

## LOCAL HISTORY



Past performances at the old Wimbledon Civic Hall and Cannizaro House for the BBC in 1998.

This month sees Wimbledon Choral Society celebrating last year's official centenary with a special performance of Brahms' *Requiem* and Saint-Saëns' *Organ Symphony* at the Royal Festival Hall on 30 March. It's another prestigious event for this proud choir, as TILLY RICHARDSON explains.

Past presidents of the Wimbledon Choral Society have included the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams and Master of the Queen's Music George Malcolm. The current post-holder is tenor Ian Partridge, while past choir members have included Dame Janet Baker, now one of the great international mezzo-sopranos.

Amateur choral societies often employ newly graduated musicians and prize-winners, giving them experience and helping them start their professional careers.

Wimbledon Choral Society celebrated its centenary last year, having given concerts almost continuously since 1914. However, newspaper records show that the first concert was actually much earlier, on 5 April 1880 at the Drill Hall in St George's Road. Tickets cost up to five shillings. It was 'an unqualified success' said the *Wimbledon Courier*.

## Still going strong after a century of song

Many years later on 17 October 1914, Dr G. Coleman Young, a local music professor, organised the choir and music for the ceremony *Salutation to the Belgian Flag* on Wimbledon Common in aid of refugees from World War One. It was a huge success and a follow-up concert took place at the Bath Halls in Latimer Road.

The Wimbledon 1914 Choral Society performed there again on 22 March 1915, making a profit of £5 10s for the refugees. They also sang in November but from 1916 suspended any further activity until the end of the war as ever more members were called up for service. Everything restarted in 1919 and the first post-war concert was on 29 April 1920.

Renamed just Wimbledon Choral Society, it has been singing ever since. Performances to capacity audiences were at the 1500-seat Civic Hall in the town centre from 1935, with three main concerts

there each season, including Handel's *Messiah*. This ended in 1988 with the demolition of the Civic Hall whose roof by then was leaking.

One of the choir's last concerts there was on the night when Wimbledon Football Club won the FA Cup. The hall had been decorated in blue and yellow flowers and choir members were invited to take these home with them.

Wimbledon's MP Sir Cyril Black was president of the Choral Society from 1967 to 1992 and is remembered for always paying for refreshments at the annual general meetings.

Since 1988 the choir's membership of up to 150 singers have been unable to find a suitable permanent local venue. Yet they have gone from strength to strength, performing in most of London's main concert venues.

Highlights have included performances for the annual televised British Legion Festival of Remembrance at the Royal Albert Hall, especially pertinent last year. It also sang *Pavane* by Fauré for the BBC's *Football World Cup 1998* and has performed in television's *Songs of Praise*.

For further information please visit the website [www.wimbledon-choral.org.uk](http://www.wimbledon-choral.org.uk)