



A Barnet Choirboy during World War One

By Eric Daw



A Barnet choirboy during World War One

I was nine years old when my family first came to Barnet in 1915. We took up residence in a 4-bedroom house in Normandy Avenue; my parents occupied the large front bedroom; my four sisters shared the two back bedrooms; and I, being the only boy, had the privilege of sleeping alone.

Occasionally I would be mildly surprised to find myself in my parents' bed when I woke up in the morning. It did not then occur to me that I was responsible for a gate being placed at the top of the stairs in our previous house, and for the early visit of a carpenter to erect a similar gate at our new abode. By the time I was 10 or so, my somnambulistic tendencies had come to an end, and I was able to spend the whole night through in my own brass bedstead, which was plentifully supplied with fascinating round knobs that could be unscrewed and used for various games when I should have been asleep.

The house was lit by gas but I soon found my own source of electric lighting and thereby a means of crafty bedtime reading without fear of discovery by my sisters, three of whom were older than I, and consequently somewhat bossy. Behind the head of my bed there was an electric bell-push. By unscrewing the cover and insinuating a small torch bulb between the contacts, I was able to obtain a rather dim but adequate light. Evidently the current used by the bulb was sufficiently high to prevent the bell from ringing in the kitchen, which was just as well for me! My parents never found out why, when rung by callers, the bell often gave a rather feeble response; and the battery of Leclanche cells, which supplied the current, never split on me.

My father had a Victorian outlook and believed in the old adage 'Spare the rod and spoil the child'. The rod (a swishy cane) was always on hand. Father was the boss and he never let us forget it. It is not that he was an ogre; he had many good points, and when we were very young he would sing nursery songs and play with us. But generally he was incapable of bringing himself down to our level and gently persuading us to do as he wished; it was a case of ordering us and not asking us.

Father possessed a pleasing trained tenor voice, and as a young man he was in the choir of St Mary Abbot's Church at Kensington. He therefore had a bee in his bonnet that I also should learn to sing; but as I was a very self-conscious and timid child, his manner of sitting himself down at the piano and ordering me to perform more often than not had the effect of bringing forth nothing but tears.

Anyway, my father persevered, and he must have approached the organist

and choirmaster of Barnet Parish Church (St John the Baptist), and very soon I found myself clad in a cassock (purple I believe for a probationer) and surplice, and taking my place with other boys in the choir stalls on the side opposite to the organ, so that the choirmaster could keep an eye on me and any other raw recruits through his mirror over the organ keyboard.

I can't remember having a voice test; so presumably my weak pipings could occasionally be overheard at choir practice and found to be reasonably in tune – at any rate after a few months I was elevated to the rank of a full-blown paid chorister on the permanent staff, as it were; and my purple cassock was exchanged for a black one (or perhaps vice-versa – I can't remember).

Mr Leonard Dewdney was the organist and choirmaster and in my opinion he was most efficient at both jobs. He was a very tall, thin man, and full of energy. He lived in Fitzjohn Avenue in 1915, having recently moved to this address from Church Cottage, 10 Wood Street (next to Church House). I don't know what his bread and butter job was, but he was an educated man and probably held some position in a London office.

His predecessor was Sydney Nicholson, who left his Barnet post in 1903 and became organist and choirmaster at Westminster Abbey. He also received a Knighthood and was the founder of the Royal School of Church Music. Mr



St John the Baptist Church choir outside the church, c1921

Nicholson did not forget his old friends at Barnet, and periodically he would return and provide us boys with a spread in Church House. I was present on one of these occasions, and if my memory hasn't let me down, he was a rather handsome man with short, thick, curly hair, turning grey.

Incidentally, he compiled the song book called 'British Songs for British Boys', a choice from which we boys at Queen Elizabeth's belted out during singing lessons under the direction (when he could make himself heard) of Mr Frank Driffill. Although I may be wrong, I believe that Mr Nicholson's father was Sir Charles Nicholson, of The Grange, Totteridge Green.

