

TREORCHY MALE CHOIR



MONACO 2013

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MONACO

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As the Treorchy Male Choir entered its 130th year since the original group raised their voices in song at a local public house, choristers have been fortunate to sing before some incredibly prestigious individuals. From the early days of performing for Queen Victoria at Windsor to entertaining Queen Elizabeth II and her family on numerous occasions since, the Choir has enjoyed over a century of royal recognition and approval. However in all that time the Treorchy men have not performed for royalty of other nations, until the wonderful opportunity arose for the Choir to undertake its first visit to Monaco.

The invitation came from Mark Thomas, President of the Monaco Welsh Association who launched the first St David's Day Dinner in 2012. Mark's late father was Richard "Clem" Thomas, the international rugby player who received 26 caps for Wales, becoming Captain before retirement in 1959. Clem later became a well-known rugby journalist and author who published the first history of the British Lions. Clem's second son Greg Thomas, who was the media officer for the 2009 British and Irish Lions decided to update his father's magnum opus as the Lions were approaching their 125th Anniversary in 2013. Together the brothers decided that to mark this occasion they would hold a special St David's Day Dinner, publish an updated second-edition of the book to launch that night and invite not only celebrities from film and television, but also a whole host of rugby internationals from all of the home nations. However, Mark soon realised that his celebrity evening needed traditional Welsh entertainment, and where better to turn than to the most famous Choir of them all – Treorchy. It was with huge excitement that the Choir learned of this all-expenses paid visit to the French Riviera and for several months beforehand the enthusiasm for the trip continued to grow. It certainly was a most unforgettable occasion and far surpassed everyone's expectations.

It was a cold wintry evening on Thursday February 28th that choristers gathered in public houses the length of the Rhondda to await the arrival of the double-decker Ferris coach. It was the first time for the Choir to use this travel firm, but were delighted to find that their driver was their old friend Walter ("Wally") who formerly worked for Edwards Coaches! Leaving Treherbert at 10.45pm and Treorchy at 11pm, the coach snaked its way down the valley with excited chorister after excited chorister boarding at their various locations. On reaching Cardiff's BBC studios the coach began its long 179-mile motorway journey to Gatwick Airport where they met Principal Guest Conductor Dr Alwyn Humphreys and Assistant Conductor David Hutchings who had stayed overnight with their various family members. With Helen Roberts travelling with the choristers from Wales, it meant that a touring party of 67 individuals were united in the departure lounge of the airport for some pre-flight breakfast and drinks (at 5.30am!). For the first time on tour the choristers were all dressed in official Choir uniform of blazer, blue shirt, grey

trousers and tie, to travel to their destination, making a very smart looking outfit of men.

At 7.40am the Easyjet aircraft departed the UK and travelled through France for a 1 hour 40 minute journey – covering 866 miles – to the southern city of Nice. It was a quick journey through security, passport control and baggage before all choristers met in the coach parking area and boarded either the 49-seater or the smaller 25-seater coach that awaited them. For the next half an hour they travelled through some beautiful French countryside before reaching the unmistakable sights of Monaco. This breathtaking scene of billion-pound homes, sports cars, yachts, sunshine and the harbour, coupled with the images of the elegant super-rich who walked the boutique-filled streets, left choristers bewildered by the sights before them.

Since the opening of the first casino, the Principality of Monaco has grown to become a world-famous recreation centre for the rich and famous. Now a major banking centre holding over £100billion worth of funds, the state has no income tax and low business taxes and is well known for being a tax haven. Monaco also has the world's highest life expectancy at nearly 90 years and the lowest unemployment rate at 0% with over 48,000 workers who commute from France and Italy each day. For the third year in a row, Monaco in 2011 had the world's most expensive real estate market, at \$65,600 per square metre. Monaco has the world's lowest poverty rate and the highest number of millionaires and billionaires per capita in the world. Monaco also has the largest police force with 515 officers for just 35,000 people.

