

BROCKHAM CHORAL SOCIETY

Minutes of Annual General Meeting: 1 September 2015

Present: 40 Members.

1. Apologies for Absence Carol Belk, Tony Earnshaw, Lyn Groves, Fred Harrison, Sally Hulbert, Maureen Jones, Jenni Knights, Sandy Luff, Charles Macrorie, Anne Mitchell, Jenny Regan, Joy Ridley, Angela Sharwood, Eiluned Slot, Jane Stride, Iris Sweet, Nick Tanton, Erin Thornton, Anne Washtell, Sylvia Williams.

2. Minutes of the Previous AGM (held 2 September 2014)

These were agreed as correct, and signed. No matters arising were raised.

3. Chairman's Report

This is attached to these minutes.

4. Annual Financial Report and Accounts

The Treasurer, Nick Hands-Clarke, explained that the format of the accounts had been changed – as flagged up last year – which made the accounts easier to read. Brockham was one of the largest local choirs in terms of turnover and as such it was important we aligned with the Charity Commission guidelines. Concert income and expenditure were both down on the previous year (affected by the Dorking Halls concert in 2013) and subscription income was down due to fewer members and Friends and the consequent impact on Gift Aid; also a clarification of the Gift Aid rules reduced the amount we could claim. Fundraising income was down (previous year income boosted by the Auction of Promises); the lack of a Christmas concert meant fewer rehearsals thus reducing rehearsal expenditure. Admin expenditure is up due to spend on the website for which we had received a grant. There was an overall surplus of £981 increasing our reserves to £8,177. Looking at the concerts, the loss on the autumn concert was very large due to significant spend on musicians and poor ticket sales covering only 28% of expenditure. We subsequently changed our ticket sales methodology which resulted in increased ticket sales. Grants are hard to get and we shall always need fundraising; income from advertising is very welcome, thanks is due to those who work hard to sell advertising, and we should use those advertisers and make it clear it is as a result of their adverts. The draft budget for this year posits a deficit of around £3,000; the committee will be looking at fund raising initiatives, but every ticket sale reduces the amount we need from fund raising. The following issues were raised in questions:

Gift Aid Michael Doughty raised the issue of joint Gift Aid donations; Nick will look into this.

Reserves Jenny Bartholomew felt disappointed at the level of reserves. Nick said they were lower than some recent years when they were bolstered by successful CD sales, but higher than years before that. Reserves are monitored and are a factor in planning future seasons. We had hoped for some financial sponsorship from outside the choir but had no success so far. Michael Doughty proposed the adoption of the Annual Report and Accounts, seconded by Diana Unwin and carried *nem con*. Alison Jesson expressed the choir's thanks to Nick for all his hard work.

Nick expressed his thanks to David Sinden for examining the accounts; David has agreed to act as Examiner again for this year. He was proposed as Examiner by Nick Hands-Clarke, seconded by Sue Tanton and agreed *nem con*.

5. Subscriptions

The Chairman said there was a proposal the subscriptions should be raised to £120. Nick explained this was partly prompted by the increase in school venue hire for rehearsals. Jacki Rance asked if the increase was enough; Reuben said it was not realistic to ask for more at present, and Nick pointed out that members could give additional donations as some already did at present. The proposition to increase subscriptions was proposed by Mark Sayer, seconded by Moira Sinden, and agreed *nem con*.

6. Musical Director's Report

This is attached to these minutes.

Mary Suckling asked about learning notes for rehearsals by those who don't have keyboards. Andy said that reading the score to familiarise with the words and pages is very good preparation, and that those with keyboards can help those who don't have them – mutual help within the choir. There is also the potential of extra rehearsals outside the normal rehearsal framework for those that need them. Robin Luff said the extra rehearsals for tenors with Andy had been immensely helpful.

7. Election of Chairman

Soo Abram nominated Reuben Suckling, seconded by Helen Campbell-Hart. There being no other nominations, Reuben was elected *nem con*. Ann Slack expressed thanks on behalf of the choir to Nick Tanton for his work as Chairman.

