



170th S E A S O N



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Season 2026–27

a classical choir with community spirit — since 1856



170 YEARS OF BRADFORD FESTIVAL CHORAL SOCIETY MUSIC · MOMENTS · PEOPLE · PLACES



Since 1856, generations of Bradford singers have gathered to make extraordinary music together. They have sung for royalty, performed the music of the leading composers of their day, continued through two world wars and adapted to enormous social change to create today's thriving choir.

170 years later, the story continues.

a classical choir with community spirit — since 1856

170 YEARS - ONE SPECIAL SEASON

**SAT 14
NOV**

McDowall · O'Regan · Goodall

ETERNAL LIGHT

Price Hall, Bradford Grammar School

**SAT 19
DEC**

A Bradford Festival

CHRISTMAS

Price Hall, Bradford Grammar School

**SAT 20
MAR**

Verdi

REQUIEM

St George's Hall, Bradford

**SAT 26
JUN**

170th Anniversary

GALA PROMS

St George's Hall, Bradford

COME & SING

McDowall · O'Regan · Goodall

ETERNAL LIGHT

Titus Salt School, Baildon, Shipley

**SAT 17
OCT**

Special Guest Eamonn Dougan

VERDI REQUIEM

Victoria Hall, Saltaire

**SAT 20
FEB**

A Season of Contrast and Discovery

**Welcome to our 170th anniversary season!
Leading our wonderful choir in this historic year is a great privilege for me — not least standing in the place of our hugely eminent past Musical Directors and thinking of the great joy the choir has brought to thousands over so many years.**



Since the choir's founding in 1856, musical excellence, the nurturing and musical education of its members and engagement with the community have run as constant threads, and this continues today; as I write we've just had a typical weekly rehearsal, welcoming new members, full of hard work on new music, laughter, members catching up with friends, the occasional musical mishap and our monthly collection for the local foodbank — as our strapline proudly states, 'A classical choir with community spirit.'

Throughout its history, BFCS has proudly championed new music alongside the great classics, and this season continues this tradition, rich in variety and scale. We move from our opening concert, featuring contemporary works both luminous and energetic from Cecilia McDowall, Tarik O'Regan, and Howard Goodall, to the familiar warmth and celebration of our classic Christmas concert, replete with brass band and audience carols. The opportunity to perform in Bradford's magnificent St George's Hall is a highlight of our year, and we visit twice this season — for the extraordinary scale and drama of Verdi's *Requiem* in Bradford International Concert Season, and the grand finale of our 170th Anniversary Gala Concert. Alongside the chorus, we are delighted to be joined by an outstanding selection of soloists, the superb musicians of Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra, and the award-winning Rothwell Temperance Band.

Our community engagement continues throughout, not least with our support for Bradford Friendship Choir — the city's choir for refugees and asylum seekers, and we hope you might join us for our two Come and Sing Workshops, where in February we're joined by the eminent choral conductor Eamonn Dougan.

The anniversary encourages us to look back at the people, music, moments and places that have shaped BFCS over 170 years of music-making, never static, always striving to build on what's come before and to maintain this great musical tradition for the future.

Whether you're joining us as a singer, supporter or in the audience, we hope you get as much pleasure from celebrating this anniversary as we will.

Here's to another 170 years of BFCS!

Thomas Leech
Musical Director

COME AND **SING**

with BFCs Musical Director Thomas Leech
alongside members of Bradford Festival Choral Society

**Cecilia
McDowall**

Ave maris stella

**Tarik
O'Regan**

Triptych

**Howard
Goodall**

Eternal Light

Saturday 17 October, 1.30pm

**Titus Salt School, Higher Coach Road,
Baildon, Shipley BD17 5RH**



“
Such a warm,
engaging and fun
afternoon, and
there was CAKE!
—”

Sing with us

Step inside the music and experience these extraordinary works from within the choir.

Experience the thrill of singing in a choir at our afternoon vocal workshop. In an informal and relaxed atmosphere, BFCS Musical Director and choral expert Thomas Leech will lead us through the most beautiful movements of Howard Goodall's *Eternal Light*, together with Cecilia McDowall's *Ave maris stella* and a movement from Tarik O'Regan's *Triptych*.

The day ends with an informal performance 6.15–7pm — why not invite family and friends to hear the results of our work!

Refreshments will be available, together with a light buffet between the workshop and informal performance.

