



CHORISTERSHIPS AT  
NEW COLLEGE

A choristership in New College Choir is valuable in many ways. It places demands upon boys and their families, but these are balanced by significant rewards, both immediate and lifelong. This booklet gives you all the important facts about choristerships, in a series of ‘frequently asked questions’ and answers.

If you require further information, or have questions other than those addressed below, please contact the Organist, Robert Quinney, in writing or by email:

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Open Days for New College Choir are held in June each year, and advertised in the local press, via social media and on the choir website. New College School holds two open days each year in October and June. Both the Organist and the Headmaster are happy to hear from prospective parents at other times. Parents and children are always welcome at Chapel services.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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The choir website [www.newcollegechoir.com](http://www.newcollegechoir.com) is a useful source of information on many aspects of choir life, including current activities, services and concerts, and recruitment. Further information about the School can be found on its website [www.newcollegeschool.org](http://www.newcollegeschool.org)

# THE BASICS

## WHAT IS A CHORISTER?

Strictly speaking, anyone who sings in a choir is a chorister, but the term most usually applies to children. Boys have played a central role in choral singing, especially in Christian worship, since long before the founding of New College in 1379. (Comparable opportunities for girls now also exist in Oxford: for example, Frideswide Voices – [www.frideswidevoices.co.uk](http://www.frideswidevoices.co.uk).) Thanks largely to historical accident, Cathedral and Collegiate choral foundations were strengthened in the Reformation and Restoration periods, and choirs like New College's have continued to flourish as their counterparts elsewhere in Europe have, with some notable exceptions, died out. In New College Choir, the boy trebles are called Choristers, and the undergraduate and professional singers who provide the alto, tenor and bass voices are known as Clerks.

## HOW HAS NEW COLLEGE CHOIR CHANGED SINCE ITS FOUNDATION?

In certain key ways, hardly at all. The founder of the College, William of Wykeham, made provision for 16 boy choristers, alongside a number of clerks, to sing the daily offices (i.e. the morning and evening services in the chapel). That is still the default number of boys singing at services today. As in the 14th century, the Choir's *raison d'être* is to provide the musical element of the College's Christian worship, in its chapel, on a more or less daily basis during University terms. Furthermore, the College has been responsible for the education of its choristers since its foundation; choristers join New College School, situated some 200 metres from the College.

Inevitably the Choir's repertoire has developed over the last 630 years; it now encompasses all styles of music from the early 16th century to the present day (stretching further back, if you count the Gregorian Chant we use for some psalms and at the Eucharist). Perhaps the most notable change in the Choir's activities is the work we do beyond the walls of the college: we broadcast on radio and the internet; we record, usually at least once a year; and we undertake concert tours outside the UK. New College Choir is internationally recognised as a leader in its field.

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND COLLEGE?

The College owns the School site and its buildings. The School operates within the private sector, and is a member of IAPS (the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools) and CSA (the Choir Schools' Association). The Governing Body of the School, comprising a number of College Fellows and external appointees, is chaired by the Warden of New College. The choristers (including probationers) represent about a sixth of the School's intake. The day-to-day management of the choristers' routine is handled by the Headmaster and the Organist. The choristers' day is carefully integrated between School and College.

New College subsidises chorister places at New College School, reducing the fees paid by chorister parents by around two-thirds. Current figures are available from the School Office. Further chorister bursaries are available in cases of need.

## WHAT IS THE ROUTINE FOR CHORISTERS?

The basic weekly routine is best expressed in a table. Note how the first two years grow in intensity toward the full immersion of Years 5–8.

- This timetable is for University term only. Services usually begin on Friday of the week before full term begins (known as '0th week'), and continue until the Sunday immediately following 8th week. Commitments outside term are detailed on the termly Choir Diary. University term dates may be found online ([www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/dates-of-term](http://www.ox.ac.uk/about/facts-and-figures/dates-of-term)).
- Outside University term, but when New College School is still in term, the boys continue to rehearse twice a day on Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday (pick-up is earlier than in term, because of the absence of services), but are otherwise free of choir commitments.
- Services are always preceded by a rehearsal. Services begin at 6.15pm (5.45pm on a Sunday), and are usually finished by 7pm. Unusually for a choir of this sort, there is no regular Sunday morning commitment.

