



# Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association

## *Newsletter* *March 2026*



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Welcome to the ECOCA Newsletter of March 2026.

This edition opens with a message from our Chair Cressida Parsons following the news of the planned closure of Exeter Cathedral School and transfer of chorister education to Exeter School.

Alongside our regular update on the Cathedral Choir we look back at the history of Exeter Cathedral School with archival material from the period before the Second World War.

The newsletter closes with the memories of recent chorister life from Ginevra Dobson, daughter of retired alto lay vicar Dr Mike Dobson.

Please feel free to get in touch if you want to share any news or memories of your time in the Cathedral Choir by emailing [ecocasecretary@gmail.com](mailto:ecocasecretary@gmail.com).

This newsletter is also published on the ECOCA [website](#), along with all previous editions since 2010.

Matthew Ryan

Old Chorister 1983—1987

# ECOCA Chair Introduction

## Cressida Parsons



It is impossible to begin this newsletter without acknowledging the sad and significant change for our community: the closure of Exeter Cathedral School. Like so many of you, I have felt a real sadness at the news.

For 850 years, ECS was not *just* where we went to school but a place where lifelong friendships were formed, musical excellence nurtured, early mornings began, last minute homework finished, maybe some unwelcome visits to the Headmaster's study came along the way. When we come together on Easter Monday we will of course be acknowledging and giving thanks for ECS.

Amongst the joy of seeing and singing with each other at our reunion, it will also give all of us a chance to focus on why our association matters so much, and to focus our energy on caring for the continued thriving of Exeter Cathedral Choir and its choristers.

Many of you will be aware that, from this coming September, the choristers will be educated at Exeter School, and we look forward to building the strongest possible relationship with them.



Being a chorister evokes an unmistakable sense of belonging to something slightly unusual, sometimes bonkers and undoubtedly something very special. We are the living continuation of that story. We carry the music, the discipline, the humour, the resilience into the present day. In many ways, it feels more important than ever that we stay connected.

I was especially heartened at last year's reunion by the number of ex-girl chorister mums and children who joined us. Seeing different generations together sharing stories, exploring the Cathedral, and creating new memories was a powerful reminder that our community continues to grow and evolve.

I also want to say this directly: if you have lost touch over the years, or perhaps wondered whether ECOCA is still "for you", please know that it absolutely is. Time and distance make no difference here. Whether you left recently or decades ago, whether you have stayed closely involved or not been back at all, you will be welcomed. This community is yours, and there is a place for you in it.

I would so love to see as many of you as possible at the reunion this year on Monday 6 April. It feels important to gather, to reconnect, to honour what has been, and to look forward with hope. If you have been thinking about coming back, perhaps this is the year to do so...

I very much hope to see you there and as ever if you would like to reach out directly please do.

With very best wishes,

Cressida Parsons (nee Peers)

[ecocachair@gmail.com](mailto:ecocachair@gmail.com)

# Easter Monday Reunion

## Charlotte Longhurst

### Honorary Secretary



The guest of honour at our reunion dinner on Easter Monday will be The Very Reverend Dean of Exeter Cathedral, Jonathan Greener. ECOCA subsidises members still in full time

education. We would welcome

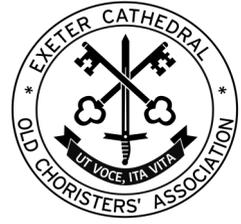
additional prizes for the raffle. If you would like to donate, please get in touch at [ecocasecretary@gmail.com](mailto:ecocasecretary@gmail.com).



## Programme

- 10.30** Practice in the Cathedral
- 11.30** Choral Eucharist. *Mass: Missa Sancti Nicolai – F.J. Haydn. Anthem: Ave verum – Mawby*
- 12.55** Cooked Lunch at the Chantry
- 14.00** Rehearsal in the Cathedral
- 15.00** Evensong. *Introit: Hail, gladdening light – Wood. Canticles: The Gloucester Service – Howells. Anthem: Blessed city, heavenly salem – Bairstow*
- 16.00** Reception in the Cloister
- 17.00** Annual General Meeting in the Chapter House
- 19.00** Dinner at Mercure Southgate Hotel, Southernhay East, EX1 1QF

# Choir News



The Investiture of nine senior choristers took place at Evensong on Sunday 14th September 2025.