Tickets: £20
Concessions: £10
Price includes music hire

Audience: FREE



Book your place
ticketsource.co.uk/bfcs

ETERNAL LIGHT

**Cecilia
McDowall**

Ave maris stella

**Tarik
O'Regan**

Triptych

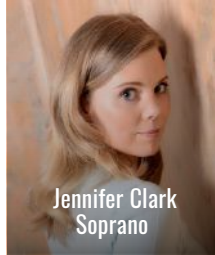
**Howard
Goodall**

Eternal Light

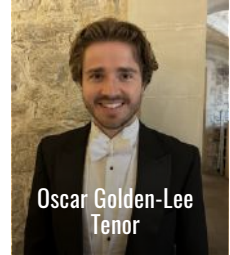
Saturday 14 November, 7.30pm

**Price Hall, Bradford Grammar School
with strings from Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra**

Thomas Leech - conductor



Jennifer Clark
Soprano



Oscar Golden-Lee
Tenor

An evening of luminous choral music, consolation and hope.

We present an inspiring concert showcasing three of the most acclaimed British choral works of the twenty-first century, bringing together emotional depth, spiritual reflection and radiant harmony. Performed just a few days after Armistice Day, this evening's music focuses on peace, consolation in times of loss, our shared humanity and above all, hope.

Cecilia McDowall's *Ave maris stella* — Hail, star of the sea — opens our programme. Dedicated 'to peace' and originally written for performance on Armistice Day, it's music full of rich harmonies and beautiful melodies, profound yet instantly accessible.

Tarik O'Regan's *Triptych* is a dynamic work that masterfully fuses Western choral heritage with Eastern rhythmic influences, offering a poignant reflection on memory, grief and hope. O'Regan — born in London and now living in San Francisco — was among the composers honoured with a commission for the coronation of King Charles III in 2023.

The concert culminates with Howard Goodall's deeply moving *Eternal Light: A Requiem*. Intertwining traditional Latin texts with English poetry, Goodall crafts a contemporary requiem designed above all to comfort the living — full of lyrical elegance and profound warmth.

Join us for an unforgettable performance celebrating the vitality and expressive power of contemporary British music, accompanied by the strings of the acclaimed professional Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra, together with outstanding vocal soloists and our chorus.

EARLY BIRD OFFER

Save 10% when you book by 14 October
Use code **10ETERNAL**



What becomes tradition begins as something new.

Discover more from our archives about the composers and music that have shaped 170 years of BFCs.

Tickets: £5–£20
Concessions · Under 30s · Groups

Book your tickets
 ticketsource.co.uk/bfcs



Get ready for Christmas with joyful music, brilliant brass and a hall full of voices singing your favourite carols!

A *Bradford Festival Christmas* brings together BFCS and the award-winning Rothwell Temperance Band for a joyful evening of Christmas music both classic and new, and all your favourite audience carols.

From *Gaudete* and *Walking in the air* to beautiful new carols by Reena Esmail and Lucy Walker, there's something for everyone.

Catch up with friends at the interval bar and sing your hearts out in audience carols including *Hark! the herald angels sing*, *O come, all ye faithful* and *Once in royal David's city*.

Join us to start your Christmas!

EARLY BIRD OFFER

Save 10% when you book by 31 October
Use code **10CHRISTMAS26**

 **170 YEARS · MOMENTS**

Some moments become part of who we are.

Discover more from our archives about the occasions, traditions and unexpected moments that have shaped 170 years of BFCS.

Tickets: £5-£20
Concessions · Under 30s · Groups

 **Book your tickets**
ticketsource.co.uk/bfcs



A BRADFORD FESTIVAL **CHRISTMAS**

An evening of glorious choral music,
festive brass and favourite carols.

WITH ROTHWELL TEMPERANCE BAND

Saturday 19 December, 6.00pm

Price Hall, Bradford Grammar School

BRADFORD FESTIVAL CHORAL SOCIETY
Thomas Leech, Musical Director

ROTHWELL TEMPERANCE BAND
David Roberts, Musical Director

COME & SING
VERDI
REQUIEM

A FULL-DAY CHORAL WORKSHOP

with BFCs Musical Director **Thomas Leech**
and special guest **Eamonn Dougan** of **The Sixteen**

Saturday 20 February, 10.30am

**Victoria Hall, Saltaire,
Shipley BD18 3JS**



Spend a day immersed in one of the great choral masterpieces.

Join BFCS for an exploration of Verdi's Requiem — dramatic, moving and exhilarating to sing.

We are delighted to welcome Eamonn Dougan of ***The Sixteen*** as special guest for the day, working alongside BFCS Musical Director Thomas Leech to explore the music, develop the choral sound and bring the day to a close with an informal performance.

A rewarding day for singers with some choral experience — whether you already know the work or are discovering it for the first time.

Eamonn Dougan is an Associate Conductor of *The Sixteen*, and a renowned conductor, vocal coach and baritone. He regularly leads choral workshops and co-directs *Genesis Sixteen*, *The Sixteen's* young artists programme, working with emerging ensemble singers and conductors. He joins us as guest leader for our February *Verdi Requiem* vocal workshop.

