

CHURCH CHOIRS and CHURCH CLOTHES

Choirs were for 80 years or more a vital part of worship. The church choir would be a fellowship, and the larger churches had choir committees, regular meetings and minutes kept by the choir secretary.

One of the circuit churches was concerned in 1905 that its choir numbered only 18, not all of whom turned up regularly. The trustees asked for the choir to be increased to 30 voices; the choir secretary in reply pointed out that it would not be easy to find another 12 singers. The trustees loftily replied that highly trained singers were not necessary and that average voices would do. Two years later the trustees regretted that their request had not been met and instructed the organist "to play in such a manner as to make up the deficiency" Paid soloists were often used in the early days; in 1922 a bass soloist was paid £15 per annum at one church. A choir would have its annual outing with wives, husbands and friends; some fifty people would enjoy a day at Stratford on Avon.

Circuit choirs were formed for the grand occasion- circuit rallies and services. The circuit has been fortunate in having over the years a number of talented musicians, so choosing a conductor to weld assorted choir members into an acceptable whole was not difficult.

The early churches accommodated their choirs in stalls in the chancel or in a balcony area; later on in the second round of church building the choir was not always given a designated area. And later still when chancel areas were cleared to give more space for communicants the choir accommodation was not always in the best place for leading the hymn singing. Congregations like to see the choir as well as hear it!

Choir dress varied from church to church, from uniform gowns to ordinary dress. In the latter case the lady choir members were aware that the congregation was appraising their apparel, and as fashions came and went the choir ladies often set the pace. Hats were required of course, sometimes causing comment as the choir swept in at the start of a service. The ladies in the congregation wore hats too, a feature which began to disappear in the 1960's so that towards the end of the century a hat was a rarity.

Gone, too, are the rows of men's hats in the porch, ranging from top hats and bowlers in 1910 to trilbies "Anthony Edens" and caps in the 1950's. The other dress feature noticeable during a service was, and still is, the tendency for ladies to keep their top coats on in winter while men left theirs in the cloakroom or porch. Improved heating (most churches were rather cool for much of the year) has altered this situation to some degree. Umbrella stands, too, were common in the first quarter of the century at the ends of pews, but these had disappeared in new buildings after 1930.

Sadly, the 80's and 90's saw a gradual diminution in the size of church choirs generally; in many cases services are held without them. The difficulty of finding singers willing to commit themselves to the essential weekday practice and to the subsequent Sunday service has proved insuperable. While choirs can still be gathered for the special occasion, it is a matter of regret that this regular feature of Methodist services seems to be lost forever.