On reaching the Principality, which borders France on three sides and the Mediterranean Sea on the other, choristers became very much aware of how small the area actually is. Monaco has a coastline of 4.1km and the width varies from 1.7km to 349 metres – making it the second smallest and the most densely populated country in the world. Dropping down into the harbour area below the slopes of Mont Agel towards the most populated “Quartier” of Monte Carlo, choristers viewed Port Hercules before travelling through the narrow streets to reach the Novotel Hotel on Boulevard Princesse Charlotte by 12noon. Unfortunately not all of the rooms were ready for the 67 guests, but those who received their hotel keys settled into their rooms before venturing out to the wonderful sights of Monte Carlo.

Literally within minutes of reaching the hotel choristers were delighted to meet Welsh film star of such hits as “Twin Town” and “Notting Hill”, Rhys Ifans who was also staying there. Following plenty of banter and laughter Rhys was seen departing for his hotel room wearing a Choir tie, donated by chorister Ian Reynolds no less! With such a celebrity welcome to the Principality, choristers began the short walk downhill towards Casino du Paris, following the streets made famous since the 1950s of the annual Monaco Grand Prix. As the singers descended along Avenue Sant-Michel, crossing Avenue de la Costa, they reached Allee des Boulingrins with its beautiful fountain and gardens. It was at this point that the choristers were surrounded by three of Monte Carlo's most famous buildings, Le Grand Casino de Monte Carlo, Brasserie le

Café de Paris and the Hotel de Paris - just names from Ian Fleming spy novels to many until now!

It was at this point that Choir Secretary Selwyn Jones met with Mark Thomas in the foyer of the Hotel de Paris and with other chorister in tow was introduced to Welsh entrepreneur Wain Powell who originated from South Cornelly. The flamboyant, outrageous and fun-loving individual took the Treorchy men to his heart and soon whisked almost 30 choristers across the square to the famous Café de Paris where he gave them the most lavish of Monaco welcomes. Free drinks were filling the long banquet-table before orders were made for expensive fillet steaks for all. His incredible kindness and generosity was rewarded with impromptu Welsh choruses, much to the delight of the waiters and fellow diners who applauded loudly over dinner. Remembering that a special night lay ahead, the choristers reluctantly left this extraordinary welcoming committee and returned to the Novotel and prepare for the evening performance.

At 6pm the choristers walked to the Hotel de Paris/ Exemplifying the privileged aura of this remarkable place the choristers were breathtaken by the majestic lobby with its sculptures, marble colonnades and crystal chandeliers which combine to create a sense of awe-inspiring solemnity. This memorable destination is a five-star luxury hotel and a listed historical site since the end of the 19th century. Opened in 1863 by Charles III this magnificent venue epitomises a European lifestyle and all year round hosts prestigious galas and receptions. With restaurants of international renown, notably Le Louis XV-Alain Ducasse and Le Grill, the Hôtel de Paris Monte-Carlo is recognised as a temple of gourmet cuisine. Its wine cellars are among the finest in the world, a home to almost 600,000 bottles and a treasure trove in itself.

Walking through the beautiful rooms and corridors, the choristers then stood aghast at the site of the Salle Empire banqueting room where they were to perform that evening. This palace-like room with its gold ornamental ceiling, masterpieces adorning the walls, archways, crystal chandeliers and breathtaking terrace overlooking the harbour was simply wondrous. Standing in such opulent surroundings, choristers were left with a sense of nervousness and bewilderment of what would face them that evening. The twenty or more dining tables were laid and prepared for the celebrity audience, complete with a Treorchy Male Choir programme alongside the menu and complimentary bottles of spirits, chocolates and gifts. The menu for the evening included marinated salmon "gravelax" style, celery root and green apple, blinis and sour cream followed by the main course of a shoulder of preserved lamb with spring vegetables. The third course was a rhubarb crumble or strawberry sorbet and home made delicacies and chocolates. A total of 250 diners were expected to attend the prestigious event.