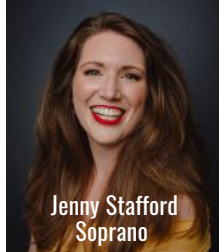


Tickets: £35
Concessions: £20
Price includes music hire

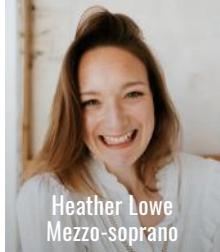
Audience: £5



Book your place
ticketsource.co.uk/bfcs



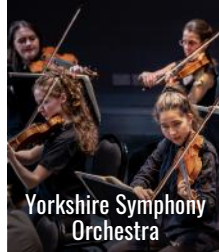
Jenny Stafford
Soprano



Heather Lowe
Mezzo-soprano



Blaise Malaba
Bass



Yorkshire Symphony
Orchestra

Few choral works are experienced quite like Verdi's Requiem.

Verdi's *Requiem* is one of the most dramatic and deeply moving works in the choral repertoire, performed here in the magnificent setting of St George's Hall.

Written in memory of the Italian writer Alessandro Manzoni, the work combines operatic intensity with moments of profound stillness and reflection. From the shattering force of the *Dies Irae* to its luminous final pages, Verdi's music moves through fear, grief, hope and consolation with extraordinary immediacy.

Presented as part of Bradford Festival Choral Society's 170th season, this large-scale performance brings together chorus, professional soloists and the Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Thomas Leech for an evening of exceptional power, scale and emotional depth.

If you've never experienced Verdi's Requiem live, this is your chance.

PRE-CONCERT ANNIVERSARY TALK

Dr George Kennaway · 6.00–6.30pm

Free to concert ticket holders

Cellist, musicologist and author **Dr George Kennaway** is a Visiting Research Fellow at the Universities of Leeds and Huddersfield and a former co-principal cellist with Opera North. His research focuses particularly on nineteenth-century music and performance, and he is an experienced speaker who has given talks for Opera North, Leeds Song, Sadler's Wells and Symphony Hall Birmingham. George joins us for pre-concert talks before our March and June concerts.



170 YEARS · PEOPLE

Every generation leaves its mark.

Discover more from our archives about the singers, musicians and personalities who have shaped 170 years of BFCs.

Tickets: £19–£37
Concessions, Under 30s
and Group Tickets available
(booking fees apply)

Book your tickets
 bradford-theatres.co.uk

VERDI
REQUIEM

SHATTERING POWER · PROFOUND BEAUTY

Saturday 20 March, 7.00 pm

with Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra

Thomas Leech - conductor

ST GEORGE'S
CONCERT HALL

 City of
BRADFORD
METROPOLITAN DISTRICT COUNCIL



170

YEARS OF MUSIC

GALA PROMS

Saturday 26 June, 7.00pm

with Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra

Thomas Leech - conductor

ST GEORGE'S
CONCERT HALL



A great summer night out to celebrate 170 years of Bradford Festival Choral Society.

Join us at St George's Hall for a celebratory finale to our 170th anniversary season, bringing together choir, orchestra, guest performers and music made for a great concert hall.

The first half looks back across 170 years of BFCS music-making, with a selection of choruses drawn from the Society's long performing history — revisiting some of the music, composers and traditions that have helped shape the choir across generations.

Then we turn up the drama with music from Bizet's *Carmen*, before bringing the evening — and our anniversary season — to a rousing close with a Proms-style finale of much-loved favourites.

Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra joins BFCS for this special anniversary celebration, alongside guest performers and musical partners from across our community.

170 years of music — and one big night to celebrate.

PRE-CONCERT ANNIVERSARY TALK

Dr George Kennaway · 6.00–6.30pm

Free to concert ticket holders

170 YEARS · PLACES

Rooted in Bradford. Heard far beyond.

Discover more from our archives about the places that have shaped 170 years of BFCS — in Bradford and beyond.

Tickets: £10–£37
Concessions, Under 30s
and Group Tickets available
(booking fees apply)

bradford-theatres.co.uk

Our Musical Team

Thomas Leech · Musical Director

Musical Director of BFCS since 2008, Tom enjoys a reputation as an outstanding and inspirational choral director and organist, with a passionate commitment to improving access to and equality of opportunity in choral music.

Educated at Cambridge University, where he was Organ Scholar at Downing College, he is Director of Music for the Diocese of Leeds, responsible for the country's largest church music programme for young people — working with over 7,500 children a week in 75 schools and 20 after-school choirs, providing outstanding musical opportunities in some of the most deprived areas of West Yorkshire — and directs the acclaimed choirs of Leeds Cathedral.

