

Trevor Cowlett (right) with members of the Kennington and District United Church Choirs

Photograph: Philip Hind



The choir master

Sylvia Vetta meets Trevor Cowlett, a man who conquered crippling agoraphobia to lead one of Oxford's leading choirs

Trevor Cowlett is the founder and musical director of Kennington and District United Church Choirs. He formed the 70-strong choir at the end of 1973.

Over more than 40 years his organisation has raised a total of more than £432,000 for local, national and international charities – an amazing achievement for an amateur choir.

But, for 30 years, Trevor was a prisoner in his own home, suffering from severe agoraphobia. “Sometimes even going into the garden was difficult. I would start sweating and break out in utter panic,” he revealed.

Trevor eventually successfully conquered his phobia and now enjoys travelling the world, but his journey began in Twickenham in 1932.

He said: “My father, Albert, belonged to the local philharmonic society. He worked for the Metropolitan Police Orphans Fund and his job was to visit police widows and to make sure they were financially secure.

“My mother, Elsie, saw it as her job to look after the family including my only sibling – Douglas, 12 years older than me. We had a

piano and I played it as often as I could. At five years of age it was deemed that I should have lessons.

“When the Second World War began, my mother declared that we should move to the village of Lane End in the Chilterns, where most of her family lived. There I discovered that I had five aunts and uncles and numerous cousins. My uncle Bern owned a large furniture factory in the middle of the village and I spent hours watching the work and getting in everyone’s way.”

Lane End also saw Trevor begin an enduring musical love affair.

“The Methodist chapel in the village bought a new pipe organ with pedal board. They were proud of it and, lo and behold, one of my aunts was organist,” he said.

“Knowing my interest in the piano she asked if I would like to try the organ. It was love at first sight. Indeed an organ has to be a priority for Oxtopia.

“My parents arranged for me to have professional lessons with Owen Hickman, then the borough organist of High Wycombe. It was not long before I was helping him out with



In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.

appointments around the town.”

Then the Congregational Church at Bourne End advertised for a church organist.

“Owen suggested I apply and, at the tender age of 12, I found myself in charge of a pipe organ and a choir of about 20. Most of our church organists were in the forces so I was in great demand,” Trevor recalled.

“When the Americans joined the war and arrived in High Wycombe, many girls were smitten so weddings were popular. I must have played for a wedding in almost every parish church in the county. Organists were like gold dust.

“In 1946, approaching my 14th birthday I became the organist at Trinity Congregational Church in High Wycombe, which had a lovely Father Willis organ and a choir of about 30.”

Trevor passed all his piano exams and everything went well for the precocious young musician until the war ended. His parents returned to London and Trevor became a boarder at The Royal Grammar School. That is when his troubles began.

“I gave a short organ recital before the Sunday evening service and came to the

attention of a young lady of about my age who sang in the choir and we became friendly. We liked to go shopping on a Saturday afternoon or visit the cinema,” Trevor said.

“I was upset when the school prohibited me, as a boarder, from seeing her saying she would hold up my Oxbridge hopes and that boarders were not allowed out with girlfriends at weekends.”

Trevor was a sensitive young man and the bullying experience affected him deeply.

He recalls: “Pressure was put upon the church and upon my parents to break up the relationship. I was made to quit the church organist post. You can imagine the shock.

“I was hoping for an Oxbridge music or organ scholarship in a couple of years and the school was not supporting me. I panicked and experienced a combination of agoraphobia and claustrophobia – which has never really left me.

“The powers that be relented a little (realising that they had made a great mess of things) by allowing me to take a temporary post at Gerrards Cross Parish Church and then at Terriers Parish Church.

“It was here that my choir was offered two weeks at York Minster to sing while the Minster choir was on holiday. I enjoyed getting to know Francis Jackson, the Minster organist who gave me great encouragement and the freedom of the Minster organ. But my playing had suffered and how I won a place to Oxford I do not know.”

From 1950 to 1952 Trevor did National Service in the Royal Air Force at RAF Wattisham, in charge of telecommunications and thus free from many parades which suited his mental state.

Before doing his National Service, Trevor finally got his scholarship to Oxford. At Hertford College, he founded a choir bringing in young women from the ladies’ colleges.

Trevor said: “I was lucky to have among my tutors Sir Jack Westrup who was the Heather Professor of Music and a walking encyclopaedia on early Italian opera, which he produced each year at Oxford Town Hall.

“I studied composition with Dr Bernard Rose who at that time was at The Queen’s College.

My third tutor was Sir Thomas Armstrong, who

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**Trevor Cowlett at
Exeter College, Oxford**

Photograph: Philip Hind

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was Choragus (choir leader) at Christ Church. A formidable trinity!

"But by the time I reached finals, my health had deteriorated and I took exams in the Warneford Hospital where I achieved a sad third."

As a result Trevor's career plans were put on hold – but he had one lucky break during vacation back in Twickenham. He met a young lady called Brenda Williams.

