Soundbites Report for All Saints' Hertford P.CC. 2025

Founded in 1996 and currently in its 29th year, Soundbites continues to flourish as an important feature of Hertford's musical and cultural life.

The first Soundbites concert was held on 6th November 1996, the day after Bill Clinton decisively won re-election and secured a second consecutive presidential term. At that time the church's historically important 'Father' Henry Willis organ, built in 1898, was becoming unreliable having last been overhauled 25 years earlier in 1971. With only a small amount in the organ fund at the time, the music committee set about organising a programme of events to raise the substantial sums required*. The idea of a weekly lunchtime concert preceded by light lunches was modelled on a longstanding series run by Ian Ray at Lion Walk URC, Colchester. Our aim was to establish a similar concert series with retiring collections devoted to the overhaul of this magnificent instrument. Ian Bell, who was appointed by the PCC and Eric Paske (Diocesan organ advisor) as organ consultant for the project until its completion in 2001, reported that *'A good deal of value is yet to be extracted from the investment made in 1971, and much of that has another 20 years' useful life,* but added that *'the accumulation of wear and tear is reaching a stage of being noticeable to the player, and certain aspects have deteriorated to the point where attention is overdue*.

At that time, there were no facilities within the church building so a small group of chorister parents and choir members, led by Rose Pullum, gathered each week in their home kitchens to prepare rolls and sandwiches which were transported to the church and served before each concert. Rose recalls; '*Soundbites lunches started life as a moveable feast. Before catering facilities were built at the back of the church, the home kitchens of a group of church and choir members were used, forging friendships as well as food. Generally, it all arrived on time! Our sponsorship from Pearces Bakery with freshly baked bread and cakes was a major help as Soundbites lunches and concerts were becoming a social mid-week event as well as a valuable fundraiser for organ repairs and upgrading the piano. Even the partial collapse of a beam near the pulpit was overcome by re-siting the 'stage' to the nave in front of the organ.'* Now as the series has grown in popularity and audience numbers have multiplied, a somewhat larger group** is skilfully led and organised by Ann Stephens-Jones. Each week a team of three or four volunteers are on duty throughout the morning and the church becomes a hive of activity as potatoes are baked and rolls and sandwiches prepared with delicious fillings. From time to time, homemade soup or biscuits are added to the appetising menu, ready for the first audience members who arrive from midday. Susie and David Hunt who both volunteered together over a number of years give a flavour of this activity and pay tribute to all involved: '*Lunches are a big part of the Wednesday Soundbites experience. The leaders purchase the food the day before and prepare various elements of the lunches before final preparations in the church on the day by a team of 3-4 helpers. The leaders must boil a dozen eggs, shell them and prepare them for roll filling, deal with tins of tuna; then there is ham, cheese, and salad for sandwiches and jacket potatoes too, plus cakes, fruit, crisps biscuits and coffee to be dealt with also. There are tables to erect and bins to assemble and washing up to be done! It is all quite a job for a team of volunteers, but with teamwork and humour and Ann supervising it all works very well. The audience appreciate their very nice lunches every week.'* Wendell arrives early to print programmes and on hand to greet, offer a warm welcome and give out the programmes of the day are Verity Tranter and Graham Stephens-Jones who both work hard behind the scenes along with David Dean to make sure all runs smoothly.

By one o'clock the church pews are filled with audience members of up to 100 – nowadays, well informed through the church's website or social media and by Wendell's eye-catching designs - eager

to hear from the many regular and new performers Soundbites attracts. Audiences are loyal, enthusiastic and generous and greatly appreciate the skilled and talented performers. Former vicar, Jo Loveridge recalls, *'Jill Crossland kindly sent me a video of her encore Jesu Joy, at her latest Soundbites concert, it moved me to tears as I remembered how much Soundbites meant to me as the vital midweek time of reflection and joy.'* Longtime supporter of Soundbites Clio Bromley, sister of Brian, who performed himself many times in recitals at Soundbites, comments that *'Soundbites is such an important part of my week which I look forward to immensely'* and that she *'loves the variety of gifted musicians and varied musical programmes (particularly the organ recitals!) and misses them greatly during the holiday months'.* Clio was a great supporter of her brother who served All Saints' for over fifty years as chorister, Director of Music and later, associate organist and Emeritus Organist, and who sadly died in 2024. Brian's legacy lives on at All Saints' (he was responsible for the 1971 organ overhaul***) and he is greatly missed.

Organ recitals are regular a feature throughout the year and in 2024 we welcomed back David Dunnett, Organist of Norwich Cathedral, who gave a typically flamboyant and brilliant recital early in May and on 6th November, exactly twenty-eight years to the day as that Soundbites began, in November 1996, Thomas Dilley played a thrilling recital that included Bach's Passacaglia in C minor. Thomas's parents, Richard (French Horn player and former chorister) and Vanessa (Clarinettist) each performed recitals themselves at the very first series back in November 1996 and have both returned several times since.