He is one of three consultants for the National Schools Singing Programme, helping develop similar work across Catholic dioceses throughout the UK. His work has included partnerships with Gabrieli, The Sixteen, the University of Texas El Paso and Vanderbilt University.

His numerous recording credits include the complete choral works of Duruflé and complete organ works of Arvo Pärt for Brilliant Classics and he has broadcast on BBC1, Radio 2, Radio 3, Radio 4, Classic FM and Radio France, with solo recitals including Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral and King's College, Cambridge.

He has served as Artistic Director of the Association of British Choral Directors' Annual Convention, and his educational work has been recognised with the Worshipful Company of Educators' Masters' Award, together with awards from Making Music and the Royal Philharmonic Society.



For more information visit his website www.thomasleech.com





Christopher Pulley · Assistant Musical Director

Chris is a collaborative pianist, répétiteur and vocal coach, and has been BFC's Assistant Musical Director since 2010.

After reading English Literature at the University of York, he studied privately with Michael Dussek, former Head of Accompaniment at the Royal Academy of Music, before becoming Junior Fellow Répétiteur at the Royal Northern College of Music from 2019–21. There he worked as principal répétiteur on productions including Poulenc's *Dialogues des Carmélites*, Janáček's *The Cunning*

Little Vixen and Jonathan Dove's *Mansfield Park* and *Flight*.

He has worked with organisations including the RNCM, Leeds Conservatoire, Welsh National Opera, Huddersfield Choral Society and Opera North. His work with Opera North began through its education and outreach programmes and youth ensembles and has since included répétiteur work on productions such as *Orpheus*, *Parsifal*, *Carmen*, *The Magic Flute* and the UK premiere of Kevin Puts' *Silent Night*. More recently he has worked with Bradford Opera Festival on its Yorkshire translation of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* and the world premiere of *The Last Machine Breaker*.

Chris also performs regularly as a recital pianist. He has appeared for Leeds Song — including as a Momentum Young Artist alongside Joseph Middleton and Sarah Connolly — as well as at Stoller Hall, Buxton Opera House, Manchester Mid-day Concert Society, Leeds International Concert Series and Manchester Festival of Song.

In 2018 he founded &Piano Music Festival in his home town of Huddersfield. The annual festival brings together established and emerging artists, often with connections to the North, with the aim of introducing more people across West Yorkshire to live classical music.

You can learn more about the festival at www.andpiano.co.uk, or follow Chris himself on Bluesky @kurisup.bsky.social. 



Making music together

Our anniversary season is made possible through musical partnerships built over time — bringing together orchestral, choral and brass traditions across Yorkshire.

Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra

Yorkshire Symphony Orchestra is a cultural voice for the region, celebrating the musical and cultural wealth of the North through adventurous programming and collaboration. Re-founded in 2023 by Artistic Director Ben Crick, the orchestra works with choirs, opera companies and artists beyond the traditional classical world. Its patrons are Alan Bennett and Ian McMillan.

YSO has become a regular BFCS partner, joining us for our Bradford Theatres orchestral subscription-series performances and, most recently, welcoming BFCS as guests at the inaugural Yorkshire Proms.

Rothwell Temperance Band

Rothwell Temperance Band is one of Yorkshire's leading brass bands and has competed at Championship Section level for more than 25 years. Entirely volunteer-run, the band has built a strong reputation through major competition successes under Musical Director David Roberts (pictured below), who has led Rothwell since 1993. BFCS is delighted to welcome the band back for our Christmas concert, continuing a much-valued festive partnership.





170 years — and still discovering

As we were preparing to celebrate our 170th anniversary, we've been delving into our archives — uncovering stories that have surprised and delighted us.

They reveal a choir closely connected with the life of Bradford: performing music that was new and adventurous in its own day; taking part in major civic occasions; travelling far beyond the city; and continually adapting as musical tastes, institutions and society changed around it.

The archive is full of both familiar names and unexpected discoveries — programmes, photographs, membership records, personal keepsakes and stories that offer glimpses of the people behind the performances.

Throughout our anniversary season, we'll be opening up more of this history, with each concert exploring a different strand — **Music, Moments, People and Places** — through programme features, archive displays and pre-concert talks in March and June.

Help us keep discovering

Old photographs, programmes, family stories or memories can help us uncover more of the BFCs story.

If you have something to share, we'd love to hear from you.

