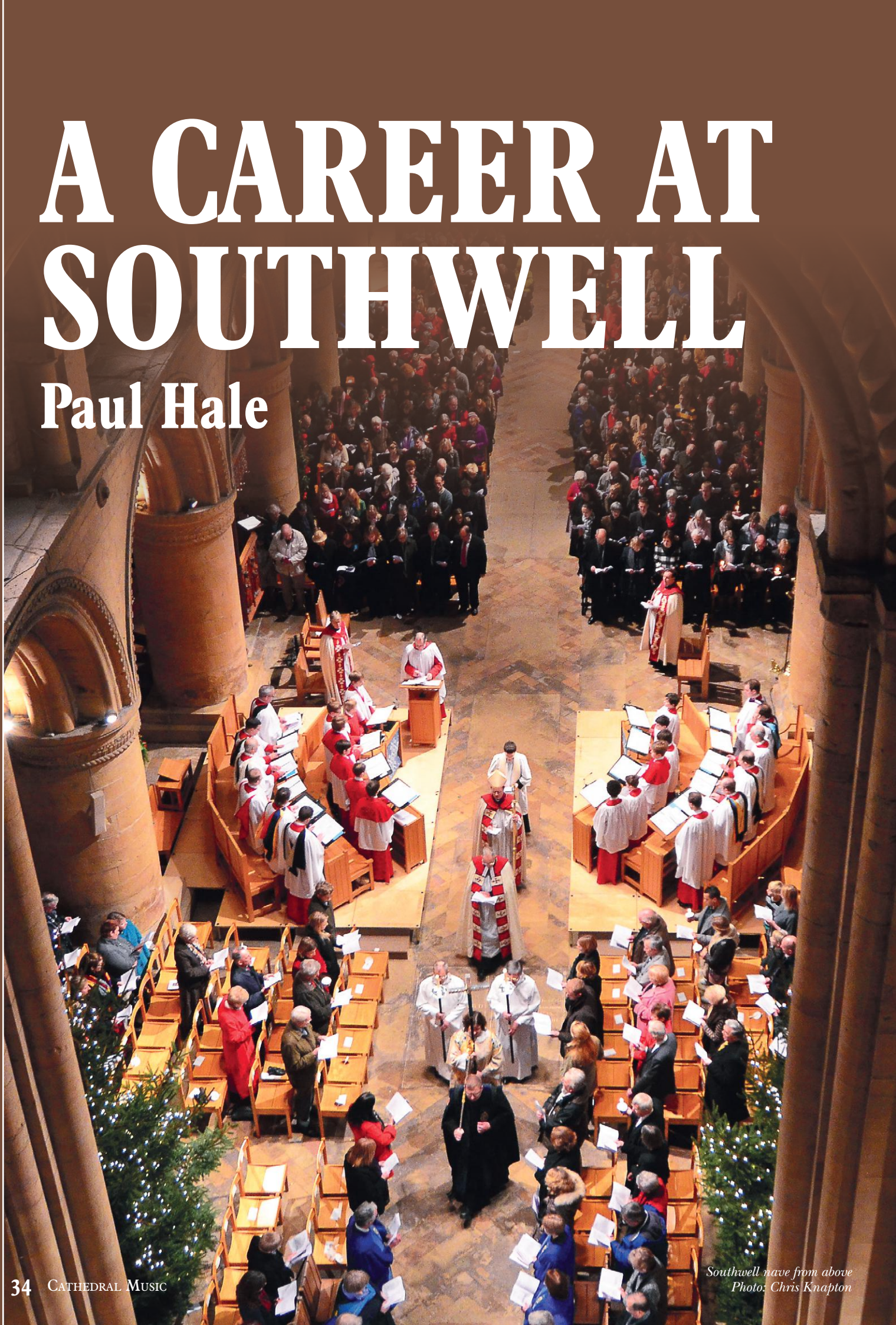


# A CAREER AT SOUTHWELL

Paul Hale





Leaving a cathedral community after some 28 years in post as cathedral organist (*Rector Chori* is Southwell's delightful title) inevitably affords the opportunity for retrospective musings. Some of these are bound to be of the 'What did I manage to achieve?' variety, some of the 'What a relief we got through all those years without any major disasters' variety, some of the 'Phew! It's someone else's responsibility now', some of the 'I'll really miss the...' [in my case, the Advent Procession, Music for Passiontide, and curries with the lay clerks], some of the 'I'll really not miss the ...' [in my case, 'Health & Safety' committee meetings, and worrying whether sufficient potential choristers would apply each year], some of the 'If only I'd managed fully to get to grips with...' [all cathedral organists will have their own list of intractable topics here], and of course 'At last, now I'll have more time to play with my train-set/compose/play the organ' or even, 'At last! Now I'll never have to play the organ again!'

Despite 1988 seeming a long time ago (the year in which GCSEs replaced O-levels, when Margaret Thatcher became the longest-serving British Prime Minister of the 20th century, and tragically when Pan Am Flight 103 was blown out of the sky over Lockerbie) I recall with absolute clarity a conversation I had, concerning the advertised Southwell post, with former Southwell cathedral organist Dr Robert Ashfield. Ashfield had been *Rector Chori* from 1946 to 1956, then moved south to teach at the RCM and live in Rochester as cathedral organist, where I came to know him during the late 1970s and 80s in his retirement. Robert and Mary were always saying nice things about Southwell, and they had a beautiful painting of Vicars' Court; what an idyllic place to live and work, I thought. When the post came vacant I spoke to Robert about it. He said that