8. Election of Committee

Reuben said existing committee members Ed Criswick, Estelle Earnshaw, Nick Hands-Clarke, Jane Dawson, Joy Ridley and Jane Stride were willing to continue, Mark Sayer had been nominated and there was space for further members. Phil Slack was nominated by Alison Jesson, and Pauline Whitehead by Estelle. Chris Griffin proposed election of the candidates *en bloc*, seconded by Bridget Doughty, and they were elected *nem con*. Diana Unwin expressed the choir's appreciation of Anne Tennant's service to the committee as she had now stepped down.

9. Any Other Business

Governance David John was sad that Nick Tanton had stood down as Chairman, and disappointed that we didn't have a comprehensive Chairman's report covering the year's activities – it would have been useful to have this and the MD's report circulated beforehand. The roles and responsibilities of the management committee didn't seem to be properly understood and there should be encouragement for new members on the committee. He was deeply unhappy with the summer term, and wrote a letter about this to Ed Criswick – he had not had a formal response and felt that it had gone dead. This appeared symptomatic of the committee's reluctance to seek people's views. Although members are well informed of committee decisions, events etc there seemed to be a lack of engagement with the members and members didn't feel encouraged to have face-to-face discussions with committee members. People should feel free to express their view, but he felt points he had raised at previous AGMs had been ignored or underreported – they should be looked at and worked on. He didn't want to sing with the choir in September and would take a break, though he would still support the choir. Reuben responded that David's letter had not been ignored, but there had been a change of chairman and the new committee would consider his letter. Estelle and Tony Newell felt David should be supported by having his letter dealt with. Ed said he had spoken to David about his letter and told him it would be dealt with, it had already been discussed among some committee members but as there hadn't been a committee meeting since the letter was sent the committee had not been able to deal with it. Reuben added that the roles and responsibilities of the new committee would be discussed at its next meeting in two days' time. There was new blood on the committee last year and again for this year. In terms of communication Reuben pointed out that précis of committee meetings were provided to members to keep them informed of matters discussed by the committee and decisions made. In addition it had been proposed to have informal discussions with the members after the AGM business on various topics; it hadn't proved possible to hold these this year but we would aim to do it at the next AGM. Jenny Bartholomew felt that it was difficult to talk to the committee, eg about not liking the music, because it seemed any opinions were ignored. However, others felt they were able to express views to the committee and be heeded. Neil Williams expressed his thanks to all who had served on the committee since he joined the choir for the support he had received.

Music for rehearsal Michael Doughty asked for music to be made available one month before rehearsals started.

Flyers Reuben drew members' attention to the flyers and schedules available for promoting the choir and recruiting singers.

10. Date of Next AGM

Tuesday 6 September 2016.

Chairman's Report

During the past year we have sung a rich variety of music, sacred and secular. At each stage the music has been within our competence (though we may not always have believed it to be so) and we have characteristically risen to the occasion when it came to performance in front of an audience.

As members of Brockham Choral we are each on a musical journey and we each have our own level of confidence and self-belief. The result of our team labours is always and exactly the sum of all parts. I would commend all of you who are musically assured actively to cherish, encourage and help those who are less so. I extoll everyone to take every possible step to learn, hone, revise and consolidate what has been learnt on each Tuesday ready for the next rehearsal. Listen to a CD of the piece (e.g. a Choraline version). Alternatively if, for example, you haven't a keyboard at home ask someone who has to help you; equally if you have a keyboard please offer to help anyone who hasn't.

Our goal should be to ensure not only that each concert is a great success but that we each grow in musical confidence (and so also in competence) week-by-week. In this way every rehearsal will become a pleasure (both as anticipated and as experienced) not least in the week immediately prior to a concert.

For a number of reasons, I have decided to step down as chairman and to take a break from singing. I wish you all the best for the coming season and would like to thank most warmly Andy for his sterling musical leadership – it has been a delight to work with and learn so much from him - Marion whose contribution to BCS's musical life is beyond measure and all those, including the committee, whose hard work has helped make it all work.