"Throwing caution to the winds we decided to marry," he said "So it was, on July 23, 1955, that the ceremony took place in the Methodist Church in Rose Hill, Oxford. We moved to a ground-floor flat in the Woodstock Road.

"Brenda was a teacher. There was a vacancy at St Swithuns Cof E Primary school in Kennington. She applied for the job and cycled to work each day."

At the time new houses were being built in Bagley Close and Trevor had his eye on one.

He said: "One of my uncles came to the rescue and put down the deposit for us which we paid back in three years."

So 159 Bagley Close became the family

home of the Cowletts in May 1956.

"Our first years in Kennington were domestic. No sooner had we arrived than our son David was born at the end of May.

"My health seemed to be improving so I applied for the post as head of music at Larkmead School in Abingdon and got it. I was there from 1957 to 1962 when my health let me down again and I was more or less confined to the house. Our son Peter was born in 1960, and daughter Mary in 1965."

Although the phobia confined him, it did not curtail his musical ambitions.

Trevor helped with a project which led to the revival of the performance of Handel's operas. The composer founded opera companies to perform his works but, after the success of *Messiah*, in 1742, he never performed another opera. Handel's operas went out of favour as his choral works flourished.

Trevor said: "When all the Abingdon schools came together for a concert, I met Francis Kitchen who taught at Our Lady's. She introduced me to her husband Alan who wanted to create the Unicorn Theatre in

Abingdon as a place to stage the early Handel operas. The little theatre was designed with balconies from which the gods could look down on the mortals. In 1959, we inaugurated the series of performances of neglected operas by Handel. It led to them being revived nationally. So a first for Abingdon!"

Meanwhile, in Kennington, Methodists had begun meeting in various homes around the village but Trevor and a few other villagers had the ambition to build a church.

"We had no money and we had no land," he said. "But the determination was there – sales of work, a Saturday morning market stall, selling bricks – everything you can think of. Edith Gandy offered us the paddock at the back of her bungalow in Upper Road where the church now stands.

"Planning permission was turned down more than once. But we got the Oxford Methodist Circuit on our side and Synod gave its permission. The Methodist Connexion came up with some funds and we opened on

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Saturday, October 29, 1967, free from debt.

"Then my health got worse until I got to the point where I could not bear Brenda to leave the house. She resigned from Kennington School and we set up a nursery school in our home which ran from 1964 right up to 1983. I also gave music lessons at home and still do."

In 1973 an ecumenical idea was gaining ground to form a choir made up of members from each of the three Kennington churches. It began with a United Carol Service. Kennington and District United Church Choirs was formed and Trevor was asked to take it on.

Its home in the Methodist Church was appropriate since Methodism was born in song. Charles Wesley, the brother of founder John, wrote more than 6,000 rousing hymns.

Trevor said: "With my agoraphobia this was hard. For the first concert in 1974, I conducted from the main doors from where I could easily escape. I was awash with perspiration but it was a success. People wanted more. Could we do something for Easter? We gave a performance of Stainer's *Crucifixion*."

The choir grew with singers coming from all over Oxford. And in 1974, Trevor was asked if the choir could stage a performance of the *Messiah*.

"We did," he said. "But I continued conducting from the main doors. We have a held a 'sing-in' *Messiah* every autumn since then. Anyone can come and join in. The following year we sang Mendelssohn's *Elijah* in the summer."

The choir's programme became ever more ambitious, but they had to restrict their ambitions as Trevor began to experience minor anxiety attacks more frequently.

Then they became more intense.

"I began to feel an absolute dread of open space, Trevor said. "I found it difficult to go further than 100 yards from our home without feeling a tremendous urge to retreat inside."

The choir had invitations to sing in all over the county and Trevor was left wondering how he would be able to get to the concerts and decided to undertake behaviour therapy.

He said: "It helped me understand the condition, but I could not overcome it. I did not get to meet others who faced the same problem – it was a practical impossibility.