Southwell was the most beautiful place and that the cathedral and town community were welcoming and supportive. But he also had a few words of caution: (1) 'You'll always find it a challenge to find sufficient boys and men, given the location of Southwell', and (2) 'The Minster has been short of money ever since the Church Commissioners stripped it of its assets in the 1840s.' And of course he was correct; those two problems proved the greatest challenges of all during my years there and have not yet been fully overcome. Nonetheless, I found that with hard work, and an imaginative approach, neither aspect prevented music flourishing in the years I was in post.



*Four Rectors Chori  
Dr Robert Ashfield, Sir David Lumsden,  
Kenneth Beard & Paul Hale*



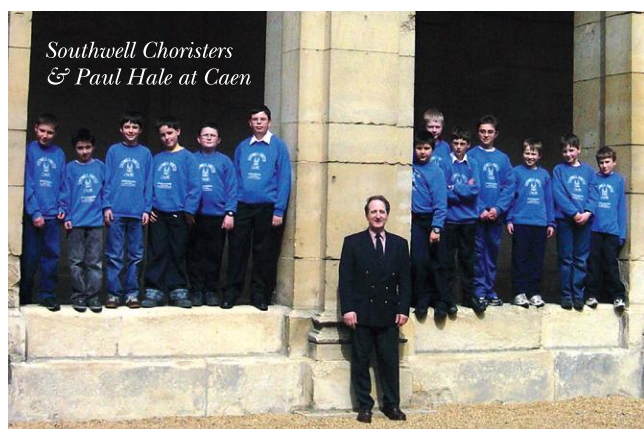
Robert's encouragement for me to apply to Southwell was matched by that of another seminal person in my life, Sir David Lumsden, who was not only my tutor at New College Oxford, where I was his organ scholar from 1971-74, but had also been Ashfield's successor at Southwell before the advent of my immediate predecessor, Kenneth Beard, in 1958. David Lumsden went on from Southwell to direct the music at New College (despite the Minster endeavouring to hang on to him by having a Positive section added to the cathedral organ!), He, like Dr Ashfield, always waxed lyrical about Southwell – even about the rat in the kitchen corridor of 4 Vicars' Court, and especially about Provost Heywood, whom he occasionally led a merry dance. He, too, loved the people at Southwell and still tells the tale of a lay clerk who one day turned over the page in an anthem they were singing, sang two bars of utter gibberish, then resumed his usual accuracy. Asked by Lumsden after the service what had happened at the top of page four the answer was, "Ah well, Dr Lumsden, when I turned the page there was a squashed spider on it, but I didn't realise it was a spider, so I sang it."

