

Melbourne Welsh Male Choir

Newsletter No 68 May 2023

Lights, Camera, Action... Performance!

As mentioned in our last newsletter, the choir set out to make a promotional video in two locations. Firstly, in our own rehearsal space, which was described in the last newsletter, and following that, at the production company's Tamale studio in Brunswick East. Dressed in the choir's touring shirts, the choir put in a hard day's work with multiple takes of several of the choir's favourite songs.



The choir hamming it up before the hard work of recording



View from the camera operator's perspective



Posed for a group photo at the end of the session

Take a look at the Choir's Facebook page for further images from the day's shooting. We will advise where and when the finished product can be seen. A description of the day's shooting by one of the participating choristers will feature in the next newsletter.

Performance by the choir at the Royal Melbourne Golf Club

The Choir was invited back to Royal Melbourne Golf Club to perform at a special dinner on the 26th April, 2023. The Choir performed three brackets of songs which included a mix of traditional Welsh songs *Gwahoddiad*, *Y Darlun*, etc., items from musical theatre e.g., *Anthem* (from Chess), *Memory* (from Cats), *Rhythm of Life* (from Sweet Charity) as well as popular favourites e.g. *He ain't heavy*

and *Danny Boy*. The Club diners loved the choir's power, emotion and musicality and rewarded them with a standing ovation. The choir was called upon for three encores.

Background to one of the songs in the choir's repertoire – *David of the White Rock*

One of the choir's (and our audience's) favourite songs is *Dafydd y Garreg Wen* a traditional Welsh musical air and folk song.

There is a tradition that the tune was composed by David Owen (1712–1741), a harpist and composer who lived near Porthmadog in Caernarfonshire.

He was known locally as *Dafydd y Garreg Wen* (English: David of the White Rock).

Y Garreg Wen was the name of the farm where he lived near Morfa Bychan.

The tale is that, as Owen lay on his death bed, he called for his harp and composed the tune of the haunting song. He died at the young age of 29 and is buried at St Cynhaearn's Church near Porthmadog.



Y Garreg Wen farm- the home of David Owen

The words were added more than a hundred years later by the poet John Ceiriog Hughes (1832–1887).

'Cariwch', medd Dafydd, 'fy nhelyn i mi,
Ceisiaf cyn marw roi tŷn arni hi.
Codwch fy nwylo i gyraedd y tant;
Duw a'ch bendithio fy ngwedd w a'm
plant!'
'Neithiwr mi glywais lais angel fel hyn:
"Dafydd, tyrd adref, a chwarae trwy'r
glyn!"
Delyn fy mebyd, ffarwel i dy dant!
Duw a'ch bendithio fy ngwedd w a'm
plant!'

'Bring me my harp', was David's sad sigh,
'I would play one more tune before I die.
Help me, dear wife, put the hands to the strings,
I wish my loved ones the blessing God brings.'
'Last night an angel called with heaven's
breath:
"David, play, and come through the gates of
death!"
Farewell, faithful harp, farewell to your strings,
I wish my loved ones the blessing God brings.'

In 1923, the British Broadcasting Company made its first broadcast in Wales from "Station 5WA" in Cardiff. Mostyn Thomas opened the programme, singing *Dafydd y Garreg Wen*, and so it became the very first Welsh language song to play on the air.

The lyrics of the song which the choir sings are given below:

Dafydd the bard on his bed of death lies
Pale are his features and dim are his eyes
Yet all around him his glance wildly roves,
'Till it alights on the harp that he loves.

Give me my harp, my companion so long
Let it once more add its voice to my song
Though my old fingers are palsied and weak
Still my good harp for its master will speak.

Often the hearts of our chiefs it has stirred
When its loud summons to battle was heard.
Harp of my country, dear harp of the brave,
Let thy last notes hover over my grave.

An arrangement of the song for military massed bands is played annually during the national remembrance Sunday celebrations led by the monarch each November in Whitehall, London.

New Choir member - Chris Davenport - Baritone.

Chris lives in Blackburn. He is a retired GP - a career that lasted some 40 years, and a good deal of his time in medicine was devoted to obstetrics.



He is married to Jenny - a retired teacher; a second marriage for both. They have 5 children and 6 grandchildren between them; the grandkids are aged between 2 and 10.

