

Milestones in lives of ex-verger and organist - reached and passed in 1970

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For two men of Christchurch Priory Church, 1970 was a milestone; for each in a different way, it marked an important stage in his life. For Geoffrey Tristram, organist and choirmaster it was the 21st anniversary of his appointment. For Cecil Stickland, it was retirement; the end of 18 years as head verger



DURING the recent power cuts, some 60 people turned up at the Priory Church to hear a recital. They found the church in almost total darkness — just a few candles casting a shadowy glimmer across the long aisles. They wailed in the darkness for 50 minutes — electricity was needed for the organ blower. Geoffrey Tristram was the organist; no one left!

Mr. Tristram's virtuosity has won him a measure of the reverence bestowed upon the great conductors and soloists.

Geoffrey Tristram, musician, organist, teacher and broadcaster, has brought fame to Christchurch Priory Church; he can look back over his 21 years with pride.

"They have been 21 happy years. I have been lucky in having two very good vicars, and the present churchwardens give me every encouragement."

Despite this encouragement and understanding, the occasional ripple has spread across the surface: once Mr. Tristram complained of the church authorities' lack of enthusiasm for the £5,000 job of finishing the organ — it looked like a plumber's backyard, he said. An enthusiast for his art, the Priory Church organist was demanding the best tools of his trade.

No Mean Repute

Geoffrey Tristram was an organist of no mean repute when he came to the Priory Church in 1949 from All Saints', Southbourne. He had studied under the late Dr. G. D. Cunningham, City Organist of Birmingham and Professor at the Royal Academy of Music. At the age of 16 he had become an associate of the Royal College of Organists, and a year later obtained a Fellowship.

He was already well known for his recitals and broadcasts — and broadcasting in those days was not the easy recording session of today.

"Everything went out live then. It was nothing to get up at one in the morning for some programme on the overseas network." And at Southbourne, there was no 'phone. The BBC had to borrow a line from a neighbour to transmit the programme.

The strain of having to get it right first time made him nervous— and even after his years of experience that nervousness persists, though with recorded recitals the reason has gone. "I have to start with something easy, or my nose starts to twitch. Or something so desperately difficult that I haven't time to think of twitches."

Records

Mr. Tristram has lost count of the number of broadcasts he has made— most from the Priory Church. But his recording sessions have not been confined to radio. He has made four records too.

He has played in many churches and Cathedrals throughout Britain, at the Royal Festival Hall, at Colston Hall, Bristol, and others. On the Continent he has played in Switzerland, Germany and France.

Not since he was a very young man has he aspired to be a cathedral organist however. Apart from anything else, the salary is abysmally low, and in any event, in the days of radio and television one doesn't need such a position to gain acclaim.

His own taste in music is catholic: Bach, some of the more modern French composers, Elgar and recently, although a surfeit of the composer at school made him wary, he has taken to Beethoven's work. He has no particular objection to pop, but finds most modern organ music incomprehensible.

He has tried composing too. He wrote a Mass which was sung in Notre Dame by St. Peter's School, Southbourne choir. However, apart from "bits and pieces" he hadn't had much time for composing. "I'm a slow, laborious writer and time is too short," he said.

Although music has been his life, it has not always been his work. He began as an estate agent, having been advised not to make a career of music. It was as an estate agent that he came to Bournemouth in 1946.

He had been an organist at Reading, and soon he took up an appointment at All Saints. He also became musical director of the Bournemouth Gilbert and Sullivan Society for a while.

Soon, too, he gave up estate agency and took to his lifetime's interest. He became music master at Poole Grammar School. For the past ten years he has been director of music at St. Peter's School, Southbourne.

His teaching experience has stood him in good stead as master of the choir at the Priory Church. Twenty-one years ago the choir was disjointed, the singing was "every man for himself" and the music was "three parts junk."