This service also marked the Installation of the new Organ Scholar, Michael D'Avanzo.

Michael was a chorister at Hereford Cathedral and has held Organ Scholarships at St David's Cathedral, Southwell Minster and St John's College, Cambridge.



# Choir News

The service included the installation of Adam Long as Lay Vicar (cantoris tenor) and Choral Scholars Toby Hawkins (decani bass) Luke Henson-Baines (cantoris tenor) and Lucie Ireland (cantoris alto). A reception with celebration cake was held after the service in the nave.



Eight new choristers were installed during Evensong on Sunday 11th January 2026. The service was followed by a reception and splendid celebratory cake made by Madeleine Shaw, chorister mother and sister of former chorister Ben Shaw, whom ECOCA members from the early 1980s will remember.



# Cathedral Choir Tour: Normandy and Paris

## Canon James Mustard



The Cathedral Choir had a successful summer tour to Normandy and Paris in 2025. Seventeen choristers from years 7 and 8 joined twelve choir adults and our organists and pastoral staff on a six day tour to our link diocese of Bayeux Lisieux, and Paris.

The Choir gave concerts in Douvres-la Deliverande, Bayeux Cathedral and Rouen Cathedral, and Saint Sulpice and La Madeleine in Paris. The choir presented mixed programmes of anthems to large and appreciative audiences. The acoustics in the churches were a revelation to many of our young singers, who revelled in hearing their voices resonate for many seconds, in contrast to Exeter's drier ambience.

But of course, the social aspect of the tour was as important as the music making. There were trips to the Bayeux Tapestry, the new British Normandy Memorial, the Musee d'Orsay, the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame and a river cruise on a bateau mouche.

In addition, there were some super meals, and choristers were impressively adventurous in trying new foods: moules frites Normandaïse (in cider) was a firm favourite! Many happy memories were made.



This article was originally published in *Cathedral News August 2025*

# Simon Beattie's Choral Music



Simon got in touch to let us know that an album of his choral music has now been released:

<https://www.orchidclassics.com/releases/orc100398-the-world-to-me/>

Simon has been writing choral music for the past twenty years and this disc brings together some of his work. Simon studied modern languages at the University of Exeter, during which time he was a choral scholar in the Cathedral Choir.



Back row members from the 1990s: Simon is fifth from the right

Simon's highly regarded setting of Rowan Williams' poem, 'Advent Calendar', was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 as part of the 2008 Advent carol service from St John's College, Cambridge, and has since been performed on both sides of the Atlantic.