A Choir Through Changing Times

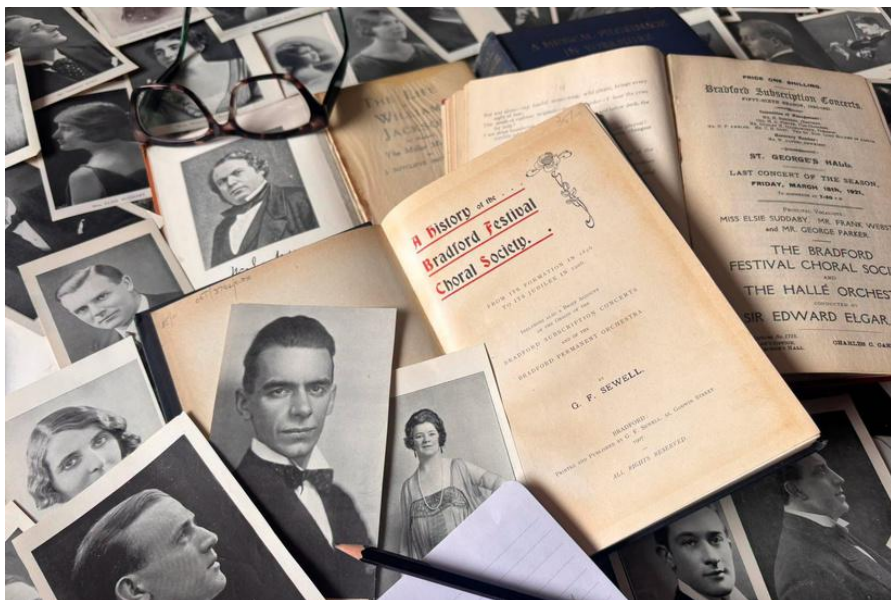
How music, moments, people and places have kept
Bradford Festival Choral Society singing for 170 years.

No one set out to create a record of 170 years.

It accumulated — in programmes saved after concerts, photographs tucked away in collections, handwritten minute books, membership records, newspaper reports and personal keepsakes. One important exception was G. F. Sewell, whose *History of the Bradford Festival Choral Society, 1856–1906* provides a detailed account of the Society's first fifty years.

Taken together, these sources show not only what BFCS performed, but how the Society changed over time — how decisions were made, how members responded to changing circumstances, and how musical and social life evolved around the choir.

Some stories are remarkably complete. Others survive only in fragments — and some still leave questions waiting to be answered.



Exploring 170 years of BFCS history — programmes, photographs and G. F. Sewell's 1907 history of the Society.



J. G. Walton

One of BFCS's founders and its first Treasurer — part of Bradford's choral life long before the Society itself was formed.

Watercolour by John Sowden, 1897.



Madame Armitage

BFCS contralto and a familiar figure on Bradford's concert platforms, whose singing career also took her to the United States. *Watercolour by John Sowden, 1891.*

Images reproduced by kind permission of Bradford District Museums & Galleries (CBMDC).



Exploring the BFCS archive at West Yorkshire Archive Service, 2026.



170 YEARS - MUSIC

What becomes tradition begins as something new.

For 170 years, Bradford Festival Choral Society has balanced familiar repertoire with the music of its own time. Works we now think of as part of the choral tradition were once new — written by living composers, unfamiliar to audiences and sometimes heard in Bradford within only a few years of their creation.

The archive shows a continuing pattern of discovery: performances of works by composers who would later become central to British musical life, alongside voices now less familiar — including women composers whose contribution is only beginning to be rediscovered.

1883 · Alice Mary Smith (1839–1884)

BFCS performed Alice Mary Smith's *Ode to the Passions* at St George's Hall in April 1883, with the composer and her husband present. The Society's minutes reveal that the work had briefly been dropped from the programme before the decision was reversed and the performance restored.

More than 140 years later, Smith's music is being rediscovered. BBC Radio 3 devoted *Composer of the Week* to her in July 2026, including works specially performed as so few recordings exist. The series is available on BBC Sounds.



Courtesy of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford — Ref. DB39/C5/1

Elgar, Parry and Stanford

Names that now sit firmly within the British choral canon were once living composers shaping the musical world around them. BFCS performed their works during that period, in some cases with the composers themselves directly involved in the performances.

Tradition, adaptation and survival

For generations, Handel's *Messiah* was part of Bradford's Christmas rhythm — so familiar that G. F. Sewell likened its annual appearance to roast beef and plum pudding. When annual performances became financially unsustainable, BFCS stepped away from the yearly custom and returned to the work when circumstances were right.

That still holds true today. *Messiah* is no longer an annual fixture, but our November 2025 performance drew an audience of almost 1,000 and made a healthy financial contribution.

Continuity has not meant doing the same thing every year. It has meant knowing what to keep — and when to bring it back.

1911 · Harriett Claiborne Dixon (1879–1928)

Bradford-born composer Harriett Claiborne Dixon conducted BFCS in a performance of her own music, *Four Love Complaints*.

It is a striking reminder that women composers have been part of the Society's story for far longer than we realised — a thread BFCS is deliberately continuing today through its commitment to include music by women in every multi-work concert.



