

A Coventrian's formative years...

Many of you will know Jeremy Filsell as a concert pianist and organist. However, you may not know he grew up as a chorister in Coventry. Here he looks back at those years.

As one's past recedes further and further into personal obscurity, it is a strangely pleasant and perhaps therapeutic experience to be asked to recall it. My formative musical experiences occurred in Coventry and my career path was substantially mapped by local musicians who nurtured whatever modicum of talent I displayed in years as *un jeune*.

There was doubtless some sense of my destiny imparted by the musicians of my maternal grandparents' family (the Bache clan had been musicians for generations and composer Edward [1833–1858] was an acquaintance of both Mendelssohn and Liszt) and my immediate grandfather was a notable local organist and pianist in the Midlands who periodically accompanied Heddle Nash, Isobel Bailey and a young Kathleen Ferrier. My paternal grandfather was an amateur but highly talented fine artist, yet my own parents would not have claimed any special right to shape a musical destiny and encouraged rather than cajoled me in my earliest musical endeavours. There is quaint photographic evidence that I could distinguish black and white keys at an age before I could walk. A picture of a toddler seated on the floor, buddha-like, before a toy two-octave piano, presumably eliciting sounds not unlike those of Webern is the earliest evidence of my association with the muse.

My parents moved to Coventry in 1971 and my father, a staunch Anglican, believed in supporting one's local parish church, which in our case, was the Civic and City parish church of Holy Trinity. We were lucky. The Vicar was the late lamented Lawrence Jackson – a formidable and charismatic (I use the term advisedly) preacher, Martyn Lane was Organist & Choirmaster, the Eucharist followed BCP 1662 to the letter, Choral Matins and Choral Evensong were sung every week and the choir of boys and men was a primary focus of pride and ministry of the church.

I well recollect the impact the choir made on me as a seven year old, such that by Epiphany 1972, I was puffing my chest out as one of six or seven new probationers. There was no easy progression to the elevated status of a chorister and I recall with fondness now

the accepted frustration at the time of being seated in a row of probationers following silently the rubrics and spoken parts of the service, prayer book in hand, seated – in mufti, not cassocks yet – on a pew behind the organ console whilst the choir itself sang 'out there'. At the conclusion of the service, Martyn Lane would click his fingers and one of us would have to leap up, kneel on the organ bench and do his best to reach across and turn over pages. I remember how desperately uncomfortable that bench was on the knees and praying that the voluntary was not a Reubke *Sonata* but some pithy Bach chorale prelude. The distance between pain and pleasure is notably small but at the organ in those days I only recall the former.

The recorded history of the organ in Holy Trinity goes back to one built by John Howes in 1526, but during the mid-17th century Commonwealth, 'the orgaynes' in the church were disposed of to Sir Henry Willoughby for £30. At the Restoration of the Monarchy, the parishioners and corporation 'paid to Mr Robert Haywood of the citie of Bath, for the organ he set up in the chancell, £100' but in 1732, the German builder Thomas Schwarbrick built an impressive instrument on a west end gallery (he was also responsible for instruments in both St Michael's next door and in St Mary's Warwick).

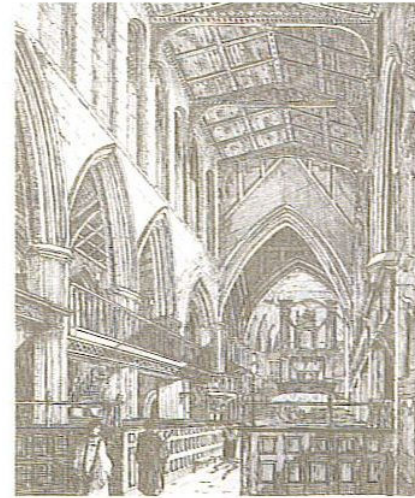
As part of the great restoration of 1855, Forster and Andrews built a new organ in the south transept. William Hill and Sons carried out further re-building in 1900, and then work by Charles Lee of Coventry was undertaken in 1933. The organ as I knew it was last rebuilt by Henry Willis (IV) in 1961. Of four manuals (Holy Trinity was not to be outdone when it was announced that Harrison's contemporaneous instrument next door would consist of four manuals) and 59 speaking stops, it contained an orchestral-style solo division (with arguably the most effective ranks of the instrument, including a crowning Tuba which, with French-style eschalots, had much more the character of a French *chamade*) and a re-modelled choir organ, fashionably named *Positiv*, but containing fundamentally old pipe work rather unsuccessfully re-ordered to provide mutations

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and a cimbel. The Great, extravagantly, retained three Diapasons (a legacy from 1900) and two 4' Principals but an ugly tierce mixture and stout 16' 8' and 4' Trombas rather obliterated the chorus. The Swell was a more successful division with English-style strings and the original, effective Hill Swell reeds. Thus it was a versatile but fairly undistinguished, much rebuilt, pot-pourri of an instrument which today, is on its last legs. Kenneth Tickell has

designed a new instrument for the church, but finances remain the stumbling block as I write.