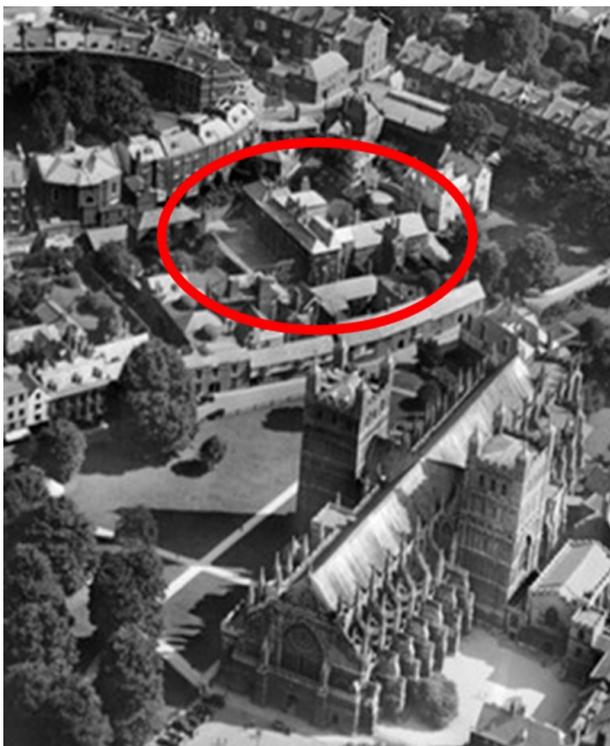
# Exeter Cathedral School History



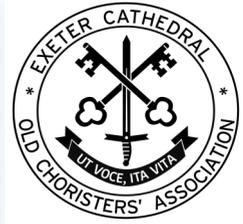
Exeter Cathedral School has its origins in the chorister school established by the late 12th century for the education of the boys who sang in the daily sung services in the Cathedral.

Until the mid-19th century the choristers received their musical tuition from the Cathedral organist, and the boys were instructed in the basics of writing, grammar and arithmetic by visiting teachers.

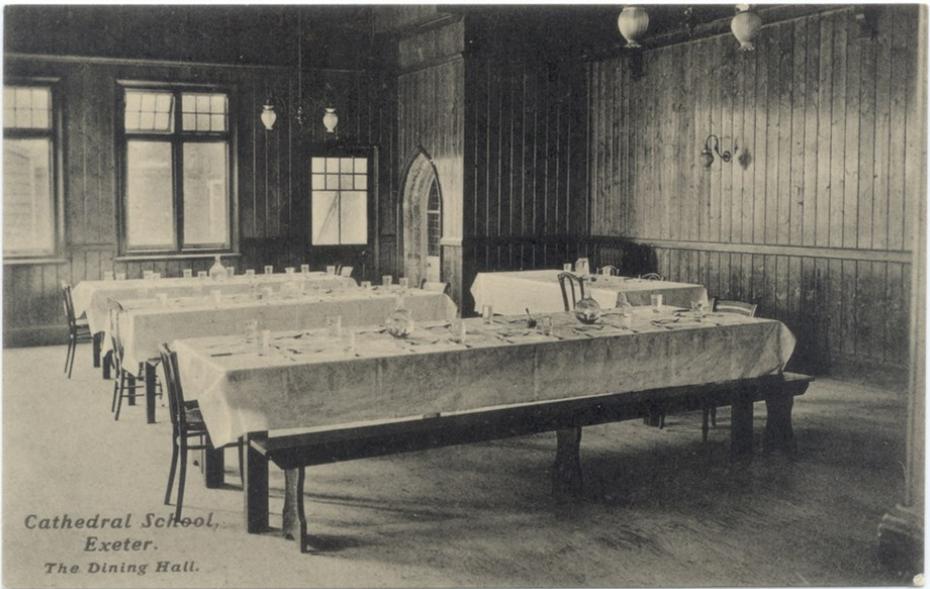
In 1838 a Diocesan Board of Education was set up, establishing an innovative new teacher training institute in a property behind 8 and 9, The Close.



The choristers were taught by the trainee teachers until 1852 when the Dean & Chapter recruited Edmund Foweraker, a 17-year-old student at the training institute, to undertake the choristers' schooling.



In 1856, the training institute building was refitted as a boarding school and the new Cathedral School was established. By that time, in addition to music, the boys were also taught Latin, French, scripture, grammar, literature, arithmetic, algebra, drawing and drill.



Exeter Cathedral School Dining Hall

The school was further expanded in the 1890s, taking private pupils as well as the choristers, and in the early years of the 20th century new buildings were added to provide additional facilities, including a new dining hall, gymnasium and rifle range.



Exeter Cathedral School Gymnasium

The school lay behind houses 9 to 11 on the street on the north side of the Cathedral. It stood on part of the area formerly occupied by the residence of the Archdeacon of Totnes.

Sadly, it was almost totally destroyed by bombing in 1942 ([the ECOCA archive has several images of this](#)). The remains were cleared away after the war and the school was moved across the Close to its current location in Palace Gate.

All that can be seen now of the old school is the entrance from its Cathedral side. This was via a doorway and alleyway between numbers 9 and 10, The Close.

