

## An interview with Mel Jones, Choirmaster and Organist at All Saints', Sedgley (April 2013)

*Mel Jones has been the organist and choirmaster at All Saints' for nearly 25 years. Here he talks to Martin Jones about how his interest in music began, and how he developed his expertise playing the organ and working with choirs.*



**Mel in familiar context, playing the organ at All Saints'.**

### **How did you first become interested in music?**

I come from a musical family. My parents were both singers and my grandfather conducted a choral society. I was 'dragged along' to performances at the age of 5, to hear oratorios such as Handel's Messiah and Elijah, so I think the seed was planted there.

My parents sang in my grandfather's choir and in church choirs too. They didn't play an instrument – my grandfather didn't for that matter.

### **Did you learn the piano as a child?**

I had my first lesson when I was 7, reluctantly I have to say. I didn't work hard. I got to a certain standard and then it dropped off. I still played and I got mildly interested in the organ. In fact I started to learn the violin and got to a very high standard - I was much more talented on that than on the organ. Why on earth I gave it up I don't know! During this period I was having organ lessons, I got my first playing appointment when I was 15 ½, at a Methodist church in Tipton.

The choral business was sparked off by one thing: the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols at King's College Cambridge. This was in the days when BBC Radio was experimenting with stereo. One Saturday morning I heard the choir singing 'Once in Royal David's City'. That simple Christmas hymn was sung as near to perfection as one could get. The sheer impact of the sound and their togetherness made a lasting impression on me.

When I had my appointment at the Methodist church there was a choir there - so I was able to work with them. I was there for about six years before I moved on to an appointment at the Wesley Chapel in West Bromwich, with a much bigger choir.

The chapel is still there - the original building that seated 2000 people was knocked down but a new church was built and that's still going. I was the last organist at the old church and the first organist at the new one!

### **At what stage did you become an Anglican?**

Being a Methodist, I wasn't very au fait with the music of the Church of England, but I used to listen to Anglican choral evensong on Radio 3 every week and this got my interest going. It's still broadcast once a week on Wednesday afternoons at 3.30pm - it used to be on twice a week.



**St Leonard's Bilston; Holy Trinity, Wordsley**

I had my first Anglican appointment at **St Leonard's in Bilston** – the church is still going. I was appointed as organist and choirmaster there. I was only there about 6 months, after which I moved in around 1975 to **Holy Trinity Wordsley** where I stayed for 6 years, leaving in 1981.

It was a wonderful time. There was an all male choir there, boys and men. It was a really strong choir - we did everything together. We sang in lots of cathedrals and we went away every summer for 7-10 days - we used to go and sing at St Asaph (near Rhyl in North Wales) in the summer holidays.

We also used to go to Lichfield, Hereford, Gloucester and Worcester Cathedrals to sing when the cathedral choirs were on holiday. The Precentor (the cleric who directs the choral services of the cathedral) at Lichfield would ring me and say: “Any chance you could sing Evensong in a fortnight or three weeks’ time?” I didn’t need to go back to the choir, that was it - they’d do it! We had a great relationship within the choir and everyone was very committed.

I remember there was a gentleman called Dick, who was in the choir at Wordsley then, and is still around - he’s 86 now I think. One time he’d arranged to go to France on holiday. We got the call to go to sing at Gloucester Cathedral and with a little bit of pressure he changed his plans!

**What did you do after Worsdley?** I did a bit of freelance work, then I went to Netherton, and then freelance work again after that. Then I arrived here at All Saints' in 1989 – next year I will have done 25 years here.

**When you came to All Saints', what state was the choir in?**

Sunday to Sunday, I just got the men. Clearly I needed to do something about that. There were ladies who used to come and sing on special occasions, eg Christmas and Easter.

I started to recruit boys to the choir by going round to the schools in the area and within 12 months we had our first appointment to sing at Southwell Minster (the Cathedral of Nottinghamshire). So in only 12 months they did very, very well.

We went to sing at Gloucester Cathedral, Lichfield, Chester and elsewhere. Sadly, as time went by the boys left one by one and it's been an impossible task to replace them.



**Mel has been resident organist and choirmaster at All Saints' for nearly 25 years.**

**Over the past 25 years, can you pick out any highlights, either at All Saints' or when the choir went on tour?**

The high spots outside All Saints' were the cathedral visits. It's a real privilege to sing at their services, because the standard they expect is very high.

**What do your duties consist of here at All Saints'?**

I play on Sundays at the 10.30am and 6.30pm services. On Thursday evenings I rehearse with the choir. Then there are many special events in the church calendar: eg the choir will be turning out on 19th May to sing Evensong; then we'll sing at another few Evensongs over summer, then there's Harvest Festival; Advent, Christmas, then Easter.

**How many regulars do you have?** In total there are about 15 choir members, but on average with holidays etc there are usually around 12 at rehearsals.



***Mel retired from All Saints' after completing 25 years here as Director of Music in December 2013; he died on Monday 13<sup>th</sup> February 2017.***

Interview with Mel Jones conducted 21/4/13; updated 13/2/17.

**Martin Jones**