

Thorne  
Music and  
Musicians

by

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Thorne Local History Society

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We know little, if anything, about musical developments in Thorne before about 130 years ago. It may be summarised that from early times folk dancing took place, and also the singing of folksongs or broadside ballads. There would, too, be music of some kind at the Parish Church, although we know of no pipe organ there until 1860, when Brindleys of Sheffield built a two manual instrument 'opened' in January 1861 by

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Jeremiah Rogers, Organist of St. George, and his Doncaster Parish Church Choir. Earlier in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, so Dr. Miller informs us in his *History and Antiques of Doncaster and its Vicinity* (1804), a psalmodic or barrel organ had ‘lately’ been ‘put up’ in the Church. Miller approved of such instruments in places where they could not afford to pay an organist’s salary and said that he himself had selected ‘proper music’ (ie appropriate and popular hymns or metrical psalms) for their use, though he does not say whether he had done so in this particular case. [1]

There was an organist at St. Nicholas by 1860, one J Roberts, about whom little is known. His successor, A. L. Peace, was in post for no fewer than 48 years, from 1860-1908. He was succeeded by Edwin Miller (no relation of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Miller), of whom more anon. In 1911 he was succeeded by George Bishop, who left Thorne in 1923; in 1924 Lawrence Ward began an impressive span as Organist which concluded only in 1980. It was quite a while before the organ of 1860 was completed, as in

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1868 efforts were still being made to raise money for that purpose.

However this was eventually accomplished and recitals were given on the instrument, for example in February 1891 by William Wolstenholme, a well known blind concert organist of the day, who played a programme of Guilmont, Gounod. S. S Wesley and arrangements of vocal numbers by Rossini and Frederick Cowen, the latter being by Wolstenholme himself; by Allan Biggs of Patricroft Parish Church and originally a Doncaster resident, on February 6<sup>th</sup> 1898, and by one C. B. Fosbery in May 1899. Miller's recital on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1906 included Hollin's *Concert Overture*, *Chanson d'Ete* (Lemare), Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor*, *Salut d'Amour* (Elgar), *Cantilene* (Salome), *Storm* (Lemmers) and Henry Smart's *Solemn Guard March*.

Interestingly, £40 was raised for the Church by a concert held on 25 January 1882, Not in Thorne but in Doncaster's then fairly new Corn Exchange – a miscellaneous affair of songs, part songs and piano solos with the band of the 1<sup>st</sup> West York Yeomanry playing a selection from

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*The Pirates of Penzance* and the *Polka de Concert* by their conductor Samuel Suckley. How many Thorne residents travelled to Doncaster for this, I wonder?

The Parish Church organ was rebuilt in 1909 by Brindley and Foster of Sheffield, many new stops being added. The most notable month in Lawrence Ward's long tenure of office appears to have been December 1947 when a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* by the sixty voice Special Choir under Ward was followed a few days later by an organ recital in which he played music by Mendelssohn, Gordon Slater, Harold Darke, Walford Davies, Bach, Franck, Dvorak and Sibelius.

So much for the Parish Church's contribution to Thorne's music. Other local churches have played their parts, too. The Methodist Chapel of 1826 acquired an organ in 1862, made by a local builder called Pepper; this was replaced in 1912 by a J.C. Bishop instrument, as rebuilt by Forster and Andrews. This Church saw a performance of Handel's oratorio *Judas Maccabeus* by Stainforth Methodist Church Choir on 29 February 1948. The Methodist Chapel on South

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Parade also had an organ, installed in 1906 – acquired second – hand; this may have dated originally from around 1800 – and sold when the Church closed in 1972.

Much earlier than that, Thorne Congregational Church staged in September 1878 an ambitious choral festival with the aid of instrumentalists (four violins, flute, cello and double bass) and singers from the Sheffield Choral Union to augment the Church's own Choir, in excerpts from *Messiah*, *Judas Maccabeus*, Mendelssohn's St Paul, a Haydn Mass and the '12<sup>th</sup> Mass' (wrongly) attributed to Mozart. Other sacred concerts were given at that church around that time.

