

The Performance of The Chiltern West Gallery Quire in Meldreth on July 4th 2009

The following is a transcription of the presentation given by the Chiltern West Gallery Quire in the Meldreth Churchyard on July 4th 2009:

Introduction by Eleanor Edwards of Meldreth.

The Eighth Psalm (New Version)

The Quires of English Country churches in the C18th and C19th were drawn up from amongst the local population with an aim to improve the standard of the congregational singing of simple psalm tunes but in many cases their enthusiasm drew them on to more elaborate settings in which the congregation could not join. Preserved in manuscripts and printed collections compiled by the singers themselves, this little known backwater of English music has been rediscovered in recent years and many revival quires have been formed dedicated to exploring what has become of what has become known as 'West Gallery Music'. This name reflects the widespread C18th practice of seating the Quire in a gallery at the west end of the church, a position that allows the sound to project into the church more effectively than choir stalls in the chancel. Both Meldreth and Melbourn Churches had galleries. This Quire, The CWGQ was formed in the autumn of 1993 and meets once a month in Welwyn Garden City.

Psalm 15. Within Thy Tabernacle Lord

In 1994, a member of this Quire visited an antique fair in Biggleswade and found a leather bound book containing church music, some printed and some in manuscript. (This book is currently on display in the church porch). Written in ink on one of the end papers were the words B Hale, Meldreth. The printed pages consist of two collections of anthems by Benjamin Cousins from the late C18th, one bearing the words 'Calculated for Country Quires' on the title page. The manuscript pages contain psalms and anthems in the West gallery style which from other sources can be dated to the period 1750 to 1815. All the pieces we sing this evening come from this book. The manuscript pages are watermarked with the dates 1799 and 1815 and the marks of the papermakers *Edmeads and Pine* and *C Ansell*. Clearly at sometime after 1815 all the pages were brought together and bound. As for B Hale, Meldreth, this is Benjamin Hale, born in 1813, son of Edward Hale of Shepreth, a carpenter and his wife Eleanor. He followed his father as a carpenter and also became a wheel wright. He made the ladder that leads to the bell loft and the funeral bier (which is one display). He lived next door to the church and was the parish clerk as were his son and his grandson after him. He married a Sarah, the same age as himself and had a son, George. Sarah died at the age of 46. Benjamin then married a Mary Ann who died in 1882 aged 70. The tombstones of both of his wives are to be found leaning against the church yard wall. His descendants live here today. Since Benjamin Hale was born in 1813, he was obviously not the original owner of the pages. There are other names written in various places in the book and under the end paper. For example: Ann Stonecleft, Thomas Yules, John Whyte, Conlinge, Grey Leg and the phrase 'J Baker is a Fool'. There were lots of Bakers in Melbourn and some in Meldreth including three James, two Johns and one Joseph. In 1846 the Melbourn Music Society was formed and the founder members included a Janet Baker and two other Bakers, most were labourers but some were tailors. As for the other names, there was a Stonecleft family in Whittlesea St Andrew, near Peterborough, most of whom died in the 1820s, a Thomas Yules in March and a Jonathon Wyatt of Shepreth who died in 1826.

Psalm 21

Psalm 18, In My Trouble I Call Upon The Lord

Anthems were sung by the more ambitious Quires who enjoyed the greater challenge they provided. Whereas the psalms were always sung in one of the metrical versions, usually either the old version of Stonehold and Hopkins, or the new version of Tate and Brady and had several verses, anthems are through composed settings of prose texts.

Originally West Gallery Quires sang unaccompanied, few country churches had organs at that time. As the C18th progressed instruments were added to the Quires, firstly a bassoon or a cello and then violins, oboes, flutes and clarinets depending on what was obtainable. The serpent was also widely used.

In the late C18th, once bands of instruments had become widespread, the music written for Country Quires started to include instrumental introductions and interludes known as symphonies. Music was also changing in style away from the austerity of William Knapp and towards the more florid style, partly as a result of more trained composers joined the movement. The main tune was still sung by the tenors, but this was to change before long and after 1800 most books indicate a soprano lead.

Psalm 81, Be Light and Glad

By the end of the C18th West Gallery Quires were at their height with some 200 collections of psalm tunes and anthems having been published many of which are preserved in the village library. Typically, the singers and players were the craftsmen and traders of the villages as were many of the composers too. JW Riley wrote in *The Country Magazine*, 'Music, though confined to a few, choice spirits beneath fustian and smock frocks played an important part in everyone's lives. Though their music was sometimes flat and sometimes sharp, it was always natural and genial in the highest degree. These old handlers of musical instruments rattling away around the old spirited fugues which had been carefully pricked out with quill pen and ink into their old, chequebook shaped tune-books, that picturesque group was now with countenances beaming with delight over some well turned corner that brought up the rear, now mopping their brows with a bright red handkerchief or touching up the fiddle after a smart finish as a man pats a favourite horse. They had, or thought they had, a special status in the village and their exclusive position up in the gallery during services encouraged their self importance. The instrumentalists played also for dances and some manuscript books have church music at one end and dance music at the other. Military music might also be attempted especially during the Napoleonic wars.