Image of Harriett C. Dixon
Courtesy of West Yorkshire
Archive Service, Bradford —
Ref. DB39/C5/1

Still widening the repertoire

That commitment sits within a wider aim to broaden the range of voices and musical traditions represented in our programming. This approach was recognised with Making Music's Diverse Programming Award in 2025, following a season which included Reena Esmail's *This Love Between Us* — a work bringing Western and Indian classical traditions into dialogue through choir, orchestra, sitar and tabla.



Discover more about these and other stories at
Eternal Light · 14 November

Through our concert programme and anniversary archive display, discover the music that has kept BFCS singing — and audiences listening — for 170 years.



170 YEARS - MOMENTS

Some moments become part of who we are.

A choir's history is measured in more than concerts. Across 170 years, the archive records extraordinary public occasions alongside the moments members shared together — celebrations and setbacks, parties and journeys, traditions formed almost by accident, and occasions when events beyond the Society forced plans to change.

Some lasted for an evening. Others became part of BFCS folklore.



1858 at Buckingham Palace

Just two years after being founded, the choir was summoned to perform for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace.

The occasion was referenced with pride in Society records for many years afterwards.

Buckingham Palace programme: courtesy of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford — Ref. 112D77

1880s–1920s · Social life and fundraising

From dances and whist drives to dinners, sports and garden parties, social events brought members together — while also helping to support the choir financially.

Courtesy of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford — Ref. DB39/C5/1



Victorian Bradford · Hail Smiling Morn!

Sung at one of Bradford's great civic occasions, this glee later became part of BFCS folklore — and is still sung by the Society today. Discover more about this long-lived tradition in our Christmas programme.

Garden parties and a missing photo

Hermann Averdieck, President in the 1870s and 1880s, regularly hosted the choir at garden parties, with generous hospitality and even brass bands. At one gathering, he arranged for a group photograph to be taken outside his home, Knottfield House in Rawdon, and each choir member received a copy.

Do you have an ancestor who sang with BFCS? Could one of those photographs still be tucked away in a loft, album or family archive?

We'd love to hear from you if you have a copy.

1914 · The concert that had to wait

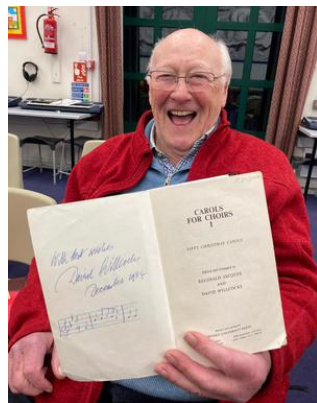
Plans were in place for one of BFCS's most ambitious concerts yet: a major programme devoted to Bradford-born Frederick Delius, with the New Symphony Orchestra from London, conductor Landon Ronald, pianist Percy Grainger and a quartet of leading soloists.

The Society described it as a concert “on a scale never before attempted”.

But with the outbreak of war, the committee concluded that the moment was no longer right. The concert was reluctantly postponed, a vivid reminder of how events far beyond the concert hall could suddenly reshape the Society's plans.

A proud moment for Malcolm

BFCS bass Malcolm still treasures his signed copy of *Carols for Choirs* — with Sir David Willcocks adding a little musical challenge for him to sight-read. A small but memorable moment from BFCS's long association with one of Britain's best-known choral conductors.



170 YEARS · MOMENTS

**Discover more about these and other stories at
A Bradford Festival Christmas · 19 December**

Through our concert programme and anniversary archive display, discover the celebrations, challenges and shared traditions that have kept BFCS together — and singing — across 170 years.



170 YEARS - PEOPLE

Every generation leaves its mark.

A choir exists because people choose to make it exist. Across 170 years, thousands of singers, conductors, accompanists, committee members, supporters and volunteers have given their time, energy and talent to BFCS.

The archive preserves them unevenly. Some are documented in detail; others appear only in a membership book, a photograph, a handwritten greeting or a poem from one member to another. Together, those traces reveal the human life behind the institution — friendships, loyalties, responsibilities and the work involved in sustaining a choir across generations.



Henry Johnson Mason

Henry Johnson Mason

As President from 1895 to 1925, Henry Johnson Mason was one of the people whose support helped make ambitious performances possible. In 1911 he offered £50 towards the orchestral costs of Gade's *Psyche* and Harriett Claiborne Dixon's *Four Love Complaints*, asking that his contribution should not be disclosed to the membership.

The gesture offers a glimpse of the quiet, practical support that helped sustain the Society.

Like other presidents and patrons of the period, he also helped sustain the social life around the choir through dinners, parties and other gatherings for members. In 1906 he also funded a special train to take the Society to London.



