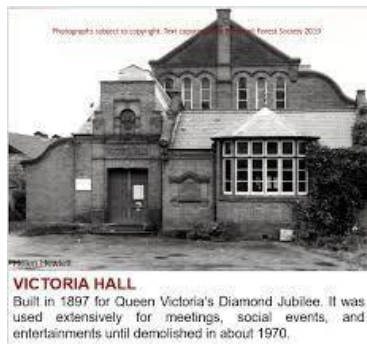


History of Bracknell Choral Society

1888

Our accompanist Nick Austin found evidence from old newspaper articles that Bracknell Choral Society was first established in 1888 and met at Victoria Hall, which was built in 1887 for Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. The conductor was Mr. C. T. Lee and Nick's early predecessor was the admirably named Mrs. Elphinstone Dalrymple. The Choir President was the local vicar.



The choir continued for a number of decades but stopped meeting in October 1930 due to a drop-off in participation.

1960–1980

The choir formed under its present name in late 1960 as a charity and grew from an evening institute class based on the original Bracknell Choral Society. The current BCS can therefore be considered as a new and separate choral society for Bracknell, from that date onwards. At the start the choir was small and had less than 20 singers. The conductor was Nigel Davison, Assistant Director of Music at Wellington College. The choir gave its first concert, of Christmas carols, on Wednesday 21st December 1960 at the Church of St Michael and St Mary Magdalene, Easthampstead.

In 1961, the choir gave two concerts at Wick Hill School (now Garth College), the first of choruses from Handel's *Israel in Egypt* and a second under a new conductor David Epps with a programme of choruses from Purcell's, *Dido and Aeneas*, and a selection of madrigals. In 1963 the choir gave their first performance of Handel's *Messiah* at the school in aid of the school's swimming pool fund.

An ambitious programme of three concerts followed in 1964, one involving a recital by soloists and instrumentalists with settings of folk songs by various composers, choruses and songs sung by the choir and a third conductor, James Kirkpatrick directing. The accompanist of the choir was Jean Paxton. The choir grew and a pattern of three annual concerts, with carols or *Messiah* at Christmas, a major work in spring and a medley of songs and opera choruses in the summer, was established. This was maintained from the mid-1960s to the present day, performing in local schools and churches, with a collection or donation in aid of various charitable funds.

By 1975 the number of singers had risen to 70. Concert programmes included Bernstein's *Chichester Psalms*, Fauré's *Requiem*, Monteverdi's *Vespers* and Elgar's *The Music Makers*, and many others. There were appreciative critiques of BCS concerts in the *Bracknell News*.

1980–2000

In 1981 the choir celebrated its 21st anniversary with a concert that included choruses from Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (ladies' choruses). Nick Austin joined BCS as our accompanist in this year and has remained with us steadfastly ever since.

BCS performed at the Festival of English Music held at South Hill Park, singing some very modern pieces under the baton of Nicholas Sherwood, and with Vernon Handley and the Guildford Philharmonic Orchestra singing Constance Lambert's *The Rio Grande*.

The prominent English composer Michael Tippett became president of BCS in 1985, remaining so until his death in January 1998. Notably, the choir took part in a performance of Beethoven's 9th Symphony at the Hexagon under the direction of Andrew Parrott, Professor of Music at Reading University. During this period the choir was invited annually to sing carols in the town centre, in Princess Square. They also performed Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle* in the old St Andrew's Church, Priestwood, a venue that was held in much affection as the choir's base. The church underwent restoration but after its centenary was celebrated in 1988, with a concert at which the choir sang the Solemn Mass of St Andrew and hymns, the church was finally demolished in 1989, leaving BCS without a 'home'.

The choir moved to rehearse at Ranelagh School in Bracknell, with the town's Sports Centre as the new concert venue. A new conductor, David Millington, organist and choir master at Guildford Cathedral, took over as Musical Director, a post he held until 1999 when he took up an appointment as organist at Exeter Cathedral. Under his baton the choir participated in the Guildford Festival concert to perform Britten's *War Requiem* with two other choirs. This Festival concert at the Cathedral became a regular fixture on the BCS calendar every three years, including a performance of Berlioz's major work *Grande Messe des Morts* in 2005.

2000–present

Clive Fairbairn became conductor and his first concert with the choir was a performance of Britten's *Saint Nicolas*. He expressed concern about conditions for concerts at the Sports Centre because of the poor acoustics and it was decided to find alternative venues for future concerts. The performance of *Messiah* in October was held in the Chapel at Wellington College and the college's Old Gym was used for the summer concert. However, some concerts continued to be held at the Sports Centre during this period when no alternative was available.