- On weekdays, the choristers are given a substantial tea in the College Hall before the rehearsal and service, and homework is supervised in School by Chorister Tutors.

- For weekend services, parents drop off and pick up their sons in College; otherwise, pick-up takes place at School, usually between 7.10 and 7.20pm.

- Year 4 boys take part in an increasing number of services through the year.

	Year 3	Year 4	Years 5-8
M		Lunchtime rehearsal After school rehearsal	Lunchtime rehearsal After school rehearsal
T	Morning rehearsal (8.30am) Chamber choir after school	Lunchtime rehearsal Sing Evensong	Lunchtime rehearsal Sing Evensong
W	Lunchtime music theory	No choir activities (occasional exceptions)	
T	Singing lesson after school	Lunchtime rehearsal	Lunchtime rehearsal Sing Eucharist
F	Morning rehearsal (8.30am)	Lunchtime rehearsal	Lunchtime rehearsal Sing Evensong Short post-Evensong rehearsal
S			Saturday Morning Music School Lunchtime rehearsal Sing Evensong
S		Attend Evensong to take collection	Sing Evensong

## HOW ARE THE CHORISTERS TRAINED?

In a variety of ways. Year 3 is a fairly gentle introduction to the basics of vocal technique and music theory – laying secure foundations at this stage enables confidence when it matters. Year 3 ‘pre-probationer’ training takes place at School, and the boys do not attend College services. In Year 4 boys begin to attend rehearsals with the main group of choristers, but spend most of their time rehearsing and furthering their theoretical knowledge separately. As the year goes on they take an increasing part in the singing of services, depending upon the particular disposition of that year’s cohort; by the end of the year they will probably take part in most services. Boys in Year 5 sing every day (Wednesday excepted), but are not expected to take a leading role in the Choir. Instead, by observing and listening to the older choristers, under the watchful eye of the Organist and his assistants, they absorb a great deal, and begin to take responsibility for their contribution; a process that continues throughout their remaining time in the Choir. To summarise, the choristers learn through study, individually and in groups; and by example, from their older colleagues.

## WHO IS IN CHARGE?

Overall responsibility for the Choir’s musical direction, administration and welfare lies with the Organist, Robert Quinney. He is a Fellow of New College, with teaching responsibilities both in College and in the Faculty of Music, but has in fact spent his whole career working with choirs like New College’s. He is assisted by the Assistant Organist, Timothy Wakerell, and one or more Organ Scholars, who are undergraduate members of the College. The administration of the Choir is undertaken by the Chapel Administrator, Nancy-Jane Rucker, and the Concerts and Recordings Manager.

Among the School staff are two Chorister Tutors who, with the Headmaster, oversee and supervise logistical and pastoral arrangements for the choristers. The Chorister Tutors accompany the Choir on tours. The Director of Music at the School, Thomas Neal, has overall charge of the musical activities at the School, teaching class music, giving piano lessons, running the School’s chamber choir, and supervising the visiting instrumental teachers. She is responsible for the organisation of NCS

Saturday morning music school, during which musicians at the school, from Year 5 upwards, receive theory and composition lessons, and engage in ensemble and orchestral activities. The musical training of a chorister is an indivisible educational process, shared by College and School. The Organist and Headmaster hold regular meetings to ensure the smooth running of the operation, and to discuss the choristers' progress and welfare. All staff who work with the choristers in school and chapel (including the Lay and Academical Clerks) are, of course, subject to the requisite Enhanced range of safeguarding checks and training.