Sewell's *History of the Bradford Festival Choral Society, 1856–1906* was dedicated to H. J. Mason, then President of the Society.



Henry Mason, 2026

The connection continues

More than a century later, the family connection is returning to the choir. Lesley Culley, Henry Johnson Mason's granddaughter, plans to sing with BFCS in Verdi's *Requiem* at St George's Hall in March 2027.

Not every name made the history books

Presidents, conductors and patrons leave a visible trail. Most of the people who sustained BFCS did not.

Membership books, photographs, greetings and poems preserve glimpses of the thousands of singers and volunteers whose contribution was quieter — but no less essential.

One anonymous member left a different kind of trace: a poem written to fellow singers in June 1863.

Here are three verses from the poem:

Courtesy of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford — Ref. DB39/C5/1.

“

Henry Johnson Mason inherited from his father a Victorian belief that life needed beauty as well as business. Art, churches, concerts and choirs all formed part of the Mason idea of civic life. His support for BFCS grew naturally from that inheritance, and from his own musical life: he could often be found in the organ loft as well as on the patrons' list. His long association with BFCS shows an instinct for turning music into occasion, community and memory — and for keeping faith with Bradford long after he had left Yorkshire. — Henry Mason, great-grandson of Henry Johnson Mason

”

In noisy mill, or dingy shop,
Long-time your notes were humming,
With little prospect, little hope,
That brighter days were coming ;
When in St. George's spacious hall,
Your voices would be ringing,
Or at the Handel Festival,
In the grand chorus singing.

You dreamt not that our gracious Queen,
(May heaven still watch o'er her,)
Would condescend to hear you sing,
At "Buckingham" before her :
Fair Ladies and most noble Lords,
Applauding in all quarters,
In satin doublet, silken hose,
And silver-mounted garters,

Music hath power to charm the ear,
To quell the heart's commotion,
To assist the voice of humble prayer,
Or raise the soul's devotion ;
Its echo's die but as they fly,
We catch the joy they yield us,
From thoughts of care and dark despair,
Its magic power doth shield us,



170 YEARS · PEOPLE

When the choir needed carrying forward.

BFCS faced new challenges and new opportunities over the next century. At times the future felt uncertain. At others, new ideas, new communities and new leadership helped the choir grow again.

Every chapter has needed people willing to step up — and to pass it on.

2008 · A turning point

By 2008, membership had fallen to just 77 singers and the Society needed to rethink how it worked. Its traditional model of bringing in guest conductors for major performances had become increasingly expensive, and both artistic and organisational renewal were needed.

James and Ruth Beattie played an important part in that period of change, helping to introduce a series of practical, sometimes radical changes to secure the Society's future. Rehearsals moved from Friday to Wednesday evenings, with an improved rehearsal venue; greater emphasis was placed on recruiting members, rebuilding relationships with Bradford Council and experimenting with concert formats to attract new audiences.

A particularly significant decision was the appointment of a new Musical Director. Thomas Leech's arrival in 2008 brought renewed artistic direction and began a long-term transformation of the choir's sound and ambitions. He was joined in 2010 by Christopher Pulleyn as Assistant Musical Director.

The Society's recovery was not the work of one person alone. Long-standing members provided continuity, others stepped forward to strengthen the organisation, and the changes made around this time created firmer foundations for the future. Membership — and ambition — began to grow again.



“

BFCS has moved from a 'traditional choral society' to a joyful, forward-looking and inclusive choir.

— John Disken, long-standing member and trustee

”



2016 · Widening the circle

As BFCS Chair, the late Maggie Eisner was instrumental in founding Bradford Friendship Choir in 2016 — creating a welcoming singing community for refugees, people seeking asylum and their friends and allies. It is now jointly chaired by Shirley Brierley and Deb Collett.

When illness later meant Maggie was unable to continue, Karen Jones and Rob Voakes stepped forward to help sustain both BFCS and Bradford Friendship Choir, carrying important organisational and community responsibilities through a difficult period.

2020 · Finding another way

When Covid-19 brought rehearsals, concerts and normal choir life to an abrupt halt, BFCS once again had to adapt. Our musical team and volunteers found new ways to keep people connected and music-making alive, through online rehearsals, virtual projects and opportunities to stay in touch until the choir could meet and perform together again.



And now?

Today BFCS has around 140 members — almost twice the number singing in 2008. The Society continues to rely on the same thing it always has: people willing to sing, lead, organise, volunteer, support and make things happen.

**Different generations. Different challenges.
The same willingness to step up — and pass it on.**



170 YEARS · PEOPLE

**Discover more about these and other stories at
Verdi's Requiem · 20 March**

Through our concert programme and anniversary archive display, discover the generations of people who have sung, led, supported and carried BFCS forward across 170 years.



