and singing analogies ranging from tube trains to types of red wine are both effective and entertaining.

## **Dave Winter**

I remember the standing ovation we got after our concert at the church of Note Dame du Cap Lihou in Granville, during our 2019 tour of Normandy.

Never been on the receiving end of a standing ovation before!

## **Michele Bourne**

I've loved being a member of Keele Bach Choir since 2007 (with some breaks). The music always seems impossible when we start our rehearsals and takes a lot of practice for me but when we finally get to the performances I feel so proud to be a part of such magical music.

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An **Inspirational** pic from Marion!



Please send in your own memories for our archives.