The Chaplain of New College, the Revd Dr Erica Longfellow, is responsible for chapel services, and co-ordinates pastoral care with the college welfare team. While she is not directly responsible for the choristers, many chorister families see her regularly through attendance at services, and she is a source of pastoral support if desired.



# AUDITIONS

## AT WHAT AGE DO BOYS AUDITION FOR NEW COLLEGE CHOIR?

We audition boys in Year 2, when they are rising 7 years old, for entry to NCS in Year 3.

## WHAT HAPPENS IN A CHORISTER AUDITION?

The Organist will expect to hear a short vocal solo; for example, a hymn or Christmas carol, or even a nursery rhyme. Lengthy songs should be avoided; so should 'music theatre' pieces (i.e. songs from musicals or films), as they tend to lock a young voice in the lowest part of its range, inhibiting access to the upper register. As well as the prepared piece, your son will be asked to respond to a variety of ear tests (e.g. singing back notes played on the piano).

The Director of Music of NCS would like to listen to an instrumental piece, but this is not essential; though all choristers learn at least one instrument, some have not begun lessons at the time of their audition, and this does not prejudice their chances – we are looking for potential more than polish at this stage.

In addition to the musical audition, candidates sit the entrance assessments for NCS, which are carried out under the supervision of the Headmaster and his colleagues. Candidates are asked to write creatively to a given title, read and answer some written comprehension questions; take a mathematics test comprising problems using addition, subtraction, multiplication and division; and sit on-line reading and mathematics reasoning tests.

## HOW SHOULD I PREPARE MY SON FOR HIS AUDITION?

Make sure he knows the tune and words of his piece, and describe to him what will happen (see above), but don't over-prepare. The audition is designed to be a friendly, enjoyable experience; we hope to set boys at their ease, allowing them to reveal their potential as choristers. If a boy feels under pressure, it is difficult for him to perform to the best of his ability; but in no circumstances will we make a boy feel uncomfortable. The result of auditions is usually communicated to parents by email within a week of the audition date.

# LIFE AS A CHORISTER

## HOW DO THE CHORISTERS BALANCE CHOIR AND SCHOOLWORK?

The choristers lead busy lives, and develop, with help from the School and parents, effective strategies for fitting schoolwork, instrument practice and other activities in among their choir commitments. On weekdays when they sing a service (Tuesday, Thursday and Friday), the choristers have time to work on their prep (as well as time to relax and play) between the end of the school day and chorister tea. The absence of a Sunday morning commitment, and the relatively short University terms, also allow more time for other activities than do many choristerhips. We believe the rewards offer ample return on the undoubted investment of time.

The staff at School know when the choristers are under particular pressure from their Choir commitments (as for instance when they have a concert to fit in with their normal routine), and plan accordingly. And the skills the choristers develop, which depend upon a capacity for focussed listening and application, no doubt stand them in excellent stead academically, both at NCS and beyond. Over the years, choristers have regularly achieved either an academic and/or a musical award to their chosen senior school.

## CAN CHORISTERS PLAY SPORT?

Choristers who show sporting ability are selected for the school teams and play as a matter of course. When fixtures clash with the chorister routine the Organist is thoughtful about excusing boys their chorister duties, but of course musical considerations are paramount.

## DO ALL CHORISTERS PLAY INSTRUMENTS?

Most choristers learn two instruments, but instrumental study is arranged to suit the needs of the individual. Piano study is a vital part of a boy's developing musical literacy, so all choristers have piano lessons. The study of an orchestral instrument gives access to ensemble playing and its attendant musical and social benefits. If learning two instruments on top of singing appears to be ambitious, it is worth remembering that

the musical skills developed in the Choir are entirely complementary to instrumental study. The chorister age-span is an ideal time for laying the foundation of good technique, allowing for real accomplishment to be developed in due course. Associated Board examinations are taken when appropriate and instrumental practice time for choristers can be arranged before school. There are some funds to assist with instrumental tuition fees in the case of need.