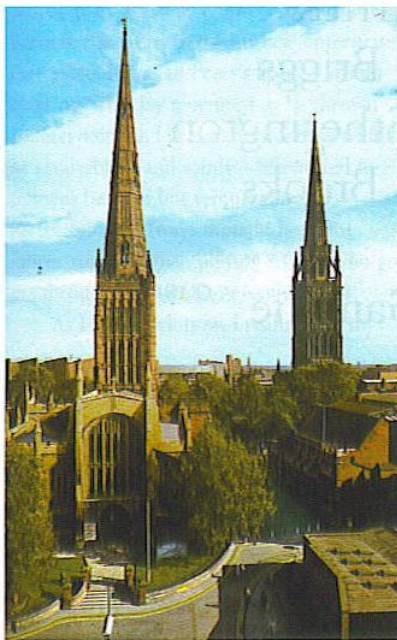
Martyn Lane (having moved across the road to Holy Trinity in 1967 from the Cathedral where he had been David Lepine's Assistant) was the first crucial influence on my own musical development. A rigorous taskmaster, he devised an exhaustive course of instruction for probationers which involved a systematic grounding in the rudiments of rhythm, pitch and sight-singing to *sol-fa* (the men were made to sight-read similarly and there were certainly teething problems with its institution amongst a group not always famed for the collectively positive response to new ideas of upstart choirmasters!). Of the 20 different 'stages' he devised, I recall that one had to pass stage seven to gain a cassock and 14, a surplice. Before Tuesday Boys' rehearsals, the Head Chorister had probationers stood in front of the vestry *sol-fa* chart, slapping it



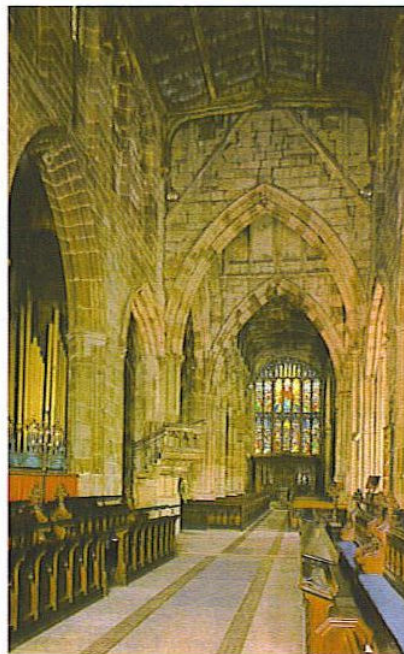
The church in the late 18th century looking west with Schwarbrick's organ on its western gallery

with a cane like a circus ring master, instructing his charges in their vocal gymnastics. Passing stage 20 on each discipline unquestionably afforded one grand master status, though I don't recall many of us passing it before our voices broke! This indefatigable musical training however, was of significance and it has undoubtedly shaped my own approaches to sight-reading and the learning of scores ever since. At Holy Trinity, we sang an extraordinarily wide-ranging 'cathedral' style repertoire under Lane's inspirational direction, and memorably, the choir spent weeks away each summer singing services at a variety of cathedrals. There was a palpable friendly rivalry we as a choir maintained with the local 'pretenders' to the throne as we saw them, those at the Cathedral next door and at St Mary's Warwick, but it was healthy and nurtured some musically successful collaborations.

Peter Johnson (now Head of Research at Birmingham Conservatoire) succeeded Martyn Lane in 1975 and when at the age of 12, I had progressed sufficiently with the piano to show an unhealthy interest in the organ, it was he who encouraged my initial steps after my voice broke, throwing me into the deep end with service playing and demanding repertoire. Peter's playing of the Dupré B major *Prélude et Fugue* after one Sunday morning Eucharist, by which I was struck, unwittingly launched me on an



Two views of Holy Trinity Church: an exterior view with the spire of old St Michael's and the new Cathedral visible behind, and an interior view looking west to Hugh Easton's great 1955 window of Christ in Majesty.





Martyn Lane (with two chorister on-lookers) at the Willis (1961) console of Holy Trinity in 1972

artistic path whereby Dupré's music has become a *leitmotiv* in my musical enterprise ever since. It was to Peter's house I would cycle on Saturday mornings to be thrown counterpoint and harmony exercises whilst he invariably – and vainly – attempted to tune his beloved but temperamental harpsichord (I always thought he spent longer tuning it than playing it) and who got me through the ARCO in tender years.

