

Chairman's Reminiscences

December 2016

Thank you to all the members of the Wessex branch who gave me such a good send-off when I chaired my last AGM. I held the post of Chairman for a long time, so I feel I'd like to write down some of my thoughts about the branch and its history.

I was a founder member of the branch; I attended the inaugural meeting at the Parchment Street Centre in Winchester in 1990.

I wasn't a very good player at that time, and I felt that I wanted to do something to help the newly formed branch so I volunteered to make tea.

It was in the kitchen that I first met Mary Steele, who had also volunteered.

I soon found that there was something else that I could do for the branch; Virginia Brooks, the first Chairman, hated the job and was very glad to hand it over to me so that she could be the musical director.

The other committee members were, so far as I remember, Ena Pick, Secretary, Gwen Hewitt, Treasurer, and Christine Carr. We continued to meet in the Parchment Street Centre until it was closed for rebuilding, when we moved to St Swithun's School, where we remained until fairly recently.

No sooner had the branch been formed, or so it seemed, than Ena decided that we should host the National Festival. I didn't really know what a festival was, but I soon found out, and acted as accommodation officer (a post now redundant), a baptism of fire, but I learned a lot and had a good time. That first festival really put the branch on the map, both socially and musically, for some time afterwards I used to meet people who said "Oh yes, Wessex is the new branch who held the festival" due to the arrangements at the time we made quite a good profit, which put the branch on a sound footing financially.

Ena started the branch when she retired from teaching. She was well known in the recorder world and knew plenty of good conductors; she started the tradition which has continued, of having visiting conductors rather than relying solely on the musical director. I think this is a good thing and maintains the interest of branch members. Another thing she was keen on was hospitality to the visiting conductors, we always entertain them to a pub lunch if they can come, and accommodate them if necessary. We also continue Ena's principle of encouraging adult learners, through the U3A branches.

Ena and I were for some years co-owners of the Kung C Bass which I now play, her husband Ron bequeathed it to me on her death.

Come 2004, Ena decided it was time for another festival, and set the arrangements in train. Unfortunately she was taken ill, with what proved to be her last illness, and Bob Whitmarsh nobly took over as organiser. Thanks to him, and to the branch members, the second festival, also at St Swithun's, was very successful.

I've made a lot of friends and met some interesting people during my chairmanship. One of our more eccentric members was Michael Wood, an elderly retired teacher, who could sometimes be seen busking on his descant recorder in the High Street. His hearing and eyesight were both failing and he had a slight speech impediment; our conductors grew accustomed to his plaintive cry of "Are we playing with wepeats?"

Someone I remember with great affection is Vernon Baker, whose obituary I wrote for the Recorder Magazine. Vernon was also a founder member and he survived into his 100th year. His family bequeathed his instruments to the Walter Bergman Fund, who will refurbish them to give to young players, as he requested.

More recently and sadly, I remember poor Julie Gray. Members supported her for many years, with transport and in other ways. I think recorder playing greatly enlivened her rather sad life. Her condition has now deteriorated and she can no longer play, I understand she is in a care home near Botley where she is well looked after.

Oh dear, all this nostalgia makes me feel like Mr Chips! I'll still be at branch meetings behind the tea-pot, so I've come full circle, I suppose!

Lorraine Curtis, ex Chairman, SRP Wessex Branch