



YORK MINSTER CHOIR

**PROBATIONER & CHORISTER
PARENTS' HANDBOOK**

November 2019

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Robert Sharpe, Director of Music at York Minster, welcomes parents and carers of new York Minster choristers

On behalf of the Chapter of York, I would like to welcome you as a parent/carer of a probationer (or trainee) chorister at The Minster School. Your child was successful at the recent chorister auditions and we look forward to welcoming him or her as a new chorister and hope that they will enjoy being a member of the York Minster Choir. I also hope that you will enjoy watching your child develop and flourish both as a chorister and as a pupil at The Minster School.

As a chorister, your child will attend The Minster School from Year 3 until Year 8. Children selected for the choir are eligible for a minimum of 60% up to 100% of their school fees to be paid by the Minster. The payments continue up until the end of Year 8 when many children go on to win scholarships to other independent secondary schools.

As the parent/carer of a chorister, the workings and traditions of the Minster and the life of a chorister will feel a little strange and unfamiliar: even those who regularly attend a Church of England church may find the Minster services a bit of a mystery. Being a chorister parent is a unique opportunity and you will become as much part of the experience as your child.

The information in this handbook is for new chorister parents. We hope it will explain some of the basics about life at the Minster including service schedules, key people at The Minster School, in the Minster's Music team and key Minster staff. There is lots of contact information and a Frequently Asked Questions section too.

We hope you will find answers to most of your questions but if not, please do not hesitate to contact the staff in this booklet. You are most welcome to contact me direct to discuss any concerns or questions that you have. I look forward to meeting you soon.

Robert Sharpe
Director of Music
York Minster
November 2019

Essential information for parents of probationer choristers

Key people

The choral foundation at York Minster is regarded as friendly, relaxed and informal. Below is an introduction to the staff most closely involved with the York Minster Choir and the day-to-day care of the choristers.

At The Minster School

Angela Mitchell – Headteacher

t: 01904 557230 e: angelam@yorkminster.org

Angela has overall responsibility for the broader school life and education of the choristers during their year school.

Julie Huckvale – School Secretary

t: 01904 557230 e: school@yorkminster.org

Ellen Harvey - Choir Chaperone (boys) m: 07771 966895

Lynda Houlston - Choir Chaperone (girls) m: 07801 574004

Judith Cunnold – Singing Teacher

At York Minster

The Revd Michael Smith – Canon Pastor

michaels@yorkminster.org

As Canon Pastor, Michael has pastoral oversight and care of the Minster's staff and volunteers and congregation.

The Music and Liturgy Department

The Revd Dr Vicky Johnson – Canon Precentor (from January 2020)

The Canon Precentor has overall responsibility for services at York Minster and the work of the Music and Liturgy Department.

Robert Sharpe – Director of Music

t: 01904 557273 e: roberts@yorkminster.org

Robert is responsible for all of the music in the Minster and trains and conducts the choristers, the Songmen and Choral Scholars (the adult singers) of the York Minster Choir.

Benjamin Morris - Assistant Director of Music

t: 01904 557205 e: benm@yorkminster.org

Ben assists Robert Sharpe with all aspects of music in the Minster including the training of the choristers and Songmen and playing the organ.

Timothy Hone – Music and Liturgy Manager

t: 01904 559353 e: timh@yorkminster.org

Tim supports the Precentor and Director of Music in managing the day-to-day running of the department and coordinating this with the rest of the Minster's activities. Before coming to York, he worked as a Cathedral musician and liturgist at Coventry, Newcastle and Salisbury Cathedrals.

Christopher Strange – Assisting Organist

e: chriss@yorkminster.org

As well as playing the organ and assisting with choir rehearsals, Chris plays a key role in the department's activities.

The Verger Team

Alex Carberry – Head Verger

t: 01904 557221 e: alexc@yorkminster.org

Probationer choristers will quickly become familiar with the Minster's team of Vergers who are based in a room called the Consistory Court inside the Minster. They are responsible for implementing all of the general and specific requirements necessary for services at the Minster and for ensuring the good order of the Minster as a place of worship.

