

The Church Band at Swalcliffe

By MAURICE BYRNE

THE origin of church bands in England is generally traced to the late 17th century following the destruction of organs in churches by the Puritans, but as very few places have records of the forming of their bands little is known definitely.¹ It is fortunate, therefore, that there has recently been an opportunity to examine the 'Swalcliffe Singers Book' which records in some detail the setting up of a band in the church in 1783 and also throws light on certain aspects of musical life in London.²

Swalcliffe in the late 18th century was one of the largest of the North Oxfordshire parishes with villages at Swalcliffe itself and at the Sibfords, Shutford and Epwell. The parish was prosperous: an influential Quaker population centred on the Sibfords and a flourishing community of weavers was well-established. The parish church was 'large and beautiful' according to Rawlinson in 1718³ and presumably had the western gallery which was removed in the 19th century. There was already an interest in music and a company of at least 14 singers sang in the church and were the prime movers behind the project to form a band to accompany them. Three of their members, Thomas Walker junior and James Colcutt junior of Sibford Ferris and William Hains of Sibford Gower, undertook the organization of the band and the raising of the funds and became the chief instrumentalists. Presumably this was by no means exceptional in Oxfordshire parishes for in 1781 the churchwardens of Ambrosden paid for a bassoon and hautboy from Oxford and in 1786 Tadmarton, the neighbouring parish to Swalcliffe, bought bassoon reeds.⁴ In Swalcliffe, however, the organizers, obviously wishing to have things on a proper basis, drew up their accounts carefully and deposited them with the vicar John Caswell: 'to be deposited and kept with the Records of the church for a memorandum that the above instruments are to be kept for

¹ The only work dealing with the subject is K. H. MacDermott, *The Old Gallery Minstrels* (London 1948).

² Swalcliffe parish records. My thanks are due to Miss Marjorie Jones who brought these records to my attention and who has given much valuable advice in the writing of this article. I am also grateful to the Vicar of Swalcliffe for permission to use the records.

³ *Parochial Collections* (O.R.S. ii), 291.

⁴ Ambrosden Par. Rec. Churchwardens acct. bk., where there are also records of the band up to 1834, implemented with violoncello and clarinet; Tadmarton Par. Rec. Churchwardens acct. bk.

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the sole use of Swalcliffe Choir for the time being for ever'. The records preserved consist of a subscription list of 1783 of the funds raised to buy an hoboy, a vox humana and a bassoon; a letter from a London agent J. Tett who was responsible for buying and looking over the instruments; the receipts from the makers and suppliers; a formal bill of the money spent on instruments and accessories; and a later subscription list of 1785 when a bass viol was bought for the band.

The enterprise had the blessing of two influential residents, the vicar and Thomas Walford, Esq., the latter being a member of a prominent family in North Oxfordshire local affairs and with a house in Sibford Gower⁵: they both subscribed one guinea, while other subscriptions were for between 6*d.* and 4*s.* 6*d.* In all £7 15*s.* 9*d.* was raised from the four villages of Swalcliffe, Sibford Ferris, Sibford Gower and Burdrop, and 66 persons gave money; Shutford and Epwell did not join in, presumably because they were served by their own chapels. The organizers bought the wind instruments from London through an agent J. Tett, who was keeper of the King's Arms off Oxford Street and himself a singer in the Portland chapel, and they were brought up to Swalcliffe by Mr. Bellenger's waggon, which left Holborn twice weekly for Woodstock.⁶ The subscription in 1785 was from the same villages and raised £2 2*s.* for a bass viol, i.e. violoncello, which was apparently bought locally.

Surviving 18th-century instruments enable the Swalcliffe ones to be pictured. The oboe was probably similar to the one by Kusder of London, which is preserved in the Pitt Rivers Museum, where there is also a contemporary reed case.⁷ The vox humana was a specifically English form of the cor anglais, and was quite plain and without a separate bell.⁸ The record of the bassoon is of great interest in that Tett's letter mentions an additional spring as being an innovation and consequently gives a date not previously known for the introduction of an extra key. It is not clear, however, whether it implies that the Swalcliffe bassoon was a five-keyed instrument: English bassoons of this period are generally either four-keyed or six-keyed with the extra keys for low E \flat and F \sharp ; five-keyed bassoons are rare and usually it is found that the fifth key is a contemporary addition.⁹ The introduction to the bassoon, which the band also bought, was perhaps similar to one recently discovered, and the scale or fingering chart for the vox humana may have

⁵ For him see, e.g. O.R.O. Misc. Br. I/IV/1, 8.