The choir held its first exchange with the Bach Choir (Leverkusener Bachchor) from Leverkusen in Germany, Bracknell's twin town, for a concert in 2001 and the two choirs sat together to rehearse and then perform *Elijah* in English. Many members gave hospitality to the German choir members in their homes and personal friendships were formed over the weekend of singing. A second exchange took place in November 2003 when BCS visited Leverkusen. Also in 2003 the choir gave a memorable performance of Fanshawe's *African Sanctus*, with an illustrated account of how he came to write it given by the composer in person.

In June 2006 Barnaby Smith (Artistic Director of the choral ensemble VOCES8) took over as Musical Director. In 2007 the choir performed Handel's *Saul* and made a recording of hymns and anthems for the BBC's *Sunday Half Hour* programme to celebrate St George's Day. In the summer the choir held its first 'Cabaret'-style concert, '100 Years of Broadway', with songs from the shows and the choir ladies dressed in ball-gowns with choir men in cowboy-style shirts. The choir also enjoyed two very stimulating music workshops with VOCES8. In 2009 the choir performed Karl Jenkins's *The Armed Man* and the Silver Song Club was set up by

BCS for members to encourage people in care homes to sing together. The choir's social life was enhanced at this time by the establishment of a separate social committee. This group organised parties to thank those who helped behind the scenes, a fun day with a walk and a skittles evening, a Quiz evening and a Christmas dinner. These have become regular fixtures in the choir's social calendar.

In 2010 the choir celebrated its 50th Year Anniversary with Haydn's *Creation* and we were joined by Greg Hallam as Concert Master. Haydn's *Nelson Mass* and Mozart's *Solemn Vespers* to mark the culmination of the year were performed at Reading Town Hall and a series of special concerts with VOCES8 and other professional musicians held at South Hill Park. The choir received a grant from Berkshire Community Trust to run a singing class called 'Learn to Sing Classical' in the same year. Barnaby Smith stood down as conductor at the end of the summer celebrations and Greg Hallam became our new Musical Director for the 2010–2011 season.

The choir went on its first overseas summer tour in 2011 to spend a long weekend of concerts in Tuscany under Greg's direction, based in the spa town of Montecatini. It has become a choir tradition to visit a different country every two years, with a tour to Bruges in 2013 when notably the choir sang at the Menin Gate memorial and in the imposing Cathedral of Brussels. In 2015 we visited Paris singing in Notre Dame, La Madeleine and Chartres Cathedral. In 2017 we visited Barcelona singing in La Sagrada Familia and Montserrat Abbey and enjoying a stay on the Costa Brava. In 2019 we went to Grado in Northern Italy, Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, singing in San Giusto Cathedral, Trieste, Rijeka Cathedral in Croatia and Basilica San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice.

In November 2011 it was announced that the choir was to move to a new rehearsal and concert base at Newbold Church in Binfield. The last rehearsal before the choir's 2012 South Hill Park 'The Tuscany Selection' concert was held there in April of that year, and the choir has rehearsed and given concerts there to the present day.

In 2013 another tradition was started when the choir attended a residential choral workshop, staying in a country hotel over a weekend in early February, to have fun with choral exercises and sight-singing, and a concert of works learnt by the end of the Sunday afternoon. Another memorable highlight was in 2018 when the choir joined Swindon Choral Society to perform Bach's two-choir *St Matthew Passion* at Marlborough College under the baton of Greg Hallam. This was a huge success and a milestone concert for the choir.

During 2020 and 2021 the choir survived the total ban on live performance during the COVID pandemic by meeting online via video technology to rehearse selected pieces, including 'A Bigger Bunch of Flowers' composed by accompanist Nick Austin. Thanks to a huge effort on the part of both Greg Hallam, Musical Director, and Nick Austin, Accompanist, using specially recorded music for the choir to sing with, we were coached to performance standard for self-recording as individuals for several video recordings of the choir on Youtube. We also contributed a similar recording, singing two carols, for Bracknell Town Council's 2021 online Christmas video of contributions from local musical ensembles and bands.

In September 2021 we returned to live rehearsals. There is nothing that can be compared with meeting face-to-face as a choir and all in BCS were very happy to fulfil the late Queen Elizabeth's confidence that we would all meet again.