Jenny plays the bagpipes and is active in the Ringwood Highland Pipe Band.

Chris' interests include beekeeping and building/renovating, carpentry & lead-lighting. He and Jenny enjoy travel and camping, kayaking and bike riding.

They have both worked with Blaze Aid and of course, the grandchildren keep them pretty active.

When asked about why the interest in the choir, Chris he says he was invited to the recent MLC concert and after enjoying the wonderful music, felt this was something he wanted to do.

There is certainly a musical element in his family background. His mother taught music and he has strong memories, from a very young age, of hearing Chopin's sonatas, among other music being played at home. He learned the piano and the

clarinet in his school years and has kept up playing the clarinet at home, as a hobby.

As a GP he was often "on call" and had unpredictable hours, so he was never able to join an orchestra or music group. But, since retirement, he has been looking for a group musical outlet and we are particularly pleased that he has chosen the Melbourne Welsh.

Is there any Welsh background in his family? Close, but no; the Davenports came from Kimbolton in Herefordshire (which borders Wales), and Jenny is a descendant of the McKenzies.

Doug Utley, our other doctor in the choir, has taken Chris under his wing and they will be having some learning sessions together at home soon. We suspect that music will only be a part of the conversation! So far, the song learning is going well, and the singing is most enjoyable.

Chris, welcome to the Melbourne Welsh, and especially to the Baritone section.

The subject of this month's established chorister profile is one of the choir's lovable long serving larrikins.

Chorister Profile - Baritone - Peter Jenkins

I was born in Collingwood in 1943 where I lived until my Welsh great grandparents died, then my family moved into their Carnegie home.



Peter Jenkins with his serious look

I come from a musical background. My father graduated from the London College of music, specialising in classical violin, banjo, mandolin and xylophones, which he taught at home each week.

He was part of a concert party that performed at the Cheltenham Home for the Aged in Heatherton. Many of the audience were born with Down Syndrome and they loved our monthly concerts.

Prior to embarking on the building industry role where I was to spend my entire business life, I sang with a group called *The Checkmates*, at dances we ran throughout Melbourne. In those days of rock'n'roll and ballroom dancing, people wanted to hold their partner, but that has all changed when groups started to perform at hotel venues

I left the group, to concentrate on my business career and to support my family - my late wife Robyn (who subsequently

succumbed to cancer after a 4-year battle) and two children, a son David, who lives in Feilding New Zealand with his wife and 3 sons, and a daughter Kelly, who lives in Watsonia North along with her son Harley and partner Steven.

Robyn always kept me grounded and we were a great team during our 49 years of wedded bliss.

My role in the building industry involved responsibility for all the building services within the major projects being constructed within Australia by our company - Lend Lease Corporation, which at that time was a wholly Australian owned builder, developer and property manager.

My job was putting together the design and construction packages for the tendering of air conditioning and mechanical ventilation, fire services, lifts and escalators, hydraulics and plumbing services and all electrical services including security and communications. It was a very rewarding career for an ordinary guy.

Some of the most interesting local development projects were those at Federation Square Melbourne, Crown Casino, Rod Laver Arena and the Melbourne Park redevelopment next to it.

Other major contracts included the Adelaide Entertainment Centre, Barwon regional sewage treatment plant and many hospitals and shopping centres.

I retired from full-time work in 2008 to have a spinal fusion operation to address my severe back problems. I did not return to the music business until 20 years ago, when I joined the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir.

The highlights of my time with the Melbourne Welsh included performing at the Royal Albert Hall and the choir's tour of Salzburg and Vienna

Reflections of a relatively new chorister. This is an unsolicited article by new member Mark Coffey relating to his experience in joining our choir. His bio as a newbie (to which he refers) was overlooked in the chaos of COVID and will be included in a later newsletter.

The Hook – when the MWMC’s penny dropped

At the time of writing, it is the anniversary of the 23rd of April 2022 St David’s Day Concert held at MLC. (Delayed from the true St David’s day on account of the post-COVID adjustments).

I’d known of the choir for some years of course through my good friend Richard Bolt - so I knew the basics of the group, knew something of the Welsh singing tradition, but I was a long way off a full appreciation of it. To this point, the idea of joining the choir was well to the side of my thoughts or priorities. (Read my Bio and you’ll appreciate why so.)