On Sundays we boys were expected to wear Eton suits (known as bum freezers by reason of the cut-away back of the jacket) and mortarboards. Curiously enough, such apparel did not invoke ribald remarks from boys in the street, neither did the even stranger garb of pupils of the Bluecoat School (Christ's Hospital), several of whom were occasionally to be seen in the district.

Many boys wore Eton collars with their Norfolk jackets or whatever clothes



Tudor Hall in 2012, formerly part of Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School

they were wearing. These collars were of two kinds – posh ones made of linen and requiring washing and starching when they were soiled; others, which only needed a rub with soap and water, were made of celluloid, a highly inflammable material. Boys being boys, I am surprised that there seems to be such a scarcity of elderly men around with scarred necks, although it must be admitted that I myself never met a boy on fire.

Choir practice was normally held twice a week, on Tuesday and Thursday nights. The Tuesday practice, for the boys only, took place in a wooden hut behind Church House. In addition to running through, with many repeats, the next Sunday's hymns and anthem, we also sang scales etc. to appropriate words which I have now forgotten, except one. This was singing, up and down, an octave in half-tones, to these words 'I will sing my half-tones every day till they are perfect' with the final 'fect' sung an octave lower (or higher) on the commencing note. And then repeats in gradually ascending keys.

On Thursdays it was full choir practice in Church. I think we boys must have had a little extra practice before the men arrived. We had to wait outside the Wood Street entrance for the choirmaster to turn up (or just inside the Church if the weather was bad). Naturally there was a little gentle horseplay



St John the Baptist Church, Wood Street side

among ourselves, with sundry shovings and barings, and occasionally half a fag furtively passed round; but always on the lookout for Mr Dewdney, who would suddenly appear from a passageway near the tram terminus. Even during blackout nights we knew, from his brisk step and a habit of knocking out his pipe on the Church railings, that Mr Dewdney was rapidly approaching, and we immediately became little innocents.

We wore our cassocks for practice, as did the choirmaster. If Arthur Martin-Smith, the assistant organist, wasn't present, Mr Dewdney would wheel in between the choir stalls a foot-pumped harmonium, which he would play, if necessary, with one hand and conduct with the other. With the organ manned by Arthur, Mr Dewdney would conduct standing up: to get the best out of us Mr Dewdney took a lot out of himself. He vigorously wielded his baton and his spare arm; he stamped his foot; he put his fingers to his lips for a quiet passage, and opened his mouth wide for a loud passage, and as occasion demanded he would shout 'Breath!' as a reminder to take ours. No wonder he was as thin as a rake! But he got results.

Occasionally, when Mr Dewdney was not available, choir practice was taken by Mr Adcock. Whereas Mr Dewdney was a disciplinarian and would whip out his notebook and fine us (2d usually) for small misdemeanours, Mr Adcock was very easy-going and we always enjoyed his visits, especially as he was to us a heroic figure in his naval officer's uniform.

Another uniformed visitor we didn't mind calling during choir practice was a



Barnet police station on Barnet Hill, c. 1890

policeman, who would come to warn the choirmaster of a possible air raid, whereupon we were all sent home. I remember running down Barnet Hill towards my home in Normandy Avenue; and more than once the warning maroons were fired from the Police Station just as I passed by, to my gratification. As there were no walkie-talkies in those days, policemen patrolling the district took their cue from the maroons, and blew their whistles as additional warnings. When the danger had passed, Boy Scouts would cycle round the roads sounding the 'All Clear' with two notes on their bugles.

The number of bombs dropped (by airships at night, which were either Zeppelins or Schutte-Lanz types) was small compared with the thousands rained down upon us in the 1940's; and a bomb landing at say Whetstone was considered by us Barnetonians as a near miss!

Two airships were brought down by aeroplanes in the vicinity of Barnet – SL11 at Cuffley on the 2nd September 1916, and L31 at Potters Bar a month later on 1st October. I remember cheers and going to the front door with my



Men of the Royal Flying Corps examine the engine of the crashed SL11 at Cuffley in 1916; inset: a glove of one of the pilots on display at Barnet Museum

parents to see L31 falling in flames, which lit the night sky as nearly 2,000,000 cubic feet of hydrogen blazed. The poor devils on board didn't stand a chance. The L31 was a 'Zepp' with aluminium framework: the SL11 was a Schutte-Lanz airship constructed of plywood reinforced with miles of wire.