From the 1860's, if not earlier, the town saw a number of secular concerts, staged in either the Temperance Hall, Fieldside, or at the Peace Hall, which may have been an alternative name for "The Long Room" behind the Red Lion Inn in Finkle Street. Several of them were under the auspices of Thorne Mechanics' Institute; at first their main content was confined to solo songs of the ballad type. By no means all the performers were local; a Peace Hall concert on January 21<sup>st</sup>

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1864, in the Mechanics' series, featured singers from Leeds, Hull and Huddersfield. At the Temperance Hall on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1882, a miscellaneous concert was given of songs, part-songs and "overtures and selections by the band (ie orchestra) of the Doncaster Musical Society". This particular DMS [2] was conducted by Joseph Eyre, Sheffield-born, who had been heard in Thorne four years before as a vocalist in a concert at the then Thorne Grammar School premises. Eyre's co-singers included Pauline Evison (soprano) whose duet with Eyre was reckoned 'the gem of the evening', C.W Darley of Thorne and a Mr Sanders. This was probably one of a series of annual concerts arranged by the School, as a later one, on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1891, was described as the '17<sup>th</sup> Annual Thorne Grammar School Concert'.

The artistes in this latter concert, held in Thorne Town Hall were a varied bunch – singers from all over Yorkshire, a 'favourite comedian', and to accompany and play a few piano solos, the blind musician William Wolstenholme, already in the town, as we have seen to give an organ recital at the Parish Church. The Travis Girls'

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School also put on concerts, that on 11<sup>th</sup> January 1882 featuring a Thorne Glee Class conducted by Joseph Eyre. A Thorne Glee Union, perhaps the same body re-styled, flourished for a time in the early to mid-1880's; in a concert in 1883 it was said to have nineteen voices. The Thorne Glee and Madrigal Society, mentioned in a concert in April 1892, may have been a further re-naming of the same institution.

By that time, concerts had been given in the Town Hall for some eight years. A Thorne Victoria Band (sometimes the 'Victoria' was omitted) appeared in around 1885 and figured in many subsequent concerts. It is not clear whether this was the same band as the Thorne Temperance Band which was in existence in 1909.



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### The Thorne Temperance Band



The Thorne Temperance Brass Band in front of the Primitive Methodist Church on South Parade. The man with the bass drum is Dick Wilson, a greengrocer, who took the band to outlying villages for concerts on Sundays, in the Summer, on his horse and dray. [3]

Another ensemble, the Thorne String Band, appeared in 1884. It's first, maybe it's only, conductor was a Mr Goodhind and it seems

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probable from the programme of a Town Hall concert of 26<sup>th</sup> December 1889, that's its make-up included wind instruments as well as strings. On that occasion it played the popular (and still popular) *Caliph of Baghdad* overture by Boieldieu and sundry dance movements and accompanied a choir made up of the Parish Church Choir boys and boys from 'Travis's School' (directed by Mr Miller, who later took over the post of organist at the Parish Church) in a sacred cantata *The First Miracle* and excerpts from *Messiah*. Two years before a similar grouping had performed another sacred cantata *Ruth* by Tolhurst, a minor Victorian composer.

I have found no further mention of the 'String Band' after 1889, but regular concerts continued to be given for the next few decades at the Town Hall. Several of them were arranged by the Thorne Liberal Association. Many featured artists known in the musical circles of Doncaster: Asa Litchfield (piano), playing Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schuman, Chopin, Godard and Rubinstein on January 1899 and Handel, Rachmaninoff (the notorious *Prelude in C Sharp Minor*), Beethoven, Grieg, Raff and

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Liszt a year earlier; his brother Claud in 1902, with Gertrude Wesley (harpist/singer) of the famous Wesley family, and Dr Havelock's ladies' Orchestra in 1895.

