

THE WYCHWOOD SINGERS - VISIT OF THE PRAGUE HLAHOL CHOIR

HOW IS A DREAM turned into reality? If you dream of exchange visits between a choir in rural West Oxfordshire and Prague, arguably the most beautiful and musical city in Europe, knowing someone there would be useful. One of our members knows someone in Prague who loves music as much as she loves England and was only too willing to co-operate in putting flesh on the bones of such a dream. Thus it was that The Prague Hlahol Choir arrived here on 29th June to meet their hosts, tired, late and probably wondering what awaited them. For many it was their first visit to England and several spoke no English. All but one of the hosts spoke no Czech and so there was a tangible air of apprehension as the visitors decanted themselves at the Milton Village Hall.

"The Prague Hlahol Association for Choral Singing" grew from the hobby of a group of Czechs and was originally only male voices. It was formally established in 1861 and soon became prominent in the cultural life of the Czech Lands, before there was a Czech Nation State. Between 1863 and 1865 the Choirmaster was the composer Bedrich Smetana. The choir owns The Hlahol Hall built by public subscription in 1905, possibly a unique asset for an amateur choir. It is one of the most important buildings in Prague in the Art Nouveau style and is now the equivalent of a "Listed Building".

The continuous existence of the choir has seen good times as well as a period of repression. In 1990, after the 'Velvet Revolution' of 1989, a revival of activities began. The mixed voice choir has 40-50 members conducted by Zdenek Sulc, a teacher at the Prague Conservatoire. They give several concerts in Prague each year and have begun performing abroad.

The visiting choir of 33 and The Wychwood Singers faced an unavoidably hurried rehearsal at The Henry Box School, Witney because of their late arrival. Would two choirs with different backgrounds, from different countries be united instantly in the shared language of music? The answer was "Yes".

The attendance at the concert in Witney, organised by the Witney Rotary Club, was disappointing but the audience soon became aware of the quality of Hlahol and the way in which the two choirs had so quickly blended. The proceeds of the concert were for the refurbishment of the Hlahol Hall. The poor support meant only that the sum raised was smaller than it might have been, but the people of Witney had missed a unique opportunity to hear an outstanding amateur choir and theirs is the greater loss.

The people of the Wychwoods know better and the Hall of Kingham Hill School was full for the concert on the following evening, Saturday 1st July.

Opinions on this concert vary from 'magical' to 'enchanted'. It was a rare occasion for the audience and The Wychwood Singers, listening to and singing with The Hlahol Choir.

However the evening is described, anyone there will remember it for a very long time. Hlahol had won the hearts of many people and an impromptu concert in Shipton Church the following evening, announced at the end of the concert, was very well attended. The retiring collection for The Hlahol Hall raised £256.

The Hlahol Choir never stopped singing. They sang on the ferry, in Cathedrals at Worcester and Wells when they visited as tourists, and by special arrangement in the Chapel of New College, Oxford. They sang at a social on the Monday evening for the choirs, hosts and invited guests. The host choir sang back and finally everyone sang and danced together.

At the Kingham concert Mr. Sulc said that meetings like these are more important for peace and goodwill between nations than the efforts of politicians. That will not be denied by anyone who experienced their visit. A little bit of Prague has been left in the hearts of many people and the homes of their hosts. A little bit of the Wychwoods has been taken back to Prague and there is every possibility that some friendships will last.

All this from a dream, but it would not have been realised without a great deal of work by many people, and the kindness of those who hosted the visitors so warmly and generously. The Wychwoods, and in particular The Wychwood Singers, owe much to these people for making the visit possible. As The Hlahol choir would say "Dekuji vam" – thank you.

And where might The Wychwood Singers be in 1996?

G.P.W



The Prague Hlahol Choir with their interpreter and Peter Wilkinson



Spontaneous singing at the social for the Hlahol Choir in Milton Village Hall

SHIPTON-UNDER-WYCHWOOD EVERGREEN CLUB

Our talk by Mr. Bob Barrett in June proved very popular, when he spoke about his own history in farming as well as Shipton farming history. Many of our members could remember people mentioned and amusing things which had happened. Later in the month we were grateful to our President and his wife for a grand afternoon in their garden, followed by tea with freshly picked strawberries and cream. So far in July we have enjoyed a Mystery Tour around beautiful places, mainly in Gloucestershire, with tea at Evesham.

Our programme for August and September is as follows:-

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| Aug | 2nd | Talk by Trading Standards Officer.
Competition: Six long runner beans. |
| | 16th | Outing to Monmouth. Tea at The Pludds. |
| | 19th | Coffee morning at 4 Coombes Close. |
| | 30th | Talk by Mrs. J. Newman on her collection of handkerchiefs.
Competition: Members' own prettiest hankie. |
| Sept. | 13th | Outing - destination to be decided later. |
| | 27th | Harvest meeting.
Singing by the children of Windrush Valley School. |