Meet the Chapter of York

The governing body for York Minster is called the Chapter of York (Chapter for short). Chapter is responsible for the worship and maintenance of the Minster. Chapter consists of the Minster's clergy team and lay members with specialist skills and experience in a wide range of fields (for example, legal, financial, education) that can strengthen Chapter's decision-making.

As the parent of a probationer chorister, you will be most likely to meet the following members of Chapter:

The Archbishop of York – The Most Reverend Dr John Sentamu

Dr Sentamu may be seen in the Minster on many occasions during the year, especially at the major festivals of Lent and Easter and Advent and Christmas. Archbishop Sentamu is one of two archbishops in the Church of England (the other being Canterbury) and is at the head of the "Northern Province" of the Church. His throne, the 'cathedra', is in the Minster.

The Dean of York - The Right Reverend Dr Jonathan Frost

Dean Jonathan was installed as the 58th Dean of York in February 2019. He has general oversight of mission and ministry at the Minster. He is also Head of the Foundation

The Canon Precentor – The Revd Canon Dr Vicky Johnson (from 5 January 2020)

Vicky will have overall responsibility to the Chapter for the Minster's Liturgy and Music and pastoral care of all employees and volunteers involved in the liturgical sphere. She will oversee the training of the liturgical principals and assistants. She will work closely with the Director of Music and Assistant Director of Music. Vicky will be present at the chorister auditions.

The Canon Pastor: The Revd Canon Michael Smith

Michael has pastoral responsibility for the Minster's congregation and institutions related to the Minster, including the Minster school. Michael is always available to speak pastorally to choir parents, and has special responsibility for preparing candidates for baptism and confirmation. These often include choristers and sometimes chorister parents.

The Canon Chancellor: The Revd Canon Dr Christopher Collingwood

Christopher has overall responsibility to the Chapter for the Minster's educational programme (excepting the Minster School), the Library and archives.

The Canon Missioner: The Revd Canon Maggie McLean

Maggie serves as an ambassador for the Minster developing partnerships with Christian communities in York, the Diocese of York, the Northern Province of the Church of England and with our link Dioceses in South Africa.

The Succentor: The Revd Catriona Cumming

Catriona assists with the singing of the services and with pastoral and liturgical work.

Service times at York Minster

The times for regular choral services at York Minster are as follows:

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday

Choral Evensong - 5.15pm until 6.00pm

*Monday is a day off for the choristers and the organists.

Sunday

Sung Eucharist – 10am until 11.05am

Choral Matins – 11.30am until 12.15pm

Choral Evensong – 4.00pm until 5.00pm

The Choir Schedule – A vital tool for the parent of a probationer chorister

Once your child joins the choir as a probationer, the most important thing for you as a parent is to check the Choir Schedule for each term. The Choir Schedule gives the choir's commitments for the whole term. It is published approximately half a term before each term begins and is emailed to parents by the Director of Music.

Staying in touch with Robert Sharpe

(i) By email

Robert will email you with updates and last minute reminders (there can be a lot of these)! It is vital that you share your current email address with him and to update him if you change your email address. You can email Robert anytime at roberts@yorkminster.org.

(ii) By telephone

If you are unsure or uncertain about anything or just need to have a chat, please remember that you very welcome to telephone Robert on 01904 557273. If you have to leave a message don't worry – your call **WILL** be returned. Please do leave your name and contact details (particularly if you are a new parent).

What do if your child is ill

If your child is ill, please send a TEXT message to Robert Sharpe (m: 07931 590383), before 8am on weekday mornings (except Monday which is a day off for the choir and for the organists). On Sundays, please text before 8.45am. Please remember to say who you are in your message if you are a new parent.

The Programme for probationers

When your child first joins the choir, he or she is a probationer - which is effectively a chorister-in-waiting. The routine for probationers is less busy than for full choristers so children and parents normally have a year or so to get used to things before the full commitment (outlined further down) kicks in.

The probationers attend morning practice Tuesday to Friday. They are collected from the school playground at 8.10am and escorted to the Chapter House. In the first term they will return to school by 9am ready for assembly but as the year progresses the practice will extend to a full hour.

Occasionally there are changes to this routine. Those affecting probationers will appear on the schedule as 'P' which indicates both boy and girl probationers [they are taught as a group].