On my way to choir practice in the dark evenings I would often loiter to watch a searchlight scanning the sky from the open top of a tram which parked each night at the terminus. I used to wonder whether I would be blinded for life if this hissing light were to shine directly on to me! This brilliant light was obtained by discharging a high current across a gap between two carbon rods (Arc Lamps). The current was supplied from a generator housed on the tram's lower deck, taking its power from the overhead tram wires.

Payment for our services was made monthly; and so far as I was concerned, my stipend amounted to between 1/-d (5p) and 1/6d (7½p). In addition, we received a half-yearly award of (in my case) about £1.00, which I promptly spent on extra Meccano parts, or chemicals and apparatus for my 'laboratory' – a six feet long trestle table in my bedroom, with a Bunsen burner taped to a nearby gas bracket. I don't think my parents would have been very happy had



The top of Barnet Hill showing the tram terminus, c1905-10

they known that, in addition to smelly experiments (which were obvious to them) I tried my hand at manufacturing gunpowder, gun cotton and nitro-glycerine! Fortunately my attempts to detonate small quantities of the last two explosives were unsuccessful, so I still possess the usual number of eyes and fingers.

Considering that my domestic pocket money was 3d or 4d (less than 2½p) per week, the extra cash earned as a choirboy made me feel like a bloated plutocrat – at least for a few days.

Choral weddings and funerals were an extra source of income, and also made a welcome break from school, as those of us boys who attended Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Wood Street were given leave of absence to be present at such functions. Funerals were more profitable than weddings; the going rate for seeing someone out of this world was usually about 6d more than the 1/-d paid for seeing a couple wed in order to bring in replacements.

Periodically there would be a choir 'outing' for us boys. On one occasion we were taken to see 'Chu Chin Chow' at His Majesty's Theatre, with the original cast, including Oscar Asche.

In spite of being afraid of my own voice, on looking back I think my three or four years in the choir was a pleasant experience, as I enjoyed the music, especially some of the anthems and hymns. I never learned to sight-read, but this didn't really matter very much, as I soon memorised the music and knew when the time came for me to add my small quota of sound.

Carols were a favourite. When Christmas was approaching, Mr Dewdney would unearth some old Carol sheets; in fact some of these were so antiquated that the words were printed in the old style, where 's' looked like 'f'. They must have been early nineteenth century editions at least. Perhaps because of the coming festive season, Mr Dewdney usually allowed us at practice to get away with at least one rendering of the words 'as they was wrote', such as 'For thif if Chriftnas Eve' after which he might say 'That's enough of this nonsense, boys' as a veiled threat that further fingering of fongs in that manner would result in fines all round.

I might mention here that the only 'sweets' permitted to be sucked were 'Melloids' – tiny black tabloids obtainable in a small flat tin from Boots.

The Church organ, very ably played by Mr Dewdney, was normally kept supplied with air by an electric motor. If, as occasionally happened, there was a breakdown in this system, then it became necessary for the air to be pumped manually. 'All hands to the pump' sometimes comprised the four