⁶ 1790 *Universal Directory*.

⁷ Eric Halfpenny, 'The English 2 and 3 keyed Hautboy', *Galpin Soc. Jnl.* ii. 10.

⁸ Halfpenny, 'The Tenner Hoboy', *Galpin Soc. Jnl.* v. 17. For illustration of a Collier vox humana in the Glen Collection, Glasgow Museum, see *ibid.* p. 16, pl. 1b.

⁹ Halfpenny, 'The Evolution of the Bassoon in England 1750-1800', *Galpin Soc. Jnl.* x. 30; There is an example of a five keyed bassoon in Luton Museum: *Catalogue of the Ridley Collection of musical wind instruments in the Luton Museum* (Luton 1957), 28; illustrated: front facing p. 13; back facing p. 20.

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been that issued under the name of Thomas Stanesby junior and published by Longman, Lukey and Co. (1769-75), price 6d.¹⁰ The composition of the band is intriguing. Whilst there is no evidence that it would have performed as a separate unit—all pictures of church bands show the players amongst the singers and sharing their parts—an undated bill shows reeds supplied to four of the singers for two oboes, one vox humana and one bassoon. These would make up a four-part reed band of the kind well known in France at the beginning of the 18th century.¹¹

The fact that the Swalcliffe musicians bought their instruments from London rather than from Oxford like their Ambrosden counterparts gives further interest to the records, for they provide new information about the activities of London instrument makers and suppliers. Thomas Collier who supplied the vox humana is given an address for the first time—at 20 Chandos St., i.e. the 'Two Flutes and Hautboy', where he moved in 1767. He succeeded the maker Charles Schuchart, who was there from 1764-5, and himself was succeeded after his death in 1785 by the flute maker John Hale who held the premises until 1804.¹² Samuel Babb who supplied the oboe was a music publisher and seller from about 1770-86 at 132 Oxford St., facing Hanover Square,¹³ but Thomas Hogg who supplied the bassoon is not recorded elsewhere as a musical dealer or maker. Two local musical dealers or players featured in the transactions. The J. Tustain to whom Walker made payment for the bass viol was perhaps John son of Sam. Tustain, victualler, of Banbury (d. 1748), while Mr. Dundass who supplied the bassoon reed may have been William Dundass son of George Dundass, sadler, of Banbury (d. 1765).¹⁴

Little is known about the musical enthusiasts in Swalcliffe itself, but it is interesting to note that they are drawn from the lower and industrial classes and can be identified in local records of this date as belonging to long-established local families. The chief organizer was Thomas Walker to whom Tett wrote from London. An undated bill shows that he played the bassoon and his brother Joseph the vox humana. Thomas, born in 1750 and dying in 1818, was the elder; he was a weaver and in 1814 supplied the church with a set of six bell ropes.¹⁵ His brother Joseph was a wool comber and their father,

¹⁰ *Galpin Soc. Jnl.* v. pl. III; and Halfpenny in forthcoming *Galpin Soc. Jnl.*

¹¹ See Phillidor MS. in Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

¹² Westminster Public Lib. Bedfordbury Ward Poor Rate Book F 550, p. 38; F 534, p. E 7; F 546, p. C 37; St. Martin in the Fields Par. Rec. Reg. of Burials, 13 June 1785; F. Kidson, *British Music Publishers* (London 1900), 114; L. G. Langill, *An Index of Musical Wind Instrument Makers* (2nd ed. Edinburgh 1962), 47.

¹³ Chas. Humphries and William C. Smith, *Music Publishing in the British Isles* (London 1954), 58.

¹⁴ *Index to Banbury Wills* (O.H.S. xl); Bodl. MSS. Wills Oxon. Peculiars 53/4/23; 37/2/34.

¹⁵ Bodl. MSS. Oxf. Dioc. pps. d 444; c 614; Swalcliffe Par. Rec. Subscription List, 1783, and Chwdns' accts.