Now there is nothing but praise for the efforts of the 14 men and 20 boys in the choir. The Priory Church has no difficulty in finding choirboys either, at a time when church choirs are dwindling through lack of interest. It's not as though they get paid much either — music costs the Priory Church £160 a year.

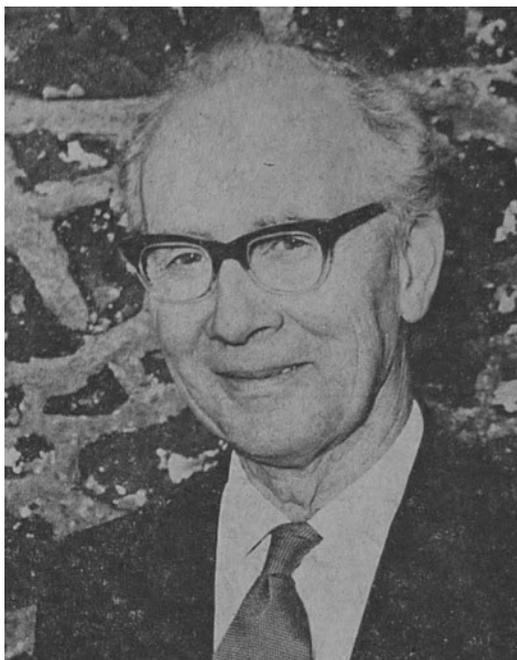
Such success depends on the qualities and ability of the choirmaster. He must instil among his class an enthusiasm sufficient to defeat the competing demands of homework and entertainment.

And when the demands of the choir include practice two or three times a week, as when preparing for special events, they need a great deal of enthusiasm and loyalty. Mr. Tristram has never found this lacking. "They are wonderful youngsters," he said of the choirboys. "I don't find the kids nowadays are no good. Their hearts are in the right place, in spite of the modern lack of parental control."

If his work has demanded time and energy from his pupils and choirboys, it has left him with little time to spare himself. Time for hobbies is precious.

Engineering has always fascinated him; he loves to visit an engineering works. Once he built a steam engine, perfect in detail, but he sold it later when he was short of money.

So he is left with music.



Cecil Stickland lived for ten years in the cottage by the west door of the Priory Church; its grey stones towered above him;

Its pealing bells permeated every wall of his home; it cast a dark shadow over the tiny windows of his little cottage.

To a man with a keen interest in local history, living and working within the precincts of the greatest monument to Christchurch's past was an excellent opportunity.

And Mr. Stickland didn't waste it. He has studied the Priory Church and its history just as he has studied the past of other local churches — ecclesiastical architecture has been his abiding interest.

He has given lectures on the subject to many local organisations, and calls like this on his knowledge will continue, despite his retirement.

He wrote the three guide books of the Priory Church, and conducted thousands on tour around the church — there are now some 3,000 visitors a year there.

His interest in church architecture stems from his first job, working for a Bournemouth firm of wood and stone carvers.

Mr. Stickland was born in 1905 in Wimborne, the son of a shipwright and one of a family of six. When he was a boy, the family moved to Parkstone.

He had an ambition to work in the church and a talent for music. At the age of 17 he became organist at Corfe Castle Parish Church, a part time appointment.

When the Second World War came he joined the RAF, having already been a voluntary reservist. His trade was carpentry, and he was posted to air-sea rescue work, spending the last three and a half years at Calshot.

Here, his ability as an organist was recognised — and he was drafted every Sunday to the camp chapel!

He started a new career after the war, joining a friend in the furniture business in the Bournemouth area. Then in 1953 he applied for the vacant post of head verger at the Priory Church. Out of a vast number of applicants, he was selected — his talent as an organist helped to make him the obvious choice.

This interest in music has become a family trait. His son David, a teacher at Bournemouth School, studied music under Geoffrey Tristram, and became assistant organist at the church for a number of years.

Mr. Stickland and his wife now live in Stony Lane, Burton, having moved there from the cottage at the Priory some 18 months ago in preparation for his retirement.