

Friday December 13, 2013

Singsong and a bit of banter

Emma Morley meets the male choir still going strong after 28 years



Smartly dressed in their distinctive burgundy blazers and ties, members of Dalston Male Voice Choir have gathered in Dalston Methodist Church. Their attire may give them an air of formality and once they're into their singing their professionalism and musical mastery shine through.

But once the singing stops it's time to relax, the atmosphere is friendly and welcoming and the banter between the members is free-flowing, making it clear why the choir has been going strong for 18 years.

They'll be performing their last concert of the year tomorrow night in Scotby to raise money for Hospice at Home Carlisle and North Lakeland and it'll be a festive treat filled with Christmas favourites.

The choir perform eight or nine concerts a year and raises money for charities including Macmillan Nurses, Eden Valley Hospice and Christian Aid Tear Fund. Tomorrow's will be the second this year for Hospice at Home.

It was at a New Year's Eve party at David Dickinson's house in Dalston in 1984 that a sing song around the piano resulted in the idea to form a choir.

"Somebody said 'some of these fellas can sing'", remembers Derek Heyes, one of the founding members and one of several still in the choir. "So Hilary Hodgson was asked if she could form a male voice choir."

Two weeks later about 10 men gathered for the first rehearsal and the rest, as they say, is history. With Hilary as musical director, a role she performed until she retired in 2011, the choir gradually grew in numbers.

"We just sang unison to start with to see what it would sound like," Derek, who lives in Dalston, says. "We first performed at one of Dalston Dramatic Society's plays."

"Hilary then started to put us into parts. We quickly developed and as we gave concerts people noticed we were enjoying ourselves and asked to join."

When it comes to their repertoire, the choir has a varied programme, from classical pieces to popular songs, and there's always a concert to practice for, with weekly rehearsals on a Sunday night and a break in the summer and over Christmas.

"I wanted to sing as I'd been in the Carlisle Cathedral Choir as a boy," Derek says. "It has been wonderful. We've been to America where we sang with the World Choir in 1994 and we've performed with a mass choir in Manchester and Cardiff. Hilary was a real driving force. If I don't go to choir rehearsals on a Sunday night it feels like there's something wrong."

Chairman Ray Fearon, from Wigton, joined the choir five years ago after attending a concert given by the choir in Wigton and he says prospective members are invited to come along to one of the Sunday night rehearsals at Dalston Methodist Church and then decide if they want to join.

"I've always been involved in music," he says. "I haven't been in a choir since school though. You don't need to have a great deal of musical knowledge or be an experienced singer. You learn as you go along."

"It takes 18 months to two years to really settle, there's a lot to learn. Your voice will develop. We take the music seriously."

"The musical director and the accompanist and all the members set you to achieve and have a high standard but there's always a great deal of humour."

The choir currently has about 35 members who range in ages from their 30s to 80s and David Wood, the newest recruit, has been singing with the choir for nearly two years.

"I moved to Dalston and joined Dalston Dramatic Society and someone in the group was



In harmony: Dalston Male Voice Choir rehearsing in Dalston Methodist Church. Above and below right, Alan Hodgson; below left, Michael Williams; bottom, chairman Ray Fearon

JONATHAN BECKER



MUSIC

also in the choir," he says. "I had just sang in choral societies before but never a male choir."

"There's a great feeling of camaraderie."

Malcolm Young and Peter Brookes agree.

"The banter is the same as it has always

been," Malcolm laughs.

Peter, who joined in September 1995, says: "I've always found it a very welcoming choir. The ambiance of the choir makes you feel young."

Current musical director, Michael Deakin, joined in January 2012 and is a secondary school teacher who started his musical career as a chorister at Carlisle Cathedral. The choir is completed by accompanist Lorraine Gash.

Dalston Male Voice Choir has always had a policy of encouraging up-and-coming young musicians and invite them to appear as guests at their concerts.

Cameron Mitchell, from Thurstonfield near Carlisle, will join them at the concert tomorrow night.

The aspiring youngster started singing at Carlisle Cathedral when he was seven, becoming head chorister and going on to perform for several local music societies. The 17-year-old is a member of the National Youth Choir.

On the night, the choir will perform Christmas songs including *O Come all ye faithful*, *Gloria*, *Winter Wonderland* and *Joy to the World*.

■ A Christmas Evening with the Dalston Male Voice Choir, in aid of Hospice at Home Carlisle and North Lakeland, is being held at Scotby Village Hall tomorrow at 7am. Tickets cost £7.50, including refreshments, available on the door.

Visit www.dalstonmvc.org.uk for more information about the choir.