On Fridays in the first term, the probationers will meet Canon Johnson or Canon Smith who will help them to understand the services they will sing and explain the workings of the Minster - both its people and the building. Later in the year there will be the opportunity to join the full chorister practice on Fridays.

Lessons in the Chapter House include vocal training [both as a group and individually], sight singing, theory of music and an introduction to the music and words of the services. Musicianship skills are developed through a variety of musical and vocal games, fostering a sense of individual responsibility while having fun.

During the summer term, probationers will start to attend one or two Evensongs each week and an occasional Sunday morning alongside the choristers. For these services they will wear cassocks. They will usually receive their surplices (the white over-garment) the following September when they are 'Read In' – the procedure by which they are formally admitted as a chorister. Sometimes a probationer will be Read In earlier in the year if there is a space in the choir or if he or she is in an older year or making very fast progress. This is always by negotiation with parents.

At the end of the summer term the probationers often give a short morning concert to showcase their skills and demonstrate their readiness for Reading-In.

The Choristers' week

Tuesday - Friday

8.15 – 9.15am

Choristers rehearse in the Camera Cantorum of the Minster. They are picked up in the school playground by the Director of Music and/or Assistant Director and walked across to the Minster at 8.10am. Please ensure your child is at school in good time. Probationers are taken across by Judith Cunnold for a separate rehearsal, joining the main rehearsals occasionally, and are returned before 9am in time for assembly.

Wednesday

Boy choristers go directly to the Camera Cantorum in time for an 8am start. They take their school things there. (Girls go to the playground as usual for the 8.10am pick-up).

Thursday

Girl choristers go directly to the Camera Cantorum in time for an 8am start. They take their school things there. (Boys go to the playground as usual for the 8.10am pick-up).

Tuesday and Friday

4.00pm

Choristers tea in the school hall. Probationers go home.

4.12pm

Choristers go over to the Minster, robe and rehearse.

4.35pm-5.00pm

Full rehearsal in the Minster with the men for choristers singing Evensong (normally either boys or girls). Those not singing Evensong rehearse in the Camera Cantorum and are collected at 5pm.

5.00pm

Break – choristers go to the Zouche Chapel with Choir Chaperone

5.15-c.6.00pm

Choral Evensong (either boys and men or girls and men)

Wednesday

4.00pm

Girl Choristers tea in the school hall. Probationers go home.

4.12pm

Girl Choristers go over to the Minster, robe and rehearse.

4.35pm-5.00pm

Full rehearsal in the Minster with the men.

5.00pm

Break – choristers go to the Zouche Chapel with Choir Chaperone.

5.15-c.6.00pm

Choral Evensong (girls and men).

Thursday

4.00pm

Boy Choristers tea in the school hall. Probationers go home.

4.12pm

Boy Choristers go over to the Minster, robe and rehearse

4.35pm-5.00pm

Full rehearsal in the Minster with the men.

5.00pm

Break – choristers go to the Zouche Chapel with Choir Chaperone.

5.15-c.6.00pm

Choral Evensong (boys and men).

Saturday

(Note: as far as possible, the girls and boys have alternate Saturdays free).

3.15 for 3.30pm

Duty choristers (boys or girls) rehearse in Camera Cantorum. They make their own way there in school uniform (white shirts).

4.15pm

Full rehearsal in the Minster with the men.

5.00pm

Break – choristers go to the Zouche Chapel with Choir Chaperone.

5.15-c.6.00pm

Choral Evensong (either boys and men or girls and men).

Sunday	(Note: as far as possible, Sunday morning services are sung by the same choristers as Saturday Evensong, with the other group singing Sunday Evensong).
8.45 for 9.00am	Duty choristers (boys or girls) rehearse in Camera Cantorum. They make their own way there (white shirts).
9.30-9.53am	Full rehearsal in the Camera Cantorum with the men.
10.00-c.11.05am	Sung Eucharist in the Nave.
c.11.05-11.23am	Break, juice/biscuits in the Chapter House. Coffee for adults.
11.30-c.12.15pm	Choral Matins in the Quire, after which the choristers who have sung Saturday and Sunday morning are then normally free.
2.30 for 2.45pm	Duty choristers (boys or girls, usually the other group from the morning choir) rehearse in Camera Cantorum. They make their own way there.
3.25pm	Full rehearsal in the Minster with the men.
3.45pm	Break – choristers go to the Zouche Chapel with Choir Chaperone
4.00-c.5.00pm	Choral Evensong.