This concert was no less than revelatory for me. It was literally the well-baited hook that caught me. The trappings of a well selected venue, the aesthetics as it were, the arrangement of the piano and stands, the flowers and procession of choristers on to stage (to Ray’s exacting instruction I later found) provided a hint that this was a polished and seriously professional outfit.

The sheer power, quality and the emotion of the choir stood out from the first note. I can’t recall what the first piece was, it was in that odd sounding Welsh language, but I with it I found myself somehow teleported into an ancient setting. Even if you don’t understand a language, and it’s especially true with Welsh, through the vehicle of song you can (or should) easily be swept into those hills, valleys and indeed standing in the country and its society and special ancient culture. More on the Welsh and repertoire later.

In my world of music, I’ve performed and seen a lot of performances. Whether musicians refer to scores or not while they perform is neither here nor there, although if a feature artist or theatrical cast is carting around a score, you’d probably be entitled to have your admission refunded. The fact that this choir presents in concert without the score folder in hand and so is thoroughly in the hands of the conductor and facing out to the “punters”, adds immeasurably to its quality and authenticity. It’s good for the choir members too! How else do you take in those audiences’ smiles and sometimes emotional tears if your eyes are plastered on your staves and dots?

Added to the concert of course was the solo and combined pieces of Singer of the Year guest artist and a touching performance from an up-and-coming junior vocalist. In these contributions I could see that broader mission of connection to the world of musical art was substantial and being fostered quite deliberately and necessarily I can now say one year on. This was more than an amateur “Glee Club”.

And as the music swelled around and the outfit swapped to Welsh tartan waistcoats and bow ties, all the time there was Bill Spawton, as MC, with that comforting and unmistakably Welsh lilt, adding to the warmth and authenticity of the event. (I’ll add that David’s acknowledgement of Traditional Owners stands out as the warmest and heart-felt I’ve witnessed from a non-indigenous person).

That’s how you got me interested. I made a mental note in April 2022 thinking I too could play a part in the MWMC.



Mark is a project manager with Melbourne Water

Coming to and watching rehearsals – my version of ‘due diligence’

I attended, I think, three rehearsals at Ringwood (rocked up, as they say, with Richard Bolt) observing from the side, for the time, so that I could see the ‘dynamics’ of group. It confirmed many things I’d surmised from the concert – such as the quality of David Ashton-Smith’s (DAS’s) musical directing along with a competent and versatile Simon Walters at the keys. Ultimately this period was about

watching the choir at work and again getting to appreciate the musical span and longer history of the choir. Yet more bait to be 'hooked' on.

First steps - how new members are welcomed in

I committed to an interest in the choir (on "probation" I was!) and started sitting in on the B1's rows. Doug Utley, as a mentor took me under his wing along with Barrie Pickersgill. Ieuan Thomas appeared (as if by magic), providing the links to the choir's big library of web resources such as the scores, rehearsal tracks (some voice recordings, some midi-mode sound files) with each of the Welsh songs having spoken pronunciation tuition tracks. Ieuan often leads in Welsh tuition sessions at rehearsals, so I wasn't left guessing at the 'ways and wonders' of Welsh. There's any amount of useful material on-line but I bought all the choir's library of CDs, for 'top' up listening, and you can find them on Spotify too.

I've mentioned just some names here and barely a few of choir who looked out for me. But there is a collective force at that kicks in when a new 'hopeful' chorister is on the threshold. The guys engage with you and encourage you and, by definition, that's an organised welcome.

As I settled in, so did the technical work of grasping the repertoire, the singing and of setting a course for "The Audition" and that steep learning curve you are on.