My era at the Minster was preluded (and interluded) by three replacements of my left hip joint. The hip became arthritic in the 1980s for no apparent reason. I went to see a surgeon late in 1988 who said – rather to my shock – that it needed replacing (I was only 36); the Southwell position was being advertised just at that time. I thought there was little point in applying, as the hip was so bad I couldn't even get up to the organ loft at Rochester, let alone play, and to conduct I had to sit on a high stool. But apply I did, and at this point the next significant person comes into the story – Provost Murray Irvine. Like all 'parish church' cathedrals at the time, Southwell had a provost rather than a dean. Provost Irvine had been a residentiary canon at Hereford and was a real cathedral person with an affection also for parish work: ideal for Southwell with its local and diocesan communities. Amazingly, when it came to interview he was not remotely fazed by the fact that I could neither stand for very long nor play the organ – all was done in a very civilised fashion in The Residence (the grand house at the east end of Vicars' Court where the provosts/deans live) over several delicious meals and a couple of interviews. I'll never forget being offered the job: my wife and I had to leave Southwell early (they'd rearranged the interview times specially for me) so as to drive back to Rochester in time for a BBC *Songs of Praise* final camera rehearsal at the cathedral. I was conducting and had to be placed in the nave pulpit, sitting on a high stool disguised with

yards of black material because I couldn't stand. The minute we arrived home from Southwell, the phone was ringing. It was Provost Irvine with the wonderful question, "Would you like to come and be our *Rector Chor?*" A fabulous, life-defining moment for Anne and me, then newly-married. That he could put such faith in appointing a cathedral organist whose ability to do the job depended entirely on a hip replacement he was yet to have speaks volumes for Murray Irvine.

If this reflection has so far concentrated on people, that shouldn't be a surprise, for it is people who make the world go round, and people who make a cathedral organist's life easy or hard. So I'll always be grateful to the somewhat ageing lay clerks in 1989, several of whom on my arrival said they realised they needed to retire and would do so, one by one, once I found replacements. That came to pass, and with occasional struggles we have had a full team ever since (of both daily and auxiliary lay clerks); a wide-ranging age group who have always got on well and socialised together, were supportive and helpful to me and my organist colleagues, were 100% dedicated to singing in the Minster, and remain completely without the back-row negativism which can infect some cathedral choirs. Indeed, whenever I was away on cathedral organists' conferences it was always a joy to get back, for the grass is not always greener elsewhere, I soon came to realise.

I was (almost) always blessed with committed and supportive choir parents, particularly since we closed the Minster School's boarding houses some 20 years ago. Their commitment – particularly that of the more distant families – was fantastic; we simply couldn't have functioned without it. When we had to abandon boarding, I contacted colleagues who ran successful cathedral choirs (with a similar daily commitment to ours) with day-boys only – such as Norwich Cathedral and New College Oxford (which used to have boarders). Their advice was simple: "If the parents see excellence in the school and in the choir, and positive advantages for their boys, then they will travel miles to enable them to become part of the music foundation". And so it proved. As a committed educationalist it has always been fascinating for me to see how choristers develop and what they go on to do; I'm always touched by those who come back in their 20s (and now 30s) and tell me just how much the Minster Choir meant to them – especially in retrospect. And of course it delights me that some Southwell choristers are now cathedral organists or assistants themselves, amongst them James Davy (at Chelmsford), Geoffrey Woollatt (no. 2 at Manchester), and Charles Harrison (of Chichester) who was actually my first organ scholar, having been a chorister under my predecessor, Ken Beard.