A former chorister, Denis Vercoe, describes the alley and the entrance [in his memoirs](#): "a dark alleyway, lighted by one gas holder; at the head of this lane a door that filled the lane, with a small inner door let into it, admitting us to the Choir School yard itself."



The alley in 1912



The same view in 2025

## Acknowledgements and Sources

The text about the early history of the school comes from an article featuring some of the photos written by Ellie Jones, Exeter Cathedral Archive, published in *Exeter Cathedral Life* 12.3.2021. Further text is drawn from the *Demolition Exeter* website: [The Abbot's Lodge, Cathedral Close](#). The images of the school dining hall, gymnasium and alley in 1912 are in Dr Mike Dobson's archive of cathedral material. Mike took the photo of the same alley in 2025 and published this material on the ECOCA website.

# Leaving a Gift in your Will

## Cressida Parsons, ECOCA Chair



Please consider leaving a gift in your will to the **Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association**

No matter how large or small, every gift makes a lasting difference. By remembering ECOCA in your will, you will help sustain and support Cathedral choristers for generations to come.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of legacy giving in confidence, please contact Cressida Parsons at [ecocachair@gmail.com](mailto:ecocachair@gmail.com) for an informal chat.

As **Exeter Cathedral School** prepares to close, those who had kindly intended to remember the school in their will may wish to review their arrangements. If appropriate, you might consider directing your legacy gift to the Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association, who will ensure continued direct support for the choristers.

### How to Leave a Gift

Leaving a gift is simple. You can provide your solicitor with the following details:

- **Exeter Cathedral Old Choristers' Association Bursary Fund** Charity Number: 258664

# Memories of Chorister Life

## Ginevra Dobson

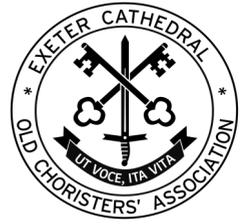
My five years as a chorister at Exeter Cathedral have left me with unforgettable memories and experiences I will treasure forever: from Mr Noon shouting "Time Choristers Please" across the playground to pantomime trips with Sally Sedgman and the countless weekly services. Looking back on my five years in the choir, I have nothing but happy memories.



A very young Ginevra, third from left

Among the many opportunities the Cathedral provided, one stands out above all: performing a solo aria in the St John Passion. Singing such a challenging piece alongside a superb orchestra was an incredible experience I will never forget. The sheer amount of singing I was able to do each week was extraordinary – I was surrounded by my passion, music, with amazing support as I explored and developed it.

Being part of a community where everyone shared the same love for music was truly special. Whether discussing our school day or debating our favourite Mag and Nunc, there was always something to talk about. The friendships I formed during those years remain strong today, and I cherish them deeply.



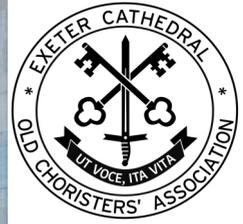
As I grew as a chorister, so did my responsibilities. Having a junior to mentor was particularly rewarding – guiding younger choristers and helping them discover what it means to be part of this tradition created a real sense of family.



Seniors in front of the High Altar: Ginevra is end right.

I now regularly return to the Cathedral to see how everyone is doing and also to sing, and even now, after leaving, I know there are people at the Cathedral who continue to support me.

The school also played a vital role in shaping my experience. From Mr P taking on the challenge of taking thirty energetic teenagers to Dartmoor for Year 8 camp to Mrs Lake-Johns' Year 5 residential (cut short by snow) every trip was memorable. Life at ECS was never dull – whether we were annoying Mr Baurance, playing playground cricket, or doing flag quizzes with Mrs Norris, we were always having fun and were surrounded by wonderful people.



Seniors looking through the stone Quire screen: Ginevra is second from right

Both the Cathedral and school have taught me so many things such as resilience, compassion, and always trying your best. I miss being a chorister so much, and it will forever remain one of the highlights of my life. I am deeply grateful to everyone who supported me then and continues to do so now, and I will always consider the Cathedral a second home.



Ginevra with her brother Freddie and father Dr Mike Dobson

