

The History of the Highfield Male Voice Choir



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Based in Runcorn, now part of the Borough of Halton, Highfield Male Voice Choir was formed in 1911. The name comes from the local Highfield Tanning Company (no longer in existence) and our choir emblem shows three figures carrying 'bends' of leather – each 'bend' consisting of half an animal hide after tanning.

The Choir's origins can be traced back to the formation by Tannery workers of a male voice 'quartette' in 1902. In time this became a double quartet, and eventually a triple quartet was formed to compete in the prestigious annual Eisteddfod in Widnes (on the opposite bank of the River Mersey), on Thursday 23rd February 1911. The conductor was Sam Hassall and the test piece was the Harry Evans arrangement of All Through The Night, sung unaccompanied. They were awarded first prize by the Adjudicator, who was the famous Welsh hymn composer, Caradog Roberts. He could be very scathing in his comments, but had nothing but praise for the performance of the Highfield men.



Immediately following the success of this first public performance, it was decided to add to the original group of twelve to form a male voice choir based on the Tannery with Sam Hassall as Conductor and local church organist Frank Gamon (then 18 years old) as Accompanist. The choir operated under the auspices of the Highfield Tannery Social and Recreational Club, but membership was thrown open to all men from the area around Runcorn and Widnes.

The Choir went from success to success, winning the first eight competitions it entered. Highfield was feared and respected in the competitions field across North West England and North Wales. James Weedall took over as Conductor in 1914, and continued in office for nearly 40 years.



Highfield at the Llangollen International Eisteddfod, 1990

A local soap works was converted to become the Camden Tannery. It was taken over by the Highfield Tanning Company in 1914, and the Choir's name was duly extended to become 'The Highfield and Camden Male Voice Choir'. Equipping the soldiers of World War 1 must have increased the tanneries' output (and therefore working hours) considerably, but Choir members gave of their own time to travel around the region to give evening concerts to

entertain the troops, returning to start work at 6am the following day.

The choir continued to grow, reputedly reaching a membership of 100 during the 1920's, to provide a rewarding outlet for many an aspiring young chorister, and won so many competitions that its name was changed for a time to The Highfield and Camden Prize Choir. However, by 1927 competitions were declining in popularity, so that the Choir decided upon a change of direction and inaugurated the series of annual Celebrity Concerts which has continued to the present day.

Numbers declined at the start of the 1930's, but had recovered enough for the Choir to make its first radio broadcast in 1937. The outbreak of World War 2 caused an initial cessation of activities, but, although reduced in numbers, the men of Highfield & Camden travelled the

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region to entertain the troops just as their forbears had done, and managed to resume the series of Celebrity Concerts in 1944.

Membership fluctuated during the 1950's and 60's, but the Choir lived on. Even though the last tannery had closed by then, the Choir decided to keep the name of 'Highfield'. There was a resurgence of interest in the 1970's and 80's, during which membership rose from its lowest recorded number of 34 in 1969 to reach a peak of 72 in time for the Choir's 80th anniversary in 1991. With membership now standing at about fifty, Highfield is, we feel, a male voice choir of quality, comparable with the best of choirs throughout the Region.

The Choir has a growing reputation for its concert performances throughout the country and in recent years has toured many times overseas in France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Spain and Malta. Within the U.K. the choir performs up to fifteen concerts per year.

During its long history Highfield has performed in many great Concert Halls throughout the British Isles, including the Royal Albert Hall in London, Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, Glasgow's City Hall and Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall. The Choir also took part in the massed choirs' concert at the Manchester Evening News Arena in celebration of the Millennium – a memorable experience! In summary, each year the Choir sings to audiences which must total many thousands.

The Choir will perform in any suitable venue, large or small in support of charities and other worthwhile causes. The Choir performs at civic and corporate functions and is also regularly called upon to sing at weddings. Contact us for further details.

THE EARLIEST minute book found in the archives of the Highfield and Camden Male Voice Choir (leather bound of course!) Starts with the AGM of 10th December 1929 with Mr Mayers in the chair and recorded in copperplate handwriting. It was noted that membership in 1929 was eighty, an increase from sixty seven of December the previous year. One entry states "A presentation of a case of pipes was made to our Secretary, Mr Leathwood, in recognition of his years of faithful service. Mr Leathwood in expressing his thanks spoke of the choir's early days 27 years ago." This was because John ('Jack') Leathwood was a founder member of the original 'quartette' in 1902, as well as becoming the Choir's Secretary on its formation in 1911. He continued in this post until the early 1940's – the first of many to give long and dedicated service to the Choir.



We presently see ourselves as a Concert Choir trained to competitive levels and we have occasionally ventured successfully into the world of male voice choral competition. The last competition in which the choir participated was in the early nineties when they won the Calvert Cup at the Southport Music Festival and

were runners up in the same competition the following year. There have also been many other successes throughout the years in choral competition throughout England and Wales.

The Tanneries

Part of the prime industry in Runcorn for a century or so, the Highfield Tannery originally belonged to a Mr. Wright, and subsequently to a Mr. Lello. The business was then purchased by a Mr. Walker of Bolton in 1888, and Mr. R. H. Posnett was sent over as Managing Foreman.