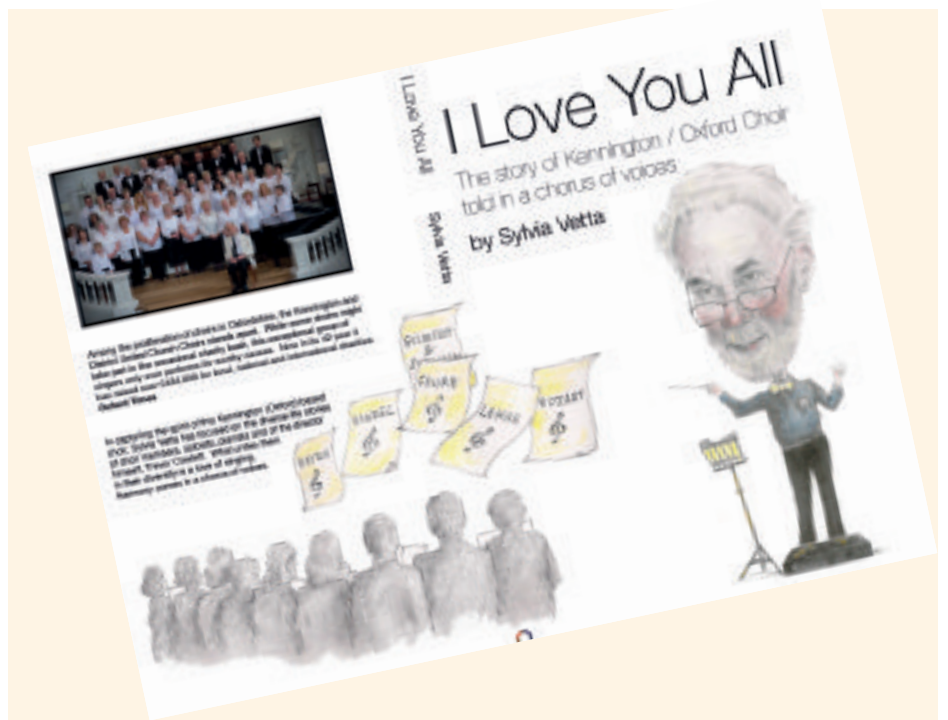
"Brenda suggested buying a minivan and making it an extension of our home. It worked in as much as I stayed inside while Brenda went shopping."

In 1983, the old van packed up after years of service.

"We decided to try a smaller car – a Mini Metro," Trevor said. "That was the beginning of an about turn. We drove a bit further each day and within six months my feelings of agoraphobia had eased. For reasons which I have never been able to explain my health began to improve.

"I wanted to travel beyond Kennington and explore. In 1984, we got to the seaside for the first time in nearly 30 years. In 1989, we took the first of our cruises to the Mediterranean. Life had suddenly blossomed and for the first time ever, I experienced real joy and happiness."

An Oxford graduate (from Hertford College), Trevor is a talented musician and teacher of music. He cannot remember exactly how many young people he has taught but believes it is well over 1,000. Many of them have gone on to



LAST year Kennington and District United Church Choirs choir celebrated 40 years of singing.

Choir member Julie Earl had kept meticulous records over those years and asked me if I would help them produce a book. It will be launched on Trevor's 83rd birthday on Saturday, May 2, at 3.30pm in Kennington Village Centre to celebrate his life devoted to music (teas from 2.30pm) and on April 19, the choir will sing in

Exeter College chapel a rarely performed work Durufle's *Requiem*.

This year the choir will be celebrating its achievements in a book to be released in May. Called *I Love You All — The story of a choir told in a chorus of voices*, it shows how a choir can bring together a group of people from diverse backgrounds to sing in harmony.

It can be bought or ordered from Mostly Books in Stert Street, Abingdon.

have careers in music – one, Matt Winkworth, recently won a prize for writing a musical.

For Trevor, music can enrich the life of everyone – so choir members and pupils just need the desire to sing or play the piano or organ.

"No-one in the choir is a professional singer," he explained. "Some have never sung before, some cannot read music. But the choir is open to everyone. There are no auditions and believe it or not, no subscriptions. The choir bears all its own expenses. Never is a penny taken from the charity collection. If we are running short of cash, I simply ask and it is always forthcoming."

When Trevor's wife Brenda died in 1995, the choir rallied around to support Trevor through that difficult time.

At the time he was teaching 70 to 80 students a week at home (one-to-one) and did not want to let his students down. Then, in 1996, he was asked by a couple of Oxford sixth form colleges to set up a music department for GCSE and A-Level work.

Trevor said: "I accepted the offer and also taught at the Oxford Tutorial College and the Oxford International College. Where else could I possibly meet the sons of the Beach Boys, or the son of the administrator of La Scala, Milan, who was able to offer me endless tickets if I could find the air fare? I did all this for seven happy years."

In the autumn of 2011 Trevor suffered kidney failure and spent seven weeks in hospital. On returning home after treatment a surprise was awaiting him.

"I got home from hospital to find a letter offering me the honour of an MBE for services to music in Oxford," Trevor said. "I accepted, as much as for others as for myself.

"On Friday, March 2, 2012, I found myself on a foggy morning being driven to Windsor Castle by my son. My children stood down to allow my three grandchildren to go into the ceremony – something I hope they will never forget. How I wish Brenda could have been there."

The charities which have benefitted from the work of the choir are many and varied. They include Helen and Douglas House, Age Concern, Sobel House, Amnesty International, The Alzheimer's Disease Society, Headway, the Six Counties Kidney Association and many children's charities. Through its annual concert for Kennington Overseas Aid a number of overseas charities are also helped.

Trevor said: "The choir is unique in Oxford because we do not have auditions. Anyone who wants to sing can come and join us.

"If in 1973, you would have told me that this amateur untrained choir would one day sing this work in a college chapel, I would have said 'If pigs could fly'."

On Oxtopia, he will have many talented musicians to inspire him and they will be delighted with his final choice of object, the Royal Festival Hall organ complete with a generator to power it. If he cannot take that then the Exeter College organ will have to do and the complete works of Bach stored in a large organ stool so that he can start a choir on our desert island.