

Choral Splendour

Dartington Community Choir Choral Workshop – February 2026 – Buckfast Abbey

Never has a day's singing workshop rattled past at such an exhilarating pace! Caius Lee, Director of College Music at Worcester College, Oxford, and our Music Director for the day, introduced us to a heady repertoire of inter-war Victorian and Edwardian 'bangers' (Caius's words, not mine) which, once melded together with the majestic power of the Buckfast Abbey organ (ably played by Charles Maxtone-Smith) culminated in an hour's superb if, at times, seat-of-the-pants performance of Choral Splendour.

The day began with an extended, and important warm-up. We stretched our bodies and our vowels; our mouths and our tongues were stretched 'north to south', not 'east to west'. We made 'puffy cheeks' and shimmied our lower abdomens, all to try and achieve the sustained tones and the graceful legatos that this music required.

By lunchtime we'd bounced from Bairstow's 'Blessed City, Heavenly Salem' to S.S. Wesley's 'Wash me Thoroughly' (NOT 'thoroughly!'). From John Ireland's 'Greater Love Hath no Man' to William H Harris's 'Strengthen Thee the Weak Hands'.

By mid-afternoon we'd dropped Hubert Parry's 'My Soul, There is a Country' and Herbert Howell's pertinent 'Oh Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem'. Too much, too soon!

The selection of pieces was enhanced from within the Dartington Community Choir by soloists Teresa Stubbs, Wendy Newman, Simon Peck and Matt Hulbert, and from without the choir by soprano Isabella Wagner.

The day drew together singers from choirs across the SW region, from London, Wales and from France. A hundred souls brought together to enjoy a genuinely communal effort. We sang together, we ate together, we rested together. We enjoyed some early Spring sunshine together and we huddled under umbrellas together in the pouring rain as we tried to regain entry to the Abbey's Conference Centre after the concert.

The anticipated planetary alignment went unseen but we all felt its energy.

Huge thanks go to Caius of course, but also to Simon Dunbavand for accompanying our rehearsal, to Carol Robinson and Robyn Roberts who masterminded the arrangements for the day, to the helpers who registered us and moved us from A to B to C and back to A, and to the team at Buckfast Abbey who oiled the wheels with welcome hot drinks and a delicious supper.

Days like this are, for most of us, challenging, engrossing, at times frustrating but ultimately joyful. Thank you to those who took part and to those who came to listen to us. We hope you all went away elated and with the beauty of the music singing in your heads and hearts.

Stephen Bristow