As I look back now, I realise that my

able to fulfil such demanding commitments. Nowadays it is largely the cathedrals which provide the bastions of artistically-led musical endeavour. Churches such as Holy Trinity nurtured ordinary school children by way of their musical ministries, and one only has to observe the rows of sepia-tinted pictures of healthily numbered choirs past which adorn the vestries of parish churches around the country to realise how often such ministries are a thing of the past.

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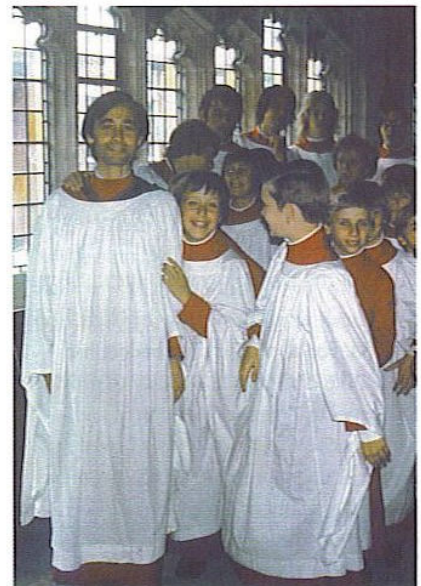
essential experiences at the church occurred because first-class musicians happened to commit themselves to a punishing schedule of rehearsals, services and administration on top of full-time school teaching posts. An absence today in many parish churches of such figures owes something to an age where management, bureaucracy, sporadic clergy antipathy and poor remuneration mitigates against local music teachers being

Indeed, at Holy Trinity, a new clergyman arrived in the early 1980s whose approach to liturgy hardly nurtured the need for vestments, the reserved sacrament, the BCP and crucially, a robed choir. The face of Holy Trinity in the years after I departed for University in 1982, began to change irrevocably, yet my father remained a traditionalist thorn in the new Vicar's side for some years, denying the tambourine, the

overhead projector and the total immersion baptismal bath their presence in Coventry's finest mediaeval building.

The church of St Mary's Warwick, a stone's throw from Coventry, was and remains today, a beacon of this crucially important parish music ministry and the integrity and musicianship of both Geoffrey Holroyde (Organist & Choirmaster 1963–73) and his successor Andrew Fletcher provided me personally with profound inspiration during my teenage years. Geoffrey (whose basement at his Coten End home constituted a music room populated by a two-manual pipe organ, two grand pianos, a harpsichord, clavichord and... a drum kit: playing Bach Trios under the early influences of alcohol on his organ united two very influential elements in my later existence) established the international credentials of St Mary's choir in the late 1960s and it was he for whom I first sang alto after the demise of my treble days. He was an inspirational and stylish choir director, possessed of boundless energy and enthusiasm for the choirs he led.

His successor was Andrew Fletcher, a musician of great refinement who was blessed with a virtuosic keyboard facility and who encouraged my own playing through an involvement with both St Mary's and RSCM choirs (indeed it was singing treble as an 11-year-old on Martin How's Cathedral course in Lincoln Cathedral in



Holy Trinity Choir before Evensong at Bury St Edmunds Cathedral in August 1974.

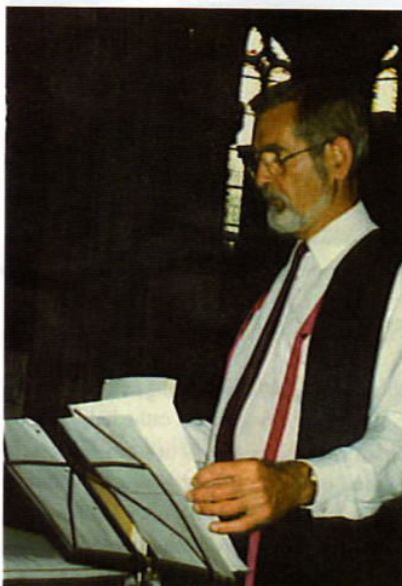
Jeremy Filsell is front right, facing inwards

1975 that I was choked emotionally during the final pages of Parry's *Blest Pair of Sirens* to a point at which I couldn't sing. With tears in my eyes, I was touched by music in a way that I didn't, at the time, understand). Regularly turning Andrew's pages in service and recital, I learnt an enormous amount about organ 'management', observing the extraordinary skill with which he coloured and orchestrated music (encountering Coe Fen