The organisation, the "Machinery" of MWMC – who does things and how they get done

Punctuating the purely musical objectives of the choir here it's essential to recognise the obvious, that 'things do not run themselves' at MWMC. There is a substantial and well-arranged administration and operational spearhead mobilised here. The members, their partners, extended family and business associates put their collective hands to the wheel. No need to 'bang on' about the benefits of organisation, but observing how the choir excels it seems suffice to add what's in its Statement of Purpose under:

Statement of Purpose - which provides a 'rallying point', and a reminder of who we are:

The purposes of the Choir are:

- (i) To strive for excellence in male voice choir singing*
- (ii) To enrich our society by bringing the music of Wales and its choral traditions to a wider audience*
- (iii) As a non-profit organization, to assist charitable causes*

Guiding Principles - the Values we are to be guided by, in our relationships with the public, and with one another; and in pursuing our purposes; and which shape our culture:

To Guide our Work –

- Focus on audience entertainment*
- Obsession with quality*
- Continuous Improvement*

One year on, now I can see where my contribution fits and likewise where it needs to continue - in the "bigger picture."

The financial outlay for being in this group is known to be too little. There is, and must be, a price tag in attaining *Quality and Continuous Improvement*. The 'Machinery' is looking into this as it must. The real values of course are in the Intangibles. We all know what they are but read on.

The Music, getting your head around the Welsh and The Audition!

The digital library shows there's over 200 songs (all choral arrangements) in the repertoire. About a quarter of these are Welsh with again more than a few in other languages. Another quarter of them are Christmas celebratory.

Some arrangements are those of past Musical Directors and an increasing number of the arrangements are from DAS. Even with some being rarely performed or 'once offs' then, that's a lot of music.

Considering that there's no in-performance score used (i.e., no singers' 'crutch') then the repertoire hits you as daunting – well frankly...? mountainous!

I'm reasonably 'across' languages, including a reasonable grasp of Spanish and German and through learning and performing Brazilian Portuguese pieces in the Jazz/Latin rhythm styles. There's not much that prepares any foreign-to-Welsh entrant to ease into this language. There are few familiar hooks or patterns or diphthongs and there are new mouth 'gymnastics' to perform, keeping us very lazy Aussie speakers (and singers) quite on our toes and out for stern looks from the ever-listening "Boyo's".

The mentors and band members (both native and non-Welsh) all coach you into grasping this wonderful tongue. Ieuan's voice tracks are there to listen to and there's live sessions done to check in on pronunciation and phrasing. You are advised about different strategies to *absorb* the pieces but there's a common and oft-repeated phrase - "Mark, one day the penny just drops. Something just 'clicks.'" Yes, it takes work to learn the pieces and I'm not the first to admit to the use of some "selective lip syncing" where the confidence is lacking. But the thrill of delivering songs such as *Nant Y Mynydd*, *Hiraeth* and *Myfanwy* in as close-to-authentically as you can get and along-side our native speakers is as much a privilege as it is a reward. Welsh is complex and rich, like most beautiful languages are.

With a couple of months rehearsing, vacuuming up the Welsh, once winning the weekly raffle and still watching the 'machinery' it was time to settle on the target date and the pieces for the Audition. The "rules" to it are simple; talk to your Mentor who puts this suggestion to DAS; must do one Welsh song and another from the repertoire; expect to do this at the rehearsal break with a cut down T1, T2, B1, B2 group. I chose *Gwahoddiad* and *Ave Verum*.

So, with nervousness you perform the pieces. DAS listens to you intently of course... and everyone watches. No pressure really! DAS gives you the 'nod' and shakes your hand (which we converted willingly into a hug - he's a St Kilda follower after all), President Kevin hands you the choir tie and the room of choristers applauds and cheers. So, at that point you are indeed "in" ... meaning you're expected to be ready to perform! Goodness me... what have I done?

Performance

My "entry" concert was to be the 30th of October 2022 event in Bendigo (my birthday too). For this we'd been working up to performing with well-known Patsy Cline likeness singer Bernadette Robinson (another of DAS's connections.) That event was cancelled for several reasons including the state being in the grip of flooding. As is happened the Singer of the Year production was shortly to follow on November 5th and that was my first concert.

Again, the thrill of working along-side the up-and-coming SOTY talent with Konrad Olszewski at the piano was sublime. I was to survive my first performance with no permanent injuries... and the B1 friendships intact! There was a 'soiree' at Doug's afterwards and I felt yet more that I was fitting in.

Other concerts followed and always there's the hope of bigger events. The "Boys" talk about the overseas performances - Royal Albert Hall, Canada, Salzburg etc. Would it be possible to have such times again? I hope so.