After that initial run of four successful concerts throughout November, a second short series began in May 1997 and by the Autumn that year, the current pattern of term-time concerts was established. When possible, a musical theme links recitals – the first three concerts of 2024 titled 'A Viennese New Year' celebrated that important cultural city with works by Haydn and Beethoven. The third concert given by violinist Beth Spendlove with Ian Ray at piano, was a musical journey along the river Danube including music from the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania. Throughout the Autumn 24 season the theme continued with the late works of Franz Schubert an important musical thread, Filippo Di Bari's lyrical and expressive performance of Schubert's final *Sonata in B flat major (D960*) concluding the season on 27th November.

Young musicians, too, were well represented in 2024 and from the earliest days an emphasis on providing professional opportunities for fledgeling musicians at the beginning of their careers has been an important feature of the Soundbites programmes. Rose continues*; 'Soundbites concerts also provided performance opportunities for Simon Balle, Richard Hale schools and Colchester Institute School of Music among others, and even branched out into evening events*. Simon Balle's star pianist Ciera Thompson took centre stage with fellow advanced students in June 24 and in November, 'Schola Cantorum' from St. Edmund's College gave a complete performance of Faure's Requiem to mark the centenary of Faure's death. London's Royal College of Music was splendidly represented in November by their student 'Seion String Quartet' with Archie Bonham at the piano.

Encores are always appreciated by the audience and as well as enthusiastic applause, performers always receive a bottle of 'Hailey Cottage' apple juice as an extra token of thanks and we are grateful to Fiona Earl for this kind gesture.

A small steering committee now meets from time to time and oversees operational matters. I am grateful to Rev. Simon Cutmore, DoM Martin Penny, Ann Stephens-Jones, Wendell Newbold, Verity Tranter and David Hunt for their varied contributions which include managing the website and online platforms, designing and distributing publicity materials, organising catering rotas, and greeting and liaising with audience members and musicians. Their efforts, and the efforts of all who contribute are

much appreciated by me and, and I know, by our audience and musical colleagues too. Ian Ray writes, *'I have very much enjoyed visiting All Saints Church over the last 28 years when invited by Chris to perform in the excellent 'Soundbites' lunchtime concerts. The series is very well organised and run extremely efficiently. There is always a warm and appreciative welcome from the audience and a tasty lunch provided. Long may this impressive tradition continue!*'

I hope this short message I received last March from Harold Chaplin, who was a much loved and prominent figure in Herford's musical for many years and who sadly died in 2024, sums up the gratitude of many for the huge team effort that lies at the heart of Soundbites:

Soundbites & the Power of Music
'*Over the years I have been a great admirer of Soundbites. You have even permitted me to give song recitals. What I want to say here is my huge feeling of* ***gratitude*** *for this opportunity not only to perform but, as my Parkinsons D inhibits any thoughts of performing, just to sit and to soak up the 'vibes' - they were very strong today, as I was familiar with the Horn trio. I still walk home using walking poles, but I barely needed them today! So, an enormous THANK YOU!*

Christopher Benham 2025

*Along with Soundbites, the Music Committee organised a wide programme of events, including a twelve-hour sponsored music concert. These efforts together with many personal donations, some in memory of loved ones through an 'organ pipe' sponsorship scheme, saw the organ re-dedicated by the Bishop of Hertford on 24th June 2001. Similar fund raising continued beyond this to secure a new Yamaha concert piano and create organ and choral scholarships through the Music Development Fund. Names of many who made personal contributions are recorded in the Book of Gifts which is displayed in the north isle.

**Member of the current catering team

Ann Stephens-Jones; Graham Stephens-Jones; Norman Anderson; Christine Day, Diana Salthouse; Dorothy Toyn; Hilary Laidler; Tom Laidler; Jane Rees; Jane Turner; Margaret Rank; John Rank; Pat Fairbrass; Roz Barron; Sally Paque; Sara McGee; Su Harvey, Susan Newbold, Valerie Worboys; Judith Pearson; Deb Bowden; June Tether; Elizabeth Dowsett.

We were all so sad to hear that Elizabeth Dowsett passed away recently following a brave battle with cancer. Elizabeth was a member of the team until her illness. She was a wonderful person, always cheerful, caring and anxious to help others and will be remembered with great affection.

***In his report to the PCC, Ian Bell noted *'The organ was extensively reconstructed in 1971, at a time when the current fashion was favouring organs of a very different style, and many very fine 19th century instruments were irretrievably damaged with little gain in musical value to compensate for what was lost. Thankfully the work at Hertford respected the Willis pipework, with tonal changes being principally additions rather than substitutions. We must be grateful in this respect for the far-sightedness of those responsible for commissioning and executing the scheme.*