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Mr. Posnett had served his time at Penketh and at that time the tannery employed 16 men and processed 50 hides per week. Under the new Manager, the business was enhanced considerably and by 1914 the weekly processing figure had been increased to between 4,000 and 5,000 hides per week.

The warehouses and sheds were gutted by fire in 1916, this unfortunate catastrophe occurring just after the Camden Tannery, previously a soap works, had been purchased from Mr. Hazlehurst, a noted benefactor to the Free Churches of the district. In the true spirit of Highfield the business was rebuilt from the ashes and by 1939 the Tannery was capable of processing 7,500 hides per week and Camden Tannery of 5,000 per week.

The industry shared the misfortunes of the depression, and serious slackening of demand in 1921/22, 1929/30 and 1937/38 required skilful expertise in avoiding a crash. However, by 1939 the Highfield and Camden Tanneries were processing a total of 12,500 hides per week.

After the war years the onset of substitute materials in men's and women's soles and other developments in plastics and fibres led to a rapid decline in the demand for good-quality leather, and the Tannery was forced into diversification into the motor trade upholstery market with all its industrial strife and fluctuating demands in sympathy with the economic climate, the final blow being struck in the 1960's when a persistent series of motor trade disputes caused a loss of 20 per cent of the tannery's production for over three successive months.

The Highfield Recreation section, which had jurisdiction over the Choir (and Band – little of which is known other than it was in existence in 1916), had always been a flourishing concern. A bowling green existed inside the tannery at an early date, later being transferred to a plot adjacent to the football ground.

The only physical remnant of the Highfield Tannery is the former Recreation Club Institute, at the end of Canal Street where it is now cut off by the embankment carrying the Expressway. Most recently the Quayside Bar and Restaurant, it is currently out of use. The site of the Tannery is now occupied by a section of the Expressway, landscaping banks and a mixture of small factories and vacant land in the Astmoor Estate. Part of the site of the Camden Tannery is now occupied by The Brindley Arts Centre; the rest taken up by the adjoining series of car parks, surrounding which some of the walls can still be seen.

Mr. R. H. Posnett died in 1929 after leading a remarkably full life in local affairs and in the tanning industry, having been Chairman of Camden, Latchford, Guest Bros., Union Central, Vale Liverpool and P. & S. Evans (Bristol) tanneries, a Director of Penketh Tannery and Managing Director of Highfield. He served for 34 years in local government, latterly as a County Councillor and a JP.

Mr. C.C. Posnett succeeded his father in many of his roles, not only in the tanning industry but also in public life, not least as President of the Choir, which position he held for over 60 years, taking an active interest in the Choir right up to his death in 1990.

By 1985, there were only three former tannery workers still active members of the choir. Two of them were pictured together in 1937 snatching break at the Camden Tannery. On the left is Walter Hardley who worked at Camden for 30 years before transferring to Highfield for a further three. Joining in 1934, he served as Choir Secretary for many years, and remained a Choir member until his death in 1990. On the right is Len Rowe, who first worked in the tannery at the age of 15 in 1930. He was recruited into the Choir, also in 1934, by his uncle, J W Bazley (one of the original Choir of 1911), and remained an active



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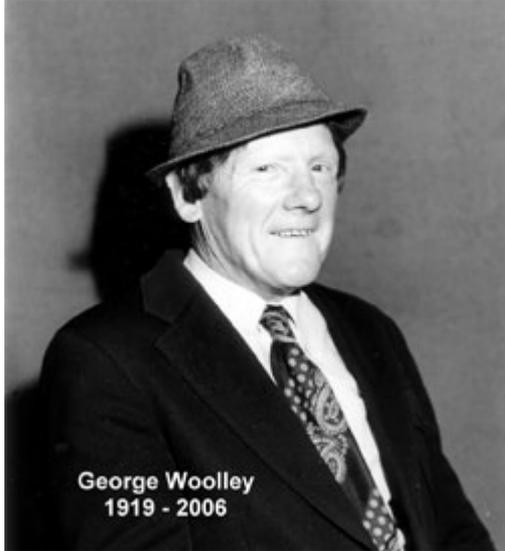


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chorister up to his death in 1998 – one of the longest serving in the Choir's history.

They recalled that the work was hard but, that there was a great spirit of friendliness amongst the men, and they were happy days.

The last survivor of the three was George Woolley, whose career at the Highfield Tannery between 1933 and its closure in 1968 was interrupted by distinguished service as a Tank Commander in the Royal Armoured Corps in North Africa, where his unit was involved in the prized capture of the first German Tiger tank to be taken intact, and later in Italy.



Although he always had an interest in the Choir, it was only in 1983 that he actually became a member, saying after doing so that he wished he had joined years earlier.

George was the choir's expert on Highfield's history and formation, even claiming that he knew the three men on the choir logo personally, and could name them if needed!

One sure way to upset George was to describe the three 'bends' of leather they carried as anything else.

He was a keen supporter of and advocate for the Choir, and soon became a Librarian and its first Archivist. His lasting legacy to the Choir is his collecting together into a single set of Archives, the Choir's various minute books, programmes, certificates and press cuttings, which have been the source and basis for research into further details of all the historical information contained in this website.

It is therefore in recognition of this that the collection given to the Choir in his memory following his death in June 2006 is being used to cover the cost of updating, improving and maintaining this website, and we thus wish to record here our thanks to all his family and friends for their generous donations to this cause.