

## PRAGUE, MAY 1996. A VISIT TO REMEMBER.

**T**HE PRAGUE SPRING MUSIC Festival runs from May 12 to early June. Among the well-known ensembles in Prague during the Festival were the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra; the Flint Male Voice Choir; Pro Cantione Antigua from London; and the Wychwood Singers.

Many of you will remember the visit in June, 1995, of the Hlahol Choir, who entranced us with the control and the beauty of their singing. This was a return visit by the Wychwood Singers at the invitation of Hlahol.

The tour started disastrously!

On the day before our departure, Michael Broadway, the conductor, had to withdraw because of family illness. On D-Day itself, we lost a tenor on the way to the airport, despite a wait of 45 minutes at Thornhill Park and Ride.

He eventually appeared at Heathrow, just in time to catch the flight, with sets of music, instructions from our conductor, and many abject apologies.

We gave two concerts jointly with the Hlahol Choir. The first was in the magnificent Church of St. Giles, a superb example of a Baroque Catholic Church of the 18th. Century. It was a joy to behold; it was also a great place for singing.

The acoustics were excellent; one very accurate description from a member of the Choir - "Did you notice how, although we'd finished singing, the notes seemed to hang on in the air".

The second concert was in Hlahol's own building, towards which we had raised £1,700 last year. The facilities were excellent - I counted at least four grand pianos - and the Concert Hall itself was very well designed.

At each concert, each choir sang a number of items and then the two choirs joined forces under Zdenec Sulz, the Czech conductor. He speaks no English at all, but he nevertheless conveyed to us, by gesture, expression and body language exactly what he wanted.

The Hlahol Choir, of course, was first class. Inspired by our hosts, the Wychwood Singers also rose to the occasion and performed admirably, drawing generous and prolonged applause from those present. You would have been very proud of us!

For the most part, we were accommodated with members of the Hlahol Choir, their partners and friends. This was an extremely generous gesture, as Prague was still under Communist rule as late as 1989, and the Czech Republic is in the throes of reconstruction and recovery. But we were all shown fabulous hospitality and friendship.

We enjoyed traditional Czech dishes such as their delicious soups, various roasts, in particular pork and chicken, dumplings -and cakes!

We were guided to the right tram, Metro station or meeting place; we were accepted as part of the family and felt very much at home; and as for the language - with the aid of odd words, a phrase book or two, little bits of French and particularly German,

and a great deal of gesticulation, nodding and winking, we all managed.

The wonderful hospitality was exemplified by the sight-seeing tours arranged for us by the Hlahol Choir. We were accompanied on two such trips by their secretary and by an English speaking guide.

Our first tour, which took up most of Friday, covered the east bank of the River Vltava. We saw the National Theatre, Wenceslas Square, the Old Town Square (where we watched the famous astronomical clock strike noon, together with a few hundred others), the Jewish Quarter, the old Jewish Cemetery, and so back (after lunch) to the Hlahol Hall.

The second tour, on Sunday, took in the Castle, the Strahov Monastery, the Archbishop's Palace, the Presidential Palace (including the "Changing of the Guard", Czech style), the Cathedral of St. Vitus, the old Troja Palace, Golden Lane, the Citadel and the British Embassy. Fortified by lunch, we continued down to the Lesser Town, Kampa Island and the Charles Bridge.

Between these fascinating trips, we visited, on Saturday, Konopiste Castle, some 35 miles south of Prague. Formerly the home of Archduke Ferdinand – yes, the same one whose assassination in Sarajevo sparked off the First World War – it is full of his hunting "trophies" – tens of thousands of animals of all kinds, from bears to birds.

On the Monday evening, after our second concert at the Hlahol Hall, we were entertained by the whole choir.

The ladies had made all kinds of goodies, savoury and sweet, while the gentlemen provided beers and wines (poured originally enough from coffee pots into our glasses).

After the eats, Zdenec Sulz took over the piano and the Czech Singers gave rousing performances of traditional Czech songs.

Not to be outdone, Mary Wilson then led the Wychwood Singers, from the piano, in even more spirited renderings of Tipperary, Loch Lomond, Rule Britannia and similar national treasures. We were helped in this by one of our sopranos, who had compiled a list of 37 possible items, each with the words, which was passed feverishly from singer to singer in the midst of a lot of miming.

Honours were even – a draw was a fair result, and there wasn't a penalty shoot-out! What a great party – what a splendid farewell!

We flew back to Heathrow on Tuesday; many of our hosts and hostesses came to see us off, and quite a few tears were shed.

I shall remember for a very long time the kindness, the warmth and the hospitality.

There must be a "next time"; our "resident comedian" has suggested that we celebrate the Millennium with "home and away" fixtures: we invite Hlahol to the Wychwoods, and then visit Prague in return.

In the meantime, rest assured that the Wychwood Singers, your local community choir, walked tall in Prague

D. Iles 10/07/96.