Nick Tanton

August 2015

2015 AGM Musical Director's Report

Before I start to deliver my prepared report, I want to begin with this postscript. This is the paragraph that I wrote at the end - after I had completed the report and I have placed it here because I want you all to know I am on your side. You must try to bear in mind throughout this report that I always have and always will support this choir to the best of my ability and with all the resources I have available. You should also be aware that I am passionate about my job and that the only way I can go about my job is to do it fully and whole heartedly. You might hear between the lines a few notes of frustration and I might express some of my concerns rather more clumsily than we would like. However, you must keep in view the fact that I have written this because I care about BCS and I want everyone else to care just as much. You don't need to applaud at the end. You just need to listen and understand and then make up your mind what's going to happen this year.

Just as I sat down to write this report, a spam email popped up in my inbox. In among the rubbish and dodgy links was, rather serendipitously, a completely unrelated paragraph about practice. It read:-

Most people don't really want to 'learn' to play the piano or 'practice' the piano, they just want to 'play' the piano. 'Play' sounds like fun, 'practice' sounds like a chore. We get this image from childhood - some unfortunate child stuck indoors 'practicing' scales while all the other children are outside 'playing'.

So, first thing we need to do is to see our piano practice in a new light. See it as a way of accelerating the learning process so that SOON you'll be able to 'play' the piano and play it well. If you don't practice and you just play old familiar tunes you stay at the same level. Yes, you'll get better at playing those old familiar tunes but they will be the ONLY tunes that you can play and technically you won't be pushing yourself to greater heights nor learning the skills that will allow you to play ALL tunes.

Proper, structured piano practice helps you stride forwards. I say 'proper' because a lot of people have an idea that practice IS just playing pieces over and over. Practice needs to involve uncharted territory. The golden rule to improving your skills is - 'practice what you CAN'T play, not what you CAN play'.

It struck me that perhaps this might be something worth saying to you tonight – although, of course, substituting the 'piano playing' with 'singing'.

So, if I may, let this be my text for this year's sermon – over which I can say, without hesitation, I have been sorely vexed.

The writing of a Music Report appears to have a number of intrinsic difficulties. I'm not sure, for example, if you actually want me to stand up in front of you year on year and deliver my thoughts on the previous season's activities – and if you do want me to say something, I'm guessing that you would like me to offer gushing and effusive praise, tell you all how wonderful you are, what wonderful concerts you've given and what a wonderful time I've had working with you.

Further, I'm not really sure if many actually listen carefully to what is said. Sadly, in thinking about what to say this year, I was made aware that much of what I have said in recent reports has been so easily and quickly forgotten. And yet it is still totally relevant today.

The reason I say this is simply that I regard this report as more than just a précis of last season's music. For me, this is my one and only opportunity to set out my stall, to share my vision of what we can do and how we can achieve it. It's also an opportunity to rally the troops – to share the ups and the downs of the year and to look forward to building on what we have already achieved. This, in my mind, has to be more than a musical survey of your last few concerts.

Now, I'm not going to repeat everything that I've said to the choir in the last eight years. That would indeed induce a collective groan – and my cause would be lost at the outset. However, just going back to my accidental appointment in 2007, I want to remind you of a few important events. First, with Barney's departure, I was given the opportunity to leave my comfortable retirement to come and work with you and to bring along my experience and expertise in the field of choral music for your benefit. In those first few months we had a number of meetings with the committee and an extraordinary meeting of the choir in which I set out what I could bring to Brockham Choral Society and the way in which we could achieve our agreed aims and aspirations. Included in these discussions were an emphasis on establishing a sound structure around the management and business of the choir, the adoption of a mission statement to make BCS the choir of choice for singers and audiences, the development of the choir through better training, workshops, improved and regulated attendance and the ongoing learning of music skills, the creation of a five-year rolling programme so that singers and audience could follow and experience the development of the choir and finally the carefully structured programming designed to raise the bar in terms of choir development and recruitment, audience development and, with secure financial management, raise the profile of BCS in and around its community.