Out of school term, the choir continues until Christmas Day, Easter Day and for approximately ten days in July. Depending on the date of Easter, the choir holiday will either be after Easter Day or partly before Holy Week (the week before Easter Day) and partly after. The routine is as above, but for morning weekday rehearsals, choristers attend in their home clothes and probationers are not required. These rehearsals continue until 9.45am and start at 8.15am for all four weekdays. In the afternoons, only those choristers singing the service return, in school uniform (grey shirts on weekdays), for a 4pm start in the Camera Cantorum.

During half-terms, the choir is free from duties normally from the Monday after school breaks up (having sung the first weekend of half term's services); alternately, the boys or girls have both weekends free at half term with the half-term choir weekend being covered entirely by the other group. Normally, in the second half of term, those choristers who have not had the full half term 'exeat' weekend have a full weekend off at some point. This is all detailed in the termly Choir Schedule.

The questions most frequently asked by parents of probationer choristers

<p>What is a probationer?</p>	<p>A probationer is a boy or girl who has gained a place in the Minster Choir at a voice trial. They are 'learner' choristers.</p>
<p>How long will my child be a probationer?</p>	<p>Usually for up to one academic year.</p>
<p>Does a probationer join-in rehearsals etc from the first day of the September term?</p>	<p>No, they normally start morning rehearsals at the start of the first FULL week of term, usually the first Tuesday. They don't come to services and rehearsals in the afternoon to start with, but as they gain more experience, we arrange for them to start attending more as they build up towards receiving their surplice and becoming a 'full chorister'.</p>
<p>Do probationers ever fail to make the grade?</p>	<p>Occasionally, but not often.</p>
<p>Is there anything that parents can do to prepare their child before he or she joins the school?</p>	<p>It may be useful to take your child to a Minster service occasionally, possibly play them some recorded choral music to familiarise them. It is important not to give them too many preconceptions - their preparation in the Minster will be very thorough. But they do need to know what they are entering into, and have some enthusiasm for it!</p>
<p>What do the choristers' medallions signify?</p>	<p>They are worn by the Senior Choristers in recognition of their position in the choir. They are called 'Duncombe Badges' after a former Dean, Augustus Duncombe.</p>
<p>What is the procedure for becoming a full chorister?</p>	<p>The procedure for becoming a full chorister is called 'Reading In' which takes place during Evensong. Parents will be notified well in advance and will have reserved seats for the service. Their child will be robed in his or her surplice and formally admitted as a chorister. This happens at the start of term in September each year, and may occasionally happen during the year.</p>

<p>How do I find out how my child is getting on in the choir?</p>	<p>Robert Sharpe may be contacted at any time during the choir term if you have specific concerns. Written reports will be issued through The Minster School twice a year.</p>
<p>If I'm not sure about something (e.g. a practice) who should I ask?</p>	<p>Most things will be notified in the Choir Schedule or by email but sometimes things slip through. First of all, ask the choir chaperones or Robert Sharpe directly. Text message is easy and quick.</p>
<p>Who looks after probationers during practices and services?</p>	<p>During morning practices, the probationers are supervised by Judith Cunnold who trains them in elementary theory of music, and begins to train their voices. Occasionally, probationers attend the main morning rehearsal with the choristers. As the year progresses, they begin to attend some services, working towards a minimum of one per week in the summer term and then they have a cassock and sit with the other choristers in the choir stalls.</p>
<p>What happens at Christmas and Easter?</p>	<p>Probationers are not required at all during the school holidays though some enjoy attending in the days immediately after the end of school summer term before choir ends in mid-July. It is good if probationers can attend the 10.00 am service on Christmas morning (though not essential) and one of the Carol services and sit with their parents in school uniform. Reserved seats are available for the Carol services. Full choristers are required to sing outside school term up until Christmas Day (boys and girls share the work as usual), up until Easter Day (sometimes the holiday is divided with some before Easter and some after, depending on when Easter Day is each year) and for around ten days in July after school ends.</p>