Instrumental music-making provides a bridge from the Choir to a chorister's next school, the considerable gap left by the end of chorister life filled by new possibilities for advancing on his instruments. Senior independent schools are often prepared to invest heavily in boys with a chorister background, particularly when their expertise extends to two instruments. In recent years leaving choristers have won valuable Music Scholarships, and in many cases these provided the means by which they have continued their secondary education within the independent sector.

### **DO CHORISTERS DROP OUT?**

We do not select more choristers than the available places and bursaries. Great care is taken during the selection process to evaluate the potential of a boy as reliably as possible. In very rare cases, a boy's progress in his probationary years may be judged to bring his future as a fully fledged chorister into question. This would be the result of constant informal assessment and discussion between the Organist, Headmaster and their colleagues; no decision hangs on a single test. Both the Organist and Headmaster keep in close contact with parents, especially in cases of inconsistent or unusually slow development, or if there are pastoral concerns.

Very occasionally a boy will find the experience uncongenial and want to leave. Here again, it is better to have sorted out his interests and preferences at an earlier stage. And it is important to bear in mind that the 'chorister experience' reaches its most enjoyable phase in the final two years, since the senior choristers are the most experienced and confident.

Once past the probationary phase, a chorister's place is confirmed on the understanding that he will commit the following four years to the Choir. The Choir depends on this mutual commitment. The worst of all scenarios

is to have invested two years in a boy's training and then not to benefit from the investment. For the College a chorister place represents a considerable investment of both human and financial resources, and once a boy is a full chorister, the interests of the Choir as an institution – and as a team – have to be paramount. Because of this, any chorister who leaves the Choir, except by mutual agreement, will then cause his parents to be liable to repay the College's fee subsidy which their son has hitherto enjoyed. But it must be said that once admitted, without exception, every boy turns out to be a useful member of the Choir, and many achieve exceptional standards, often well beyond what they (and indeed their parents) imagined possible.

### HOW MANY CONCERTS, RECORDINGS AND TOURS DOES THE CHOIR UNDERTAKE?

There is no regular schedule of concerts, recordings and tours, but we expect to travel outside the UK at least once a year, and to record once or twice in the same period. In recent years the Choir has travelled to the USA, Australia, and most European countries, giving concerts by itself and with other ensembles, vocal and instrumental. All this is of considerable educational value to the choristers, both musically and socially. At the same time, they are helping to promote on an international level the excellence of their work in Oxford, bringing this important piece of the UK's cultural legacy to a wider audience, acting as ambassadors for the country as well as for New College. While on tour, boys are given sufficient time to recover from travel before rehearsing or performing, and we take every opportunity to explore the places we visit. The full costs of the Choir's touring are met by the promoters.

Most of the touring and recording undertaken by the Choir takes place in holiday periods. During a typical year the boys are likely to be engaged in such activities for periods totalling four to six weeks. Notice of the Choir's commitments is given in good time, allowing parents to organise their family holidays around the Choir's work. A small number of events cut into School term, since it is impossible to organise everything to fall into the school holidays. The periods immediately following the end of term are likely to be busiest with outside work; the month of August is usually free of choir commitments.

### FINALLY, WHAT MAKES BEING A CHORISTER WORTHWHILE?

For a musical child, there is no better early training. But the choristers learn much more than music – the experience is of lifelong benefit, regardless of the path they take in their later studies and careers. They develop an understanding of teamwork, learning to take individual responsibility while working with others. They enjoy the thrill of performance to audiences at home and abroad, and retire (at thirteen!) with recordings of their singing that, in due course, they can play to their grandchildren. They reap the rewards of daily contact with a venerable tradition; something visible in the beauty of the chapel and college buildings, audible in music and words, and intangibly present in the spiritual import of their work. They hone skills of focus, calm under pressure, and learning from mistakes. And as they progress in the Choir, they pass all of this on, acting as mentors and guides to the younger choristers. There is much to recommend a choristership at New College!

Robert Quinney