I've transferred over to the B2's now. It seemed the right thing to do. The solid and dependable Ray is there to mentor. I love singing with this choir and I've made great friends here already, so it doesn't much matter where I fit. This experience has done very positive things for my mental health. I get to leave a lot of unneeded baggage at the door when I walk into rehearsals on Wednesday nights. Preparing for performances is likewise.

Music is therapy and the choir has excellent therapists – all sorts of them!

Musical Direction – the heartbeat of the MMWC

It's impossible to overlook the importance of musical direction. It's all about the music after all and in its infinite artistic, emotional and scientific glory. There's good reason to acknowledge too the bonds between the Welsh language, the Welsh singing tradition and why indeed there is Welsh Nationalism.

David Ashton-Smith with his technical depth and connections, along with Simon at the ivories, ultimately drive to extend this choir in all its facets. That's as obvious today as it was when in April 2022 I 'took a bait' at the St David's Day Concert.

Indeed, one year on I stood confidently and well prepared, singing as a member of the MWMC at the 2023 St David's Day Concert in the ranks of the B2's and enjoyed for myself the thrill and accomplishment that comes from a choir performance and that wonderful reward that comes back at you when a satisfied audience applauds, cheers and smiles.

Want to join our choir

After reading about Mark Coffey's experience after 12 months with the choir, you may be keen to emulate him.

If you are keen, whether you've been involved in music all your life, sing in another choir, or only sing in the shower, please feel free to come along to our rehearsals at Maroondah Federation Estate, 32 Greenwood Avenue, Ringwood and join in the fun and the stimulating learning process, that being a part of the Melbourne Welsh Male Choir is all about.

The choir is open to people of all ages and nationalities and our current and past members include people with Scots, English, Irish, New Zealand, Dutch, French, German, Egyptian, South African, Tongan, Samoan and Australian backgrounds. We even have a Kiwi as the current president!

So, whether you are in your teens or your eighties, provided you pass the (relatively simple) audition, you will be made most welcome.

While our musical heritage is Welsh, and roughly a quarter of our concert programs are Welsh songs (not necessarily all in the Welsh language), we are fundamentally a multicultural choir with probably less than half of us having any Welsh ancestry.

We have an excellent rehearsal facility at Maroondah Federation Estate. It has a grand piano, comfortable seats, good acoustics and facilities for tea and coffee at interval.

In addition, we have the best music director and accompanist combination in Melbourne.

David Ashton-Smith, our Music Director, has a background as an opera singer, teacher and adjudicator, which shows in his coaching of our voice development and projection, as well as his role in teaching us new songs. He is ably assisted by our talented accompanist, **Simon Walters**, himself a music director and arranger of some note.

We have mentors for each vocal section, who look after all the new members, to ensure they are introduced to other members and are properly equipped with the relevant music scores. The mentor oversees the new member for the duration of the probationary period, helps with pitch or pronunciation where appropriate, and answers any questions, they might have.

There is a break for tea or coffee during rehearsals, which gives everyone the opportunity to get involved with other choir members. On the first Wednesday in the month, one of the sections provides the choir and our visitors with (a sometimes sumptuous) supper.

Car parking is plentiful and free, while Ringwood railway station is only a 5-minute walk away.

If you contact us on the phone numbers or email addresses shown in this newsletter, we will respond promptly and arrange for your introduction to the choir. Otherwise, just come along on a Wednesday evening at 7:00 p.m., introduce yourself and you will be made most welcome.

Once you decide to join, we will provide you with access to our web-based aids, which will enable you to learn the songs and practice the individual parts at home. This makes the process of getting up to speed with the Choir's repertoire much easier.

We also have Welsh language sessions, given by some of the Welsh speaking members of the choir, to assist new and existing choristers in the pronunciation and translation of the words of the Welsh songs in our repertoire.

Following some rehearsals and a formal audition, you could be singing in one of our concerts within weeks and possibly joining us on our next tour.

Want to hire the choir?

Anyone who has attended our concerts at major venues such as the Melbourne Recital Centre, Ulumbarra Theatre Bendigo, Hamer Hall and the Melbourne Town Hall, or smaller venues such as our venue for St David's Day Concert (the James Tatoulis Auditorium at MLC), will be aware that the choir has the skills, to produce and run high quality major events.

The choir is available for community, corporate and sporting events, dinners, anniversaries, weddings etc., at most times in the year.