170 YEARS · PLACES

Rooted in Bradford. Heard far beyond.

Over 170 years, BFCS has sung in a remarkable variety of places — concert halls, churches, schools, museums, cinemas, stations, open spaces and private homes. Some recur throughout the Society's story; others belong to a single memorable occasion. Together they trace a changing geography of musical life: where people rehearsed, where audiences gathered, where civic events took place, and how BFCS moved through Bradford and beyond as the city itself changed.

1856 · St George's Hall

BFCS was formed in the wake of the Bradford Musical Festivals associated with the newly opened St George's Hall. The hall became the setting for early rehearsals and many of the Society's most ambitious performances and remains central to BFCS today.



St George's Hall today

A choir in the life of the city

Bradford Technical School · 1882

BFCS sang as Bradford celebrated one of its new civic institutions, performing at the opening festivities attended by the Prince and Princess of Wales.



Programme for the opening of Bradford Technical School, 1882: Courtesy of West Yorkshire Archive Service, Bradford — Ref. DB39/C5/1

Midland Station · Victorian Bradford

After one of President Hermann Averdieck's celebrated gatherings, choir members reportedly sang as they returned through Bradford — their voices "ringing out" beneath the arches of Midland Station.

BFCS has never belonged to one building alone. As Bradford changed, so did the places where the Society rehearsed, performed and gathered.

Bradford Mechanics' Institute · a long association

By the late Victorian and early Edwardian years, rehearsals and BFCS committee meetings were being held at the Bradford Mechanics' Institute, beginning a long relationship with one of the city's important educational and cultural institutions.

A small trace of that relationship still survives: an envelope bearing a BFCS Mechanics' Institute stamp, used for a letter of condolence sent by the choir to President Henry Johnson Mason's widow in 1925. The image was kindly supplied by the Mason family from their archive.



Beyond Bradford

Although firmly rooted in the city, BFCS has also carried Bradford's choral tradition well beyond it — from the 1858 visit to Buckingham Palace to later performances at Crystal Palace and in Chester, Huddersfield and Skipton.

Finding a place to sing

Finding the right rehearsal home for a choir of BFCS's size has not always been straightforward. Today, Clock House at Bradford Grammar School provides a welcoming and much-valued home for our weekly rehearsals, where singers gather each Wednesday beneath a work by former pupil David Hockney, gifted to the school.

And for the 170th anniversary finale, BFCS returns to St George's Hall — a venue that has been part of the Society's story from its earliest days.

170 YEARS · PLACES

**Discover more about these and other stories at
170th Anniversary Gala Proms · 26 June**

Through our concert programme and anniversary archive display, discover the places that have shaped BFCS — the halls, churches, schools and gathering places where generations have rehearsed, performed, celebrated and made memories.

From our Chair of Trustees

I wonder what those Victorian gentlemen and women who founded our choral society in 1856 would make of us here in the 21st century? No website, online musical resources or social media presence for them!

It is a real privilege to sing with this choir and as chair of trustees I am so proud of all that has been achieved both in the past and now, as we continue to adapt to meet new challenges. We are a choir with a wonderful heritage, which we value and continue to celebrate, whilst maintaining a real commitment to moving forward, reaching new audiences and singing contemporary and diverse works from living composers.

With our Victorian forebears we share the same love of choral music, a desire to sing well and delight audiences — and this remains as strong as ever and will hopefully continue for the next 170 years. Here's to many more rousing renditions of the Hallelujah chorus!

Elaine Schack



Community spirit in action

Opening the door

BFCS Inspire, Come & Sing days, open rehearsals and accessible ticketing help more people take part in our music — as singers and audiences.

Supporting our community

Members support local causes through initiatives including food bank collections, continuing a long BFCS tradition of using music and collective effort to support others.

Working together

Partnerships with Bradford Friendship Choir, schools, community groups and fellow musicians connect BFCS with different communities across the city.

**Community spirit has deep roots in BFCS's history
— and continues to shape what we do today.**

170 YEARS LATER THE STORY CONTINUES

Whether as a singer, musician, supporter, volunteer or audience member, there is a place for you in the next chapter.



Formed	1856
Buckingham Palace	1858
300+ singers	1895
Jubilee Ball	1906
Harriett Claiborne Dixon	1911
Sir Malcolm Sargent	1925
Centenary - Sir David Willcocks	1956
New artistic chapter	2008
Bradford Friendship Choir	2016
First concert dedicated to music composed by women	2019
Diverse Programming Award	2025
170 th Anniversary Season	2026–27

Special thanks to Sara Daniel and the Archive Team for creating this special 170th anniversary brochure and helping uncover and share many of the stories within it.



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