Havelock, once Organist of Valetta Cathedral (Malta) had found Doncaster's climate to be more temperate and was successively Organist at Christ Church Doncaster and St James' Doncaster. At one time he was organist of six local churches, training their choirs mid – week and leaving the playing of the Sunday services at five of them to his pupils! This was not the only time this pupils gave concerts in Thorne (incidentally the Biggs brothers were once Havelock pupils). The Ladies' Orchestra by the way, comprised violins, cellos, guitars and mandolins, and was in demand to give concerts throughout South Yorkshire.

Around the turn of the century, other nearby towns formed music societies to perform choral and instrumental music, among them – besides Doncaster – Conisbrough, Bawtry and Goole. Thorne was slow to follow their example, but it managed it at last in 1906. This Society remained in being until around 1923, with a

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break during the Great War. It was conducted at first by Miller then, from 1911, by this successor as Parish Church Organist, George Bishop. The (1911 February concert was directed by the Doncaster Organist, conductor and teacher Harry Moore). The usual pattern of their concerts was a medium length choral work in the first half, with a miscellaneous second half of short part-songs, vocal solos and instrumental miniatures. Major works performed included, in 1907 *The Daughter of Jairus* by Stainer, better known for his *Crucifixion*, *The lay of the Bell* (Andreas Romberg: 1908), *The May Queen* (Sterndale Bennett: 1909, 1913) *The Sun Worshippers* Arthur Goring Thomas: 1911, 1922), *Phaudrig Crohoore* (Stanford: 1911), *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* (Coleridge – Taylor: 1912), *Messiah* excerpts (1911), *The Ancient Mariner* (J F Barnett: 1913), and *The Pied Piper of Hamelin* (Parry: 1913, with part of Elgar's *The Banner of St George*).

Most interesting perhaps was the visit of Alfred Gaul, a Birmingham-domiciled composer, to conduct the Society in his cantata *The Holy City* – very popular with choirs at that time – and

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other short choral works, in April 1909. Gaul described the performance as ‘admirable’; his cantata *Una* and two short choral songs had been performed by the Thorne Society the year before. For Gaul’s visit the Society mustered between thirty and forty voices; in 1908 it had 49 singing members, in 1913 fifty. In November 1909 the Society was accompanied by the Goole Brotherhood Orchestra, but it seems probable that from 1911 the orchestra was home-grown, as in 1910 we hear of a Thorne Orchestral Society; in a concert the following year selections from *Cavalleria Rusticana*, *Martha*, *William Tell* and *Il Trovatore* were played.

The Music Society appears to have petered out in the 1920s, probably as a result of Bishop leaving the district, though the 1920s did see other musical initiatives. A Thorne Operatic Society – not the present one – flourished for some years and Thorne Colliery Band was formed in 1927, a few years after the opening of the colliery. The latter closed in 1956, but Thorne’s brass band traditions were sustained thereafter by the Thorne Town Band, which not only gave concerts in and out of doors, but

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organised brass competitions in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The bandstand in the Park, which dates from 1926, when the first concert was given by the Band of the 8<sup>th</sup> King's Royal Irish Hussars, is still in use.

During the past two generations, Thorne's major concert venue has been the Grammar School premises in St Nicholas Road. The School itself put on some notable stage shows of its own – Gilbert and Sullivan, especially.



Thorne Grammar School production of the Mikado in 1949 [4]

In the years after World War II and since 1964 the School Hall has seen the productions of the Thorne Operatic Society. *The Merry Widow* by

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Franz Lehar, was that first show; since then the Society's repertoire has ranged over operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan and enterprisingly, Offenbach (no fewer than three titles *Orpheus in the Underworld*, *La Belle Helene* and *The Grand Duchess of Gerolstein*), older musicals like *The Desert Song* and *The Arcadians*, more recent ones like *South Pacific*, *Salad Days*, *Camelot* and *The Boy Friend*, Christmas Pantomimes and their own reissue of the Second World War years *Barrage Balloons & Bisto*. In recent years the Society has twice promoted concerts featuring the distinguished opera singer Lesley Garrett, born and brought up in the Thorne area and arguably the most celebrated artiste ever to perform in the town.

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Music practice at Thorne Grammar School Mr L Ward (seated at the Piano) was the music master.