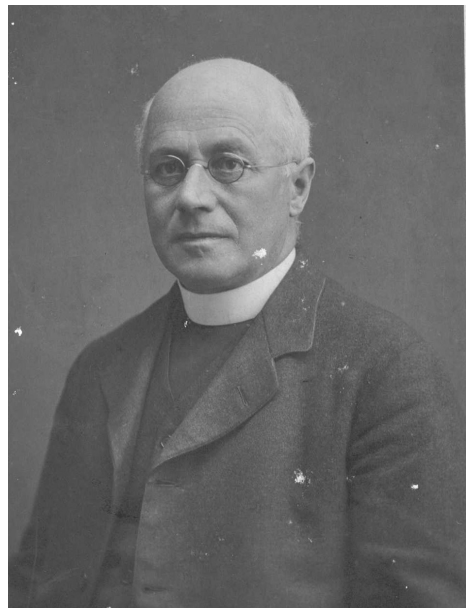
hands of two of us boys, who were closeted in a small room beneath the organ, in which there was a long wooden handle and a hanging cord with a small weight on the end, which rose and fell according to the amount of air in reserve. The idea was not to allow the weight to fall below a certain height indicated by a mark, otherwise the organ music would be liable to run down like a dying wail of a deflating set of bagpipes, only more so, to the astonishment (or amusement) of the congregation, the anger of the organist and the shame of the pumpers. Such a thing didn't often happen, as I believe the organist would play safe by moderating the volume of sound. Really loud stuff, and the free use of the large pipes, might have reduced the poor pumpers to a state of exhaustion!

The Rector in my time was William Manning, an imposing bald-headed man. Although I, like the rest of the choirboys, never listened to his sermons, they must have been good stuff, as the Church was usually packed on Sundays.

Two Curates stand out in my memory – the Revd. C.W. Lyne and the Revd. J. K. Wood. They were both tone-deaf; and although they were given their cue by a brief note played on the organ, it was more by luck than judgment that they hit it right when intoning. Mr Lyne started the 2nd Barnet (Parish Church) Scout Troop, of which I became a member, and Mr Wood later became Superintendent at the Boys' Farm Home in East Barnet.

We boys processed in pairs from the Vestry up the centre aisle to the choirstalls, where we peeled off, one to the organ side stalls (Cantoris) and the other to the south side stalls (Decani). For a period I was placed last in the procession, which meant that after all the other boys had shuffled along the stalls, I and my opposite number were at the end nearest the altar. Of course, on the homeward journey after the Service, the position was reversed, and we two were the first to reach the Vestry.

Being the end boy on the organ side, it was my job to slip out at the beginning of the sermon and switch off the lights in the body of the Church (for wartime economy) and to switch them on again when the sermon ended. Three or four rows of



The Rev William Manning

brass covered switches were on a wall nearby under a hinged cover; and although it now seems ridiculous, at that time, at the age of 10 or 11, this simple job worried me no end, as I was always terrified that the wrong switches would be turned off. In fact this did happen on one occasion. On seeing the preacher walk towards the pulpit, I went to the switchboard, and in my usual state of anxiety I completely forgot which of the switches to turn off. I panicked, and in my confusion switched various lights off and on, and even for a few seconds managed to plunge the Church into near darkness. Eventually, Mr Dewdney hurried from his organ seat and put matters right.

There was another disadvantage in having this job – whereas the other boys amused themselves during the sermon by reading or playing noughts and crosses under cover of their book rests, I was forced to keep more or less alert and listen for the closing ‘And now to God the Father’, etc. as my cue to put all the lights on again.

My choirboy days ended when I had throat trouble at the age of 13 or 14 – in



Barnet Church chancel, showing some of the choir stalls, 1948

short, my voice broke. I probably heaved a sigh of relief at being able to leave without fear of punishment by my father, but I have never regretted the experience.



Barnet Church, showing war memorial in front, 1931



Barnet Museum & Local History Society

email: enquiries@barnetmuseum.co.uk www.barnetmuseum.co.uk
020 8440 8066 31 Wood Street, Barnet. EN5 4BE

Barnet Museum's collection covers many aspects of life in Barnet, from ancient times to modern day, including objects relating to The Battle of Barnet, both World Wars, domestic life, shops, pubs, sport, leisure, costume and health, as well as temporary exhibitions. The museum has an extensive archive, and is a centre for family and local history research. Founded in 1938, the museum is a charity run by volunteers. Group visits are available by appointment. Admission free.

The Local History Society organises talks and outings.

Barnet Museum & Local History Society (charity no. 295950)

A Barnet Choirboy during World War One © 2014, Barnet Museum & Local History Society (first published c.1970s)

Front page image: Eric Daw as a choirboy (Eric Daw)

Photos all from Barnet Museum collection except where stated, 2012 photograph taken by Mike Noronha.