The 17-year-old author at the organ of Holy Trinity church (left) and Geoffrey Holyroyde (right)

unsung musical heroes of the British cathedral establishment, who since leaving Coventry for a brief sojourn as Director of Music at Dean Close School Cheltenham, has remained happily ensconced in a similar capacity at Ampleforth College in Yorkshire. Ian's artistry was of the highest order and I would often loiter outside the Cathedral song school before an organ lesson, listening to him practising Brahms' *Ballades* and



Intermezzi: his invocation that piano study was essential to anyone whose *raison d'être* was the organ is one I took to heart. To study on the Cathedral organ itself was a great privilege for a teenager. The seminal nature of its eclectic design is well known forty years on, and the brilliant quality of its vibrant ensembles and beauty of individual timbres made a significant impact on me back then. Certainly it seemed to help grant my playing a rhythmic dynamism I had struggled to impart elsewhere.

Periodically, Ian took me to New College, Oxford, when he had arranged to play to his former teacher Gillian Weir (famously introduced once in Albany, New York as 'one of the world's greatest organisms'). He was keen for me to play to her too and I still have a copy of Alain's *Litanies* on which she scrawled in 1980, 'breathless' in huge letters above the opening staff. I have never played it any other way since! The fact that here was an established cathedral organist and a marvellous player in his own right still receiving tuition provided me with the lasting impression of the road to perfection the musician incessantly travels but one where the zenith seems to recede continually further into the distance. Ian had me work at Germani's formidable pedal studies and he led me through a diet of the Bach Trio Sonatas, imparting a musical and technical rigour that I hope I have

for the first time in Gloucester Cathedral in 1977 – one of my final incarnations as a treble, again in Martin How's RSCM Cathedral Singers, with Andrew's accompaniment – nay, arrangement – is another indelibly imprinted musical memory). His were great lessons in turning an intractable organ into a musical instrument. The St Mary's instrument was new at that time, but in truth, it was a silk purse made from a sow's ear by Nicholson's in 1980. For all that, a tight budget had denied the craftsmen the ability to provide a truly effective musical instrument and whilst, rather like Holy Trinity Coventry, the musical resources were impressive on paper, the reality of the ensemble was rather thin and uncharacteristic.

Back in Coventry, Peter Johnson's departure for pastures new in 1978 led me to defect 'across the road' to the Cathedral where I studied under Ian Little, one of the



The choir processing through Vicars' Close in Wells en-route to a cathedral rehearsal in August 1973. Jeremy Filsell, giving the thumbs up in an absence of decorum, reveals a bare leg in the process



The Cathedral Church of St Andrew in Wells

AUGUST 1973
In RESIDENCE
The Revd Dr D. S. Bailey, *Precentor*

TRINITY VII AUGUST 5	8 a.m. 10 a.m.	Holy Communion Sung Eucharist (HEBANA SINGERS) <i>Morbecke and Palustrina</i> Nolo mortem peccatoribus— <i>Asterley</i> Psalm 26, vv. 1-6. Hymns 443, 408, 303 Preacher: The Revd P. M. Martin, <i>Chancellor</i> and <i>M. 662</i>	THURSDAY AUGUST 9	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Byrd: The Second Service</i> <i>Albion—Hewlers</i>
Collections for the maintenance of the Cathedral	11.15 a.m.	Mattins (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) Te Deum— <i>Stanford in C</i> Jubilate— <i>Gilman</i> Psalm 145. Hymns 258, 434 Preacher: The Ven. A. Hopley, <i>Archdeacon of Taunton</i>	FRIDAY AUGUST 10	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Tallis in the Dorset mode</i> O Lord, look down— <i>Bartshill (443)</i>
Responses: <i>Leighton</i>	3 p.m.	Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) Office hymn 482 Psalm 145 <i>Merrill in E</i> Hail, gladdening light— <i>Hood (1045)</i> Hymn 498	SATURDAY AUGUST 11	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Stanford in C</i> How lovely are thy dwellings (Requiem)— <i>Brak</i>
TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR LORD MONDAY AUGUST 6	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 10 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (OKANA SINGERS)—Office hymn 236 Praise to thee, Lord Jesus— <i>Schetz</i> Magnificat— <i>Edgar Cook</i> Nunc Dimittis— <i>Morau in D</i> O clap your hands (pt 2)— <i>Gibbons (1238)</i>	TRINITY VIII AUGUST 12	8 a.m. 10 a.m.	Holy Communion Sung Eucharist (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) Psalm 65 Tantum ergo— <i>Dunlop</i> Hymns 422, 479, 306 pt 2 Preacher: The Ven. T. G. A. Baker, <i>Archdeacon</i>
Exhibition in Chapter House until August 10th by British and Foreign Bible Society Responses: <i>Smith</i>	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Gibbons: the Short Service</i> Bene quoniam via integra est— <i>Stanford</i>	Collections for the Church overseas	11.15 a.m.	Mattins (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) Psalm 65 <i>Howells: Collegium Regale</i> Hymns 449 (T 472), 362 (omit*) Preacher: The Revd Dr D. S. Bailey, <i>Precentor</i>
TUESDAY AUGUST 7	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Gibbons: the Short Service</i> Bene quoniam via integra est— <i>Stanford</i>	Responses: <i>Leighton</i>	3 p.m.	Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) Office hymn 389 (T 167) Psalm 77, 134 <i>Howells: Collegium Regale</i> Gloria in excelsis— <i>Hewlers</i> Hymn 511
WEDNESDAY AUGUST 8	7.45 a.m. 8 a.m. 10 a.m. 5 p.m.	Mattins Holy Communion Evening (COVENTRY PARISH CHURCH CHOR) <i>Kelly in C</i> Like as the hart— <i>Howells (91, vv. 1-3)</i>			