To the historian the thirty or forty years prior to 1964-5 seem to have been a quiet period in Thorne's music, but a new venture in 1965 led to what was probably the most notable decade in the town's musical history. This was the formation of a new Music Society on the lines of the successful Stainforth and District Concert Society nearby. Both Societies were in fact affiliated to the Vermuyden Institute of Further



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Education and on occasions they combined in joint events. For some nine years the Society brought to Thorne a wide variety of good music, performed by excellent artistes, many of them leading professionals. Not all the music was classical; there was folk music of various types, from Cy Grant, the Spinners, who came twice, and Leonard Pearcey. Several brass bands, including the famous Black Dyke, figured. Visiting choirs included the Doncaster Wheatsheaf Girls and Wakefield Cathedral Choir. Opera and Ballet – the Opera Players in ‘intimate’ versions of *The Barber of Seville*, *Così Fan Tutte* and *La Bohème*, Pocket Opera and the Ballet Minerva, not to mention a concert party led by Marion Studholme and Philip Langridge performing Viennese operetta – were all heard.

Visiting orchestras included student ensembles from Hull and Bretton Hall (twice) and Doncaster’s Boyce Chamber Orchestra (three times). A distinguished pianist, Iris Loveridge, gave the first recital on 12<sup>th</sup> May 1965; she returned the following year, bringing with her the outstanding oboist Evelyn Rothwell, Lady Barbirolli. Other fine pianists to be heard in

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Thorne were John Lill, Denis Matthews, Margaret Newman, Keith Swallow and Kathleen Jones. Other instrumentalists included Lawrence Turner (violin) for many years leader of the Halle Orchestra (1967), clarinettist Janet Hilton, harpist Elinor Bennett and guitarists Timothy Walker and Julian Byzantine. Visiting singers, besides Marion Studholme and Philip Langridge, included the baritone Frederick Westcott and the late Alfreda Hodgson (contralto).

Programmes were often of unusual interest; one early on (in September 1965) explored American classical music, and I recall a stimulating concert one cold evening in February 1969 by the Robles Trio (harp, viola and flute) including music by Debussy, Charles Spinks and Alan Rawsthorne. Looking down the programmes, one encounters fascinating rarities like Carl Davies' duet song cycle *Harbour Bound* (1967), Ginesta's Piano Sonata (1968), Prokofiev's Second Piano Sonata (1974) and English 18<sup>th</sup> Century concertos by Charles Avison, John Stanley and John Garth (played by the Boyce Orchestra in 1972).

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Unfortunately for the Society, audiences only occasionally approached expectations and financial difficulties forced its winding up in 1975. Yet it did valuable work and created a most enjoyable atmosphere for the music.

Since 1975 Thorne has had no concert society, but useful activity has continued. We have mentioned the Operatic Society. A Thorne and District Male Voice Choir has existed since 1981 and given many concerts; it musters a strength of about thirty voices. The seventies saw a succession of fine Sunday evening band concerts by Championship Section bands at the Grammar School Hall. The student Vermuyden Concert Band, formed by Ray Woodfield in 1975 and attached to the Thorne/Hatfield Music Centre (now in 1993 absorbed into the central William Appleby Centre in Doncaster) give an average of two concerts a year which are well attended, especially the Christmas one. The Sheffield Bach Choir and orchestra performed Messiah, complete, under Dr. Roger Bullivant in the Parish Church. And the Thorne/Moorends Festival in recent summers have had their share of good music.

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Summing up, Thorne's music down the years has exhibited a stimulating variety. Only occasionally have notable names visited the town but against that local people have demonstrated an ingenuity and an industry which have surely created a tradition to inspire future generations of Thorne musicians.

### Notes:

1. page 296
2. The history of various Doncaster Musical Societies is outlined in the author's *Singing Together: The Centenary History of Doncaster & District Choral Society 1888-1988*. (Doncaster Library Service 1988) pp 3-28
3. From Thorne in Times Past by Joan Middleton – Laurie Thorp –Roy Trippitt p25
4. Ibid

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