<p>Can choristers be permitted to be absent?</p>	<p>Although always trying to support Choristers, absences from Choir duties can be detrimental to the overall balance of the Choir. All absences have to be cleared by the Director of Music. No absence can be taken for granted and any absences granted are at the sole discretion of the Minster's Director of Music. In very sensitive cases, he will seek the advice of the Chapter.</p>
<p>Is there a problem being in school sports teams?</p>	<p>The school positively encourages sport at all levels and endeavours to arrange matches to suit the Minster's programme. This works well and the Headteacher and Director of Music meet regularly to discuss timetables.</p>
<p>Are there any meetings that all probationer and chorister parents are expected to attend?</p>	<p>Occasionally, and these will be notified with good notice.</p>
<p>Are probationers involved in diocesan visits?</p>	<p>The Minster Choir occasionally sings Evensong or a concert in the Diocese. The concerts do not involve probationers.</p>

General Chorister matters

Respect in the Minster

The Minster is primarily a place of worship, not a concert hall or a museum. The stewards and vergers meet many thousands of visitors every year. Although the Minster very much values all you will contribute as a chorister parent, when it comes to Minster services it is not usually possible to make special arrangements for choir parents. When you attend a service you will be treated with the same respect as any other member of the congregation. If you do want a seat with a good view of your offspring then get there early – but please remember it is sometimes less distracting for a child if their parents are not in their direct line of sight.

When your child is on duty in the Minster, please understand that he/she is part of a professional team and appropriate behaviour is expected. It is for this reason that the Precentor has requested that parents do not talk to or distract the choristers in the Minster.

Special care must be taken with hair (kept out of the eyes) and jewellery (sleeper earrings only) for girl choristers. In line with the Minster School rules, hairbands should not be brightly coloured for services.

Changes in schedules

Sometimes there are changes to the published schedule for an extra practice, an extra service such as a funeral or memorial service, or maybe just a photograph or radio interview.

The Director of Music will always endeavour to give as much notice as possible for any minor changes in routine but these are infrequent.

Semi-chorus, duets, solos

When your child has become more established in the choir he/she may be tried out occasionally in a smaller group of choristers, or as a soloist depending on the repertoire. The final decision on who sings is made at the discretion of the Director of Music. Parents should note that experience has shown that many excellent choristers are not gifted soloists, and vice-versa, so solos cannot simply be based on 'whose turn it is' especially with the pressure of a large congregation in attendance.

Concerts

The choir gives up to three concerts or Evensongs a year in a parish church in the diocese (this can be a long way away). Parents may wish to attend. Please remember that the audience will have paid to attend these concerts and you should pay too. Special arrangements will be made for travel and supper. In addition, the choir gives occasional concerts each year in the Minster including the popular Christmas Carol Concert, for which chorister parents and families will be offered half-price tickets.

Broadcasts and Recordings

BBC Radio 3 regularly broadcasts a live Evensong service from the Minster. Details are published in the school calendar and the Minster's monthly music scheme well in advance. If you wish to attend, you should arrive well in advance. Please note that live broadcasts are not ideal services for very small children to attend.

The choir also makes recordings in the Minster. This is usually done from 6-9pm for three evenings for a CD, sometimes earlier if possible.

Tours

The Minster Choir, sometimes just the older choristers, has a programme of tours to other parts of the country and abroad. This is in the process of being developed, and parents are encouraged to help with fund-raising ventures. Tours take place outside school term, but not in August.

Waiting around

Inevitably there will be times when you arrive at the Minster to find that the service has overrun, perhaps because of a rather keen visiting preacher or a very large number of people attending. Wherever possible, notice is given of any foreseeable problems but occasionally there is a little waiting around.

Chorister traditions and special events

The Senior Choristers, who wear medals, are responsible for overseeing the others both musically as leaders and when the choir is moving around or robing up for rehearsals and services. The Senior Choristers lead the two sides of the choir. These sides are called *Decani* (the side of the choir where the Dean sits, traditionally on the South side in all Cathedrals) and *Cantoris* (the side of the Cathedral where the "cantor" or Precentor sits).

The Christian Year

In any year, there are always special dates to mark on the calendar. We celebrate our birthday, and those of our family and our friends. Other events, too, always happen at the same time each year: the new school year begins in September, and the FA Cup Final is held in mid-May. Dates in the calendar and the changing of the seasons help give shape to our lives from year to year. It's the same in the Church, which also organizes its life by a special calendar.