Following a brief rehearsal with Dr Alwyn Humphreys the choristers were free to relax in their own ante-room, surrounded by polished wood walls, where drinks were served all evening. A free evening meal was prepared in a staff dining room on the upper floor of the hotel before the choristers settled into

their surroundings and awaited the first performance of the evening. At 6.45pm, amid huge excitement, the Choir was ushered to the foyer of the Hotel de Paris and stood in position on the majestic marble staircase which dominates the awe-inspiring room. Everyone awaited the arrival of the special guests for the evening, the paparazzi were lined up, cameras pointed and at the ready. The Choir, filled with trepidation took deep breaths and remembered the one opening note that Dr Humphreys had sung to them as this first performance would be unaccompanied. Then amid a flurry of flashing cameras the main doors of the Hotel de Paris opened and Mark Thomas welcomed Their Serene Highnesses Prince Albert II of Monaco and his wife, Princess Charlene. At that moment Dr Humphreys led the Choir into a tremendous performance of "Men of Harlech" which clearly left the Royal Couple and the many guests spellbound by the wall of sound that greeted them. Their Serene Highnesses were invited to meet Dr Humphreys where they heaped praise on the Choir's performance and stood for photographs with the Choir as a perfect backdrop. The Prince, who is a close friend of Mark Thomas and regularly visits the UK to watch various rugby internationals, sported a bright Welsh dragon tie, much to the amusement of the Welshmen who greeted him.

Monaco is a principality governed under a form of constitutional monarchy, with Prince Albert II as head of state. Even though Prince Albert II is a constitutional monarch, he still has immense political power. The House of Grimaldi have ruled Monaco, with brief interruptions, since 1297. Albert II (Albert Alexandre Louis Pierre Grimaldi; born 14 March 1958) is the son of Rainier III, Prince of Monaco, and the American actress Grace Kelly. His sisters are Caroline, Princess of Hanover, heiress presumptive to the Crown, and Princess Stéphanie of Monaco. In July 2011, Prince Albert married Charlene Wittstock, the famous South African sportswoman.

The Prince's involvement in the proceedings was more than just due to his interest in the sport of rugby however. It was also a fundraising opportunity for the Princess Charlene Foundation which supports children across the world through sport. With their departure to the Salle Empire choristers were ushered back to the ante-room, with some congregating on the marble staircase to their room, relaxing in the atmosphere of this special evening. A host of rugby internationals passed them on their way to the ballroom, most accommodating by stopping to talk, sign programmes and have photographs taken. At one point the corridor went deathly quiet as the unmistakable image of Dame Shirley Bassey walked passed the choristers. Suddenly the "girl from Tiger Bay" stopped, turned, smiled and shouted, "Well, is anyone going to say hello to Shirley?" Amid roars of laughter the choristers duly obliged and gave her a typically warm Welsh welcome!

At 7pm the choristers lined up wearing their tuxedos and a daffodil on their lapel marched two abreast into the Salle Empire. Passing by many of their own rugby heroes, they mounted the two-tier stage adjacent to a beautiful grand piano and surveyed the scene before them. To the left stood Dame Shirley with her guests, other celebrities including Rhys Ifans in the distance, alongside his friend Kevin Allen, the director of the black cult film "Twin Town"

(and uncle of Lilly Allen). To the right stood an array of rugby legends waiting patiently for the first note to be performed. It is hard to explain the scene that greeted the Choir. The elegance of the evening, the sheer wealth, fame and luxury of the room and its inhabitants all created an almost intoxicating atmosphere.

Some of the guests from the world of rugby included Gareth Edwards, JPR Williams, Ieuan Evans, Bob Norster, Peter Winterbottom, Mike Hall and Scott Gibbs (who proposed to his girlfriend at the dinner). Also celebrating the Welsh Patron Saint's Day was Welsh artist Andrew Vicari along with former Harrods