So, if you are, or know of, an organization which might require anything from a short rousing opening to a conference (say) to a full two-hour concert, together with quality guest artists and an orchestra or band (if required), please contact **David Field (0418 175 584)** or any committee member. Please bear in mind that we're talking about a choir of 40+ voices plus a professional music director and accompanist.

We have an eclectic repertoire, a great sound and provide excellent entertainment and value for money.

Would you like to sponsor the choir?

The choir is a not-for-profit organisation and we rely on revenue from concerts, membership fees, sponsorship and donations for our continuing operation. This has obviously been a problem for the choir during the COVID pandemic, when we weren't able to perform in any concerts.

If you would simply like to donate to the choir, please contact any member of the committee. The choir is a registered charitable body and all donations are acknowledged and are tax deductible.

Alternatively, if you have a product or service which you believe might appeal to our audiences, then please contact us and we will be delighted to promote your product in our concerts, marketing material and promotions.

Communicating with the Choir

Feel free to copy or circulate this newsletter to any of your friends and relatives. We are keen to increase our supporter base, so if you would like us to add them to our distribution list, simply let us know their email address. Alternatively, they can subscribe directly to the newsletter via our website:

www.melbournewelshchoir.com.au or via our Facebook page.

We treat all information provided as confidential and subscribers can opt out at any time.

Email is our preferred way of communication with our supporters, so please send us an email and we'll respond promptly to whatever queries you may have. Alternately if you want to speak with the newsletter author about any of the content, please phone him on 0419 562 353.

Your feedback is important to us, so please let us know what you think about the choir, our newsletters, or our recent performances, whether on video or live.

Please introduce us to your friends and be sure to let us know what you might like to see us perform in our future concerts.

Laughter is the best medicine.

Sex after surgery

A recent article in the Daily Post reported that a man, Dave Harper, has sued the St Paul's hospital, saying that after his wife had surgery there, she lost all interest in sex.

A hospital spokesman replied:

"Mrs Harper was admitted for cataract surgery. All we did was correct her eyesight"

Life's rewards

A minister of the church dies and is waiting in line at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him is a guy who's dressed in sunglasses, a loud shirt, leather jacket, and jeans.

Saint Peter addresses this guy "Who are you, so that I may know whether or not to admit you to the Kingdom of Heaven?"

The guy replies "I'm Joe Cohen, taxi-driver, of Noo Yawk City".

Saint Peter consults his list. He smiles and says to the taxi-driver "Take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom".

The taxi-driver goes into Heaven with his robe and staff.

Next, it's the minister's turn. He stands erect and booms out "I am Joseph Snow, pastor of Saint Mary's for the last 43 years".

Saint Peter consults his list. He says to the minister "Take this cotton robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom".

"Just a minute" says the minister. "That man was a taxi-driver and he gets a silken robe and golden staff. How can this be?"

"Up here, we work by results" says Saint Peter.

"While you preached, people slept; while he drove, people prayed".

Crafty Parrot

Fred at last could see a way of making a fortune. After months of hard work, he trained his parrot to tell jokes. At last, he felt ready to cash in on all his hard work, so he took the parrot down to his local pub.

"This is my incredible joke-telling parrot," boasted Fred.

"Go on," jeered the pub regulars. "We'll give you ten to one that your parrot can't tell us a joke."

But try as he could, Fred could not make the parrot talk - let alone tell jokes.

Fred left the pub, dismally, having lost the bet. On the way home he shook the parrot and shouted:

"What do you mean by keeping quiet, you stupid bird? You made me lose a ten to one bet!"

"Ah!" squawked the parrot. "Tomorrow you'll be able to get fifty to one."

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CHOIR DIRECTORY (please note the new positions as of March 2023)

President: Kevin Seerup president@melbournewelshchoir.com.au

Vice-president: Bill Spawton vicepresident@melbournewelshchoir.com.au

Secretary: Michael Kenny secretary@melbournewelshchoir.com.au

Treasurer: Phil Tomlinson treasurer@melbournewelshchoir.com.au

Music Director: David Ashton-Smith OAM

Committee: Richard Bolt, Michael Brandon, Geoff Cooke, David Field, Robert Mits, Ieuan Thomas