Anthem on Psalm 81, Sing We Merrily followed by a dance – The College Hornpipe

Interval

The Royston & Barkway Volunteers Slow March

The Royston & Barkway Volunteers Quick March

Psalm 148, Ye Boundless Realms of Joy

In the reign of George III, hand spinning was very common in the area around Meldreth. The pay wasn't great, but it was more seemly than young girls and women working in the fields as happened later in the century. The parish accounts showed that wool was supplied in small quantities, apparently by small shop keepers who took the yarn and sold it to agents who took it away to woven in the newly established mills of the north. In 1770 the pay for spinning was poor. A stout girl of 15 or 16 could not earn more than 6d a day. Wool combing and sorting was a little better pay and wagons passé through the village of Meldreth to collect baskets of sorted wool taking it to the mills of Wakefield. In this age too, cattle and sheep were commonly herded. Every morning from May to October, the old herdsman with his horn would be seen making his way to the common land of the village, with each blast of his horn calling cows in their ones and twos from homesteads along the way. By and large, the old ways were followed in the village of Meldreth. The price of the wheat, barley and oats rose steadily during the last years of the eighteenth century and reached high levels around the turn of the century when supplies for the troops away fighting the French was desperately needed. Apart from *1812, which was a famine year in this region, prices almost doubled between 1790 and 1804*, so did the rents and landlords took their share. This lead in turn to a fall in prices as the peace came and together with the introduction of new threshing machines it had a huge impact on this area. For the farm workers in the village of Meldreth and others locally, the machine was what was threatening their work and so, where-ever they found it, the labourers set about it with a vengeance. The number of criminals for trial for malicious damage went up from around 50 per year to a staggering 1245 in 1831. No less than 921 for destroying machines, riots, incendrism and sending letters threatening to burn houses. In Meldreth, the Church Warden, John Burr, remarked: 'Keep up the price of labour or there will always be cause to fear'. Church Wardens and Overseers were hard pressed to keep control of their parishioners who were being driven to riot and all manner of crime in an attempt to put food in the mouths of themselves and their families. Meldreth was no different, and in 1835 the first Royston Union was formed to implement the new poor laws in the town and the 29 surrounding villages of Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex. Meldreth ceased to control it's own parish and the workhouse, the prison, school and the constable, previously shared with it's neighbour Melbourn, became the affair of a much larger authority. To celebrate the new reform, most villages had a 'spirited little set out' and the one at Meldreth had 750 people provided with dinner and the musical amateurs of the village and neighbourhood with their violins, clarinets, horns etc., which they were using to the best of their knowledge gave youthful spirit to the aged and so well was the commemoration of the reform bill conducted that it was admired by all who witnessed it. In the evening they all, ladies, gentlemen and poor, about 400 in number, had a reel together and concluded the evening in a very amiable manner wishing success to reform.

Psalm 96, Fall Down and Worship Ye the Lord

The Farmer's Boy

The manuscript section of the Meldreth book has a number of pages missing, but the contents page makes clear what pieces have been lost and some of these can be recovered from printed collections in the British Library.

Psalm 67, To Bless Thy Chosen Rest

The nineteenth century brought big changes to the Church of England, partly under the influence of Peeble and Newman. Dilapidated buildings were restored or simply rebuilt and new efforts were made to get congregational theme going, not only in country churches where the West Gallery Quires dominated, but also in town churches where often the music was sung only by a choir of charity children with organ accompaniment. Although the Meldreth book contains only tunes of the elaborate type unsuitable for congregational singing, in many places West Gallery Quires did sing plain tunes. However, the new breed of clergy did not like country Quires: 'The conceit of country musicians is intolerable. What I chiefly complain about is every [button] has his favourite solo and Oh, the murder, the profanation, if there be ears devout in the congregation, how they must ache! These anthems should be positively forbidden by authority. Each strived to surpass his neighbour in the [execution], 'till exhausted with the exercise, they gradually ceased and sat down, a smile of congratulation playing about the lips supposing that they have given their new parson a good idea of the manner in which he can anticipate the joys of heaven. It is best to be plain spoken and therefore I say at once that the singers are often the best of the parish. Most revealing is this comment from [H Day Gauntlet]: 'The humble imitation of the ancient Chapel Royal mode of executing the Quire music with addition of brass, wood and stringed instruments which yet remain in country churches and chapels is not of that cast or character as to be all helpful to a deep devotion or spiritual exultation. This shows how the Victorian's view of religion differed from that of the Georgians, who were content to sing to the praise and glory of God.'

Anthem on Issiah 12, Behold God is My Salvation

As the nineteenth century progressed galleries were taken down and replaced with choir stalls. Surpliced choirs were introduced in an attempt to recreate the medieval golden age. 'Glory to God in the Highest' became 'Glory in Excelsis Deo'. Thomas Hardy's novel, 'Under the Greenwood Tree', subtitled 'The Mellstock Choir', tells the story of the disbanding of a Gallery Quire and it's replacement by an organ and the ill-feeling this creates. A story repeated many times in English villages. Often a barrel organ was brought in, avoiding the need for an organist. Here in Meldreth, a barrel organ was installed in 1866 having been brought from Bassingbourn where it was not considered loud enough. The gallery was taken down in the church restoration of 1846 and Benjamin Hale's book somehow disappeared to reappear in 1994 at an antiques fair in Biggleswade.

Rendition of **Jesus Christ Is Risen Today** on the Meldreth Church Organ

A reading of **The Choirmaster's Burial** by Thomas Hardy

A dance for all – **The College Hornpipe**

Website for the West Gallery Music Association: www.wgma.org.uk

Website for the Chiltern West Gallery Quire: www.cwgq.co.uk