The Christian Year divides into two types of time: *seasonal time* and *ordinary time*. About half the year falls in seasonal time, and half in ordinary time. Seasonal time covers those parts of the year when we celebrate something specific to do with the Christian faith. There are two blocks (or cycles) of seasonal time: the *Christmas cycle* and the *Easter cycle*, and within these two cycles fall the seasons of the Christian Year.

The Christmas cycle (and the Church's New Year), begins four Sundays before Christmas Day with the season of **Advent**. This is a time of waiting and preparation, both for Christmas itself, and for the time when Jesus will finally return. At **Christmas** (25 December) we celebrate the birth of Jesus, through which God shares our life by being born as a human being. This leads, 12 days later (6 January) into the **Epiphany** season, in which we focus on who Jesus is and what he did when he was on earth. The Christmas cycle ends 40 days after Christmas Day with the Feast of **Candlemas** on 2 February.

The Easter cycle begins six and a half weeks before Easter Day on Ash Wednesday with **Lent** – a season for drawing closer to God. Lent leads into **Passiontide** and **Holy Week** – the most important week of the Christian Year. In Holy Week, the Church commemorates the events that led to Jesus' death and resurrection. Holy Week begins with **Palm Sunday**, when we recall Jesus being welcomed by the crowds as he rode into Jerusalem. The Thursday of Holy Week is called **Maundy Thursday** (from the Latin *mandatum*, meaning 'commandment'). On this day we remember Jesus' Last Supper with his disciples, that he washed his disciples' feet, and gave them commandments: to 'love one another' and to take and share bread and wine in remembrance of him. The Friday of Holy Week, **Good Friday**, recalls Jesus' death on the Cross. **Easter Day** is the most joyful day of the Christian Year: the day when we celebrate Jesus' rising from the dead and the truth that he is alive today. The Easter season (or 'Eastertide') lasts for a further 50 days. **Ascension Day** (40 days after Easter) celebrates Jesus' return to heaven and his promise that he will always be with us. The season ends 10 days later on the Day of **Pentecost** (Whit Sunday), when we celebrate the gift of God's Holy Spirit, who lives in all Christians and gives life to the Church.

In seasonal time, the Church's worship tends to have a clear focus or theme. But for the rest of the year, the Church keeps 'ordinary time'. It's as though we need some time simply to get on with everyday 'ordinary' life as Christians! There are two periods of Ordinary Time. The first – from 3 February to Ash Wednesday - is quite short. The second is much longer, and runs from after Pentecost to Advent Sunday.

The final weeks of the Christian year are marked by 'Sundays before Advent' and include celebrations of the saints (**All Saints' Day**), those who have died (**All Souls' Day**) and Remembrance Day.

These times and seasons give pattern and rhythm to Christian worship throughout the year, and shape not only the special worship which takes place within the Minster, but also the daily round of services, with Matins, Evensong and the Eucharist being celebrated every day. The choir has the special privilege of sharing in this round of worship whenever the service is choral. The services - which are shared between the girl and boy choristers - will sometimes fall on a Saint's day, sometimes on an 'ordinary' day and sometimes on a particular day when some local, national or world-wide event is commemorated. All this has a bearing on the music that is sung and, through that, on the way each worshipper encounters God. Our prayer as a Cathedral is that all who come to York Minster will in some way be taken more deeply into the mystery of God and continue on their spiritual journey re-orientated and refreshed.

A final word for parents of probationer choristers

The routine, daily discipline, skill and musicianship that is required to maintain this glorious tradition offers both an opportunity and a challenge for young choristers. Those of us who have experienced life as a chorister know what a privilege it has been in musical, spiritual and human terms.

Useful contact information

The Minster School
Deangate
York
YO1 7JA

T: 01904 557230
E: school@yorkminster.org

School secretary: Julie Huckvale

The School Office is open from 8.30am until 4.30pm, Monday to Friday during term time for any general enquiries. Hours are reduced during the school holidays.

The Music and Liturgy Department
York Minster
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10-14 Ogleforth
York
YO1 7JN

T: 01904 557200
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