Interestingly, in preparation for this report, I re-read my EGM speech given on 20th May 2008. I spoke about the diminishing cultural relevance of choirs, the perceived decline of choral societies and the need to act positively to buck the trend. I spoke of the state of BCS as I found it and of how the membership needed to support the developmental initiatives if the choir was to survive. I spoke about musical development and commitment and I finished with these two paragraphs:-

If you give me a mandate tonight to bring my experience and expertise to the choir's future, I will undertake to commit fully to making BCS the choir of choice for singers and audience alike. That's the easy bit! In return I would expect the members of BCS to commit as fully as possible to the season's schedule of rehearsals and concerts. I would expect the hard-working committee to continue to support the members in pursuing our stated aims and ideals and I would expect the members of the choir to support their committee's work fully.

The debate about my appointment really boils down to this: is the membership happy to continue along its comfortable, comparatively unchallenged path with no eye to the future OR does the membership want to raise its game, take this opportunity to learn new skills, attract new members and new audiences, revitalise the life of the choir and create a positive reputation and future for BCS both in and beyond its community.

And, guess what? The choir voted unanimously to appoint me on that mandate.

So, eight years on, where are we? Well, we've actually travelled quite a long way along the chosen road.

However - have some of us lost sight of the vision we all agreed to in 2008? Have some of us forgotten what's been said so often in previous MD Reports? Has there been a growing dissatisfaction and disaffection in the choir this last year or two? Do we still have members picking and choosing which concerts they support? Has there been a reduction in the commitment of some members to fulfil the requirements of their membership?

Can we all honestly say that we have supported the choir and the committee fully this year? I think probably not all. I stand here week by week and I see the variable attendance. I'm saddened at the lack of engagement by some members and I witness the minimal effort by some which continues to hold back the choir's musical development. Along with many of our colleagues I get frustrated by those who seem to think that it's OK to ignore the weekly requests to look at their music between rehearsals. I have repeatedly asked that we move through the note-learning part of the rehearsal period early on so that we can concentrate more on how to sing rather than continually going back over learning notes and words for those that haven't put in the work. As I see it, I fear that we have not managed this particularly well through the last season.

And here's the greatest part of my dilemma. While we have struggled through this last year with undercurrents of disaffection, mutterings of discontent and a lack of focus, we have actually produced a pretty sensational season. We have presented five major events over the year and in addition some of our ladies participated as guests in a wonderful performance in Guildford Cathedral in July. There have been several social and fundraising events and – here's the thing – the choir made a cash surplus over the year. How many choirs can boast such a successful record? You'd like to think that all of our members would be thrilled to be part of a thriving choir that offers unrivalled weekly entertainment and opportunities to perform high quality concerts in an environment of mutual respect and support at a cost of less than £3 per week.

Let's look at what you've achieved in the last twelve months.

On 2nd November we sang a liturgical performance of the Fauré Requiem in St Martin's Church. This was sung to celebrate All Souls Day and was well received by an appreciative congregation. Another important part of our outreach and charitable work – an essential element of raising our community profile.

Just three weeks later we presented a Mozart evening with the amazing Chameleon Arts Orchestra. If anyone actually needed convincing by now that the quality of the accompanying orchestra is critical to the presentation of high quality performances, then this concert was a prime example. In the first half the orchestra brilliantly accompanied the violin concerto K219 with soloist Dorothea Schupelius from the Yehudi Menuhin School. The choir then gave a startlingly good and emotion-packed performance of the Mass in C minor. This piece is a true *tour de force* in the choral repertoire and the choir sang out of its skin for this one while the orchestra gave a truly virtuosic reading of the score. This was by any standard a superb concert.

In the spring term we prepared a concert of words and music entitled Lighten our Darkness. The theme here combined the events leading up to Holy Week and the crucifixion in the church's calendar with the darkness of the beginning of the First World War, represented in the first half of the concert by penitential motets sung by the choir and poems written largely by wartime poets read beautifully by some of our own members. The choir alongside members of the Chameleon Arts Orchestra performed the stunning setting of the Requiem by John Rutter in the second half. This was an extraordinarily moving performance given to a larger than expected audience. There was a great deal of very positive and appreciative feedback about the programme and this performance.