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Thomas Walker senior (d. 1805), was a hemp and flax dresser.¹⁶ There were other Walkers in the parish, some indeed supported by the parish, but if the musical Walkers were connected with Nathaniel Walker the schoolmaster (d. 1770) perhaps their cultural tastes can be explained.¹⁷ James Colcutt who helped to collect funds again came of a weaver's family.¹⁸ William Fortnum, however, who was supplied with reeds, seems to have been a shopkeeper, and William Hains (Haynes), who played the oboe, a labourer.¹⁹

The band seems to have kept going until at least 1815 and Thomas Walker with it : there is a bill for payment to him for reeds and repairs to the bassoon in that year. The final dissolution of the band is recorded by the Reverend Edward Payne (1837-86) : 'in 1842 a small but well toned organ was placed in the existing Western Gallery of Swalcliffe Church displacing a violoncello, clarinette and all kinds of music.'²⁰

APPENDIX : SWALCLIFFE SINGERS DOCUMENTS (1783)

London December 13th

1. Mr. Walker youl find the Receipts for the Instrument round the read Cacis they belong to I am sorry you have waited so long but I hope for the Best as I think you have a Compleat Set of Instrument your bassoon has an adishennal Spring which they are now made with and youl find it a full tone & a good pice of work should any thing be wanting to it or out of order Mr. Hogg will put it to Rights at any time Should any thing Ther be wanting I will send it by the same waginyer by an order from you and am your serv^t Jo^h Tett

	<i>s</i>	<i>d</i>
I paid for Three Read Cacis	4	6
To Three Hoboy reads	2	0
Packing Case	1	6
	8	0

I am disapointed in sending your Scale and pen to rule lines but will send them next week.

¹⁶ Bodl. MS. Oxf. Dioc. pps. d 444 ; Bodl. MS. Wills Oxon. 101, p. 405.

¹⁷ Bodl. MS. d. d. Par. Sibford Gower b 1 ; Bodl. MS. Wills Oxon. Peculiar 82/2/21.

¹⁸ Bodl. MS. d. d. Par. Sibford Gower b 1 (1791) ; O.R.O. Misc. Br. I/iv/1.

¹⁹ Bodl. MS. Oxf. Dioc. pps. d 444 ; d 445 ; c 614.

²⁰ Swalcliffe Par. Rec.

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2. A Bill of the Instruments & Articles belonging to them

To a Bassoon £5 : 5 : 0	£5 : 5 : 0
To a Reed Case to D ^o 1/6d	1 : 6
To a Vox Humana 18s	0 : 18 : 0
To a Reed Case to D ^o 1/6d	0 : 1 : 6
To a Hautboy 10/6	0 : 10 : 6
To a Reed Case to D ^o 1/6 3 reeds at 8d per reed	0 : 3 : 6
To an Introduction to the Bassoon 1/6d	0 : 1 : 6
To D ^o to the Hautboy 2s the cost may be seen in the Title Page of each Book	0 : 2 : 0
To a scale to the Vox Humana 6d	0 : 0 : 6
To Mr. Bellengers Charge for Carriage 1/6d	0 : 1 : 6
The above come at twice p ^d James Boonham for carriage	0 : 0 : 6
To the Case or Box as the Instruments was sent in	0 : 1 : 6
Bo ^l of Mr Dundass Banbury 1 Bassoon reed at 1/2d	0 : 1 : 2
To 2 D ^o for the Hautboy at 7d per D ^o 1 for the Vox Humana at 8d	0 : 1 : 10
Bo ^l of Mr. W ^m Page a Fat Goose & sent it to Mr Jo ^h Tett as a Reward for purchasing & proving the Instruments	0 : 2 : 6
The Basket as it was sent in & Carriage to London	0 : 1 : 3
	£7 : 14 : 3

for the truth of the above Charges the Original Bills are annexed if a further Confirmation is requested application may be made to Mr Jo^h Tett one of the Singers in Portland Chappel Choir & Keeper of the Kings Arms Inn near the Pantheon Oxford Street London who pay'd for & prov'd the Instruments for the rest apply to the different Parties concern'd