I started the Southwell organ scholarship so that boys or girls from state schools without the benefit of a school chapel could spend their sixth-form years at the Minster School, studying organ and harmony with me, and playing in the cathedral. This worked until boarding closed, after which it became the gap-year or post-graduate position that it now is. I have been particularly proud to see these young men and women all make great strides in our profession; they play, compose, direct choirs or conduct orchestras all over the world, and it is a real pleasure to be in regular contact with nearly all of them. Several are cathedral organists, most recently two in Wales: Emma Gibbins at Newport and Stephen Moore at Llandaff.

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I had the pleasure of working with five assistants. The first, Peter Wood, had been appointed back in 1958 by David Lumsden, was still loyally playing in 1989, and indeed ran the cathedral's music for the term before I arrived. I much appreciated his very warm welcome to Anne and me and his willingness to adapt to the ways of a newcomer with a distinctly different repertoire and style from that of Ken Beard. My first appointee, Philip Rushforth, fresh from Trinity College Cambridge, shone as our first young assistant since 1958; he moved on to be director of music at Chester Cathedral, to be replaced by the talented Simon Bell, from Westminster Abbey. After a distinguished few years with us Simon moved to Winchester Cathedral and is now at Tewkesbury Abbey. Philip White-Jones came next from Liverpool, Cambridge and Winchester, and then took a unique step for a cathedral organist, that of leaving the profession to become an airline pilot for BA. I suppose flying an Airbus is just like playing the organ – all those buttons, lights, knobs and pedals: and such *power*! Then appeared another Simon – Hogan – from



St Paul's Cathedral, who from the very first impressed us with his all-round musical ability and astonishingly brilliant organ playing. Simon and organ scholar Edward Turner (another former Southwell Chorister, then organ scholar of Worcester College Oxford) ably held the fort for two terms until my successor, the talented Paul Provost, arrived from Guildford Cathedral in April this year. I couldn't possibly have wished for a more wonderful set of colleagues.

Many organists reading this will at some point be thinking, 'So far, so good, but what about the clergy?' Well, I have been blessed with a very appreciative, supportive and collegial group of priests with whom to work day by day. All – provosts, deans, canons, vicars choral and chaplains – regularly expressed pleasure in the music we offered to God, day in and day out, and all helped us deal with the ups and downs of delivering that music.

And now for the next chapter in my life... Coupled with my cathedral choir work has always been a passionate interest in organ design and construction. It was triggered during my years at Solihull School in the 1960s, singing and learning the organ, and has continued unabated ever since. Working as an organ consultant is indeed now pretty well my full-time occupation, along with giving recitals, lectures, conducting choral festivals, directing Nottingham Bach Choir and examining diploma candidates for the Royal College of Organists.

Organ advice was initially sought from me in my twenties, during my first post as Assistant Director of Music at Tonbridge School. But the church would always ask the opinion of someone else, too, just to make sure I wasn't talking rubbish (once the vicar even prayed during an organ project PCC meeting to discern whether God wished them to use guitars rather than have an organ at all). Then in my thirties they stopped asking anyone else, and the number of clients slowly grew. When I reached my forties they started paying me for advice and the significance of some of the projects grew, as cathedrals began to ring me up; in my fifties they started paying me a professional rate, projects of great interest and significance appeared one after the other, and I gave up being Editor of the IAO's *Organists' Review* as there simply wasn't the time for everything any more. Reaching the age of 60 in 2012, I came to realise that there would come a point at which I would have to decide between one major strand of my work and the other, and so I abandoned directing cathedral music and am instead consulting on organs and giving recitals and talks. The diary is now quite full enough!

Curiously, I've not left the cathedral world itself at all – quite the opposite, for at the time of writing I find I have 15 cathedrals (in England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland – and New Zealand) as current clients, for projects small and great. What a privilege it is to remain so creatively involved in cathedral music!



Southwell Minster Choir, July 2016