Just another couple of months later we presented a highly successful Noel Coward Revue. Here was an opportunity to present an attractive and popular summer concert to a full house in the newly refurbished St Paul's Church. The choral arrangements were mostly prepared by what has become a traditionally reduced summer concert choir and a great deal of additional time was spent in preparation by the host of excellent soloists, duettists and ensemble members to present a wonderful evening of singing and entertainment. With the help of many volunteers who also spent time preparing the venue, the tables and the all-important bar, this was a hugely successful promotion. The audience loved it and almost everyone went home with a smile having been thoroughly entertained.

For those who volunteered to extend the summer by taking part in the visit to Winchelsea, a very good time was had. With thanks to Jane and to all who had a hand in the organisation of the visit, I offer my thanks and the gratitude of the tour party. Once again, in spite of some difficulties in rehearsals, we presented an entertaining concert on the Saturday evening. This was given in aid of the church and of the local charity ARRCC and it was very well received by a small but enthusiastic audience – with a standing ovation at the end. On the Sunday morning we also sang at the Eucharist – much to the delight of the Rector and many of the congregation. A very good social and musical time was had by all.

And finally, during July, some of our sopranos and altos helped create and rehearse in a special one-off choir to perform the final movement in Holst's Planets Suite for an exceptional concert held in Guildford Cathedral. For those who volunteered to take part, this was a memorable experience. I offer my special thanks to them for the additional time and effort they donated towards the success of the concert.

To achieve all of this in one season is a great accolade to the choir and my thanks go to all who have made this possible. Of course, to the committee and those who have helped the committee to manage so much activity so well on the choir's behalf. To all the volunteer readers and soloists who have put in such a lot of extra time and effort to support our performances. To those of you who have strived to improve your own performance over the year and to those who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes to ensure the smooth running of the choir and our public events.

Just think how amazing our concerts would be if all our singers put in the amount of work that some of our singers do on a regular basis. What can I persuade you to do to ensure continued development and a solid future for the choir?

Essentially: trust me. I'm here for your benefit. I'm here to help you get the most out of your chosen leisure activity – both individually and, more importantly for the health of the choir, collectively. It is ONLY by working together that we can ensure the secure development of the choir and its activities in an area where everyone keeps telling me that there is too much competition from other choirs. Rather than caving in to the pressures of improving our presence in the market or defecting to another choir where a) the expectations are not so demanding or b) the expectations are more demanding (depending on where you currently stand), I want to be able to channel your energies to make BCS the best choir in the area and the one to which all the other choirs defer. The benefits are obvious – and coincidentally have been discussed at length in previous AGM reports.

The task doesn't need to be onerous. Not one of us needs to be fearful of failure. Every one of us, from whatever level we start (and I always acknowledge that as a non-auditioned choir these levels vary widely), can improve our commitment and our contribution to the choir. If every member increased his or her commitment to the work of the choir by just a small percentage, just think how much more satisfying for all of us our work would be.

To conclude, I'd like to refer you to my opening paragraph and to the junk mail received yesterday which, if I may, I'll translate into BCS speak ...

Most people don't really want to 'learn' to sing or 'practice' singing, they just want to sing. Singing sounds like fun, whereas 'practice' sounds like a chore. We get this image from childhood - some children stuck indoors 'practicing' scales while all the other children are outside 'playing'.

So, first thing we need to do is to see our choir practices in a new light. See them as a way of accelerating the learning process so that SOON you'll be able to sing really well. If you don't practice and you just sing old familiar tunes you stay at the same level. Yes, you'll get better at singing those old familiar tunes but they will be the ONLY songs that you can sing and technically you won't be pushing yourself to greater heights nor learning the skills that will allow you to sing ALL tunes.

Proper, structured singing practice helps you stride forwards. I say 'proper' because a lot of people have an idea that practice IS just singing songs over and over. Practice needs to involve uncharted territory. The golden rule to improving your skills is - 'practice what you CAN'T sing, not what you CAN sing'.

Perhaps we can all put this into practice for the forthcoming season. Not much to ask of individuals for the greater benefit of the whole choir. Everyone pulling together with a common aim – to make Brockham Choral the choir of choice for singers and audiences and to make our concerts, our charitable works and our community engagement the envy of all other choirs.