SIRWEN BAILEY, *Precentor* ANTHONY CENILANO, *Organist and Master of the Chorists*

Holy Trinity Choir singing the week's services in Wells Cathedral, August 1973

maintained through the subsequent twenty-five odd years.

Notable perhaps is the absence of mechanical action instruments within my organistic development. In the 1970s, mechanical action organs were few and far between in the Midlands and it certainly wasn't until my regular excursions to Merton College during Oxford years did I truly absorb the subtleties of touch and pipe speech available sans electricity. What I think I did learn as an organist through such an upbringing was the age-old ability to 'manage' a large instrument, something those whose formative years are spent exclusively with mechanical action instruments bereft of electrical aid or

comfortable consoles often find difficult. However, I can only thank my continued enthusiasm for the piano and its inexhaustible repertoire for providing the true foundations of my technique. Peter Johnson, Andrew Fletcher and Ian Little were all former Oxbridge organ scholars and despite my over-riding teenage ambition to open the bowling for England at Lord's in an Ashes series, I came to realise that attaining an Organ Scholarship was perhaps a more realistic ambition. Thus in 1982, I left school for Oxford, fortuitously becoming one of Andrew's successors as Organ Scholar at Keble and where the next formative musical chapter of my life began.

Jeremy Filsell

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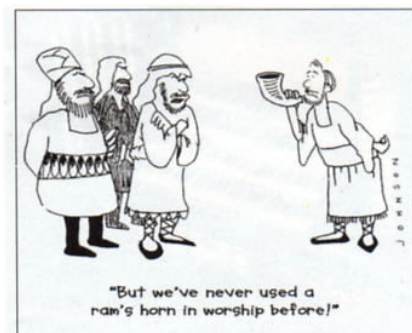
Jeremy Filsell is an international concert pianist and organist who recorded the *Intégrale* of Marcel Dupré on 12 CDs for Guild in 1998 and the Symphonic cycle of Louis Vierne on the Cavaillé-Coll organ in St Ouen Rouen to be released by Signum in September 2005. Currently he combines a performing career with teaching at the Royal Academy of Music and Eton College and a lay clerkship in the choir of St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle. His PhD thesis is a contextual and analytical study of the music of Marcel Dupré.

Friends of Cathedral Music announce their new Joint Patron and Vice-President

The Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor, is to become a Joint Patron of the Friends of Cathedral Music (FCM) alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, who became Patron in July 2003. FCM's Chairman, Professor Peter Toyne, announced this news at the organisation's AGM as part of a gathering taking place over the weekend of 17 to 19 June jointly at Chelmsford Anglican Cathedral and Brentwood Roman Catholic Cathedral. He also announced that the Bishop of Brentwood, the Rt Revd Thomas McMahon, one of FCM's hosts over the weekend, had agreed to become a Vice-President.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor said on accepting his new role, "I am glad to hear that the Friends of Cathedral Music have always been careful to include Roman Catholic as well as Anglican cathedrals and I would like to support your work in any way that is open to me".

Professor Toyne said, "This is a double-first for FCM and underlines the ecumenical nature of our commitment in encouraging high standards of choral worship in both these sectors of the Christian Church. We are honoured and excited at having the two Archbishops as Joint Patrons and a Roman Catholic Bishop as a Vice-President and it marks a high point in FCM's history and reflects its growing status and accomplishments. Last year Dr Christopher Robinson, a distinguished figure in cathedral music became our President and we now have on board church men and musicians of the highest calibre thus increasing our stature and influence."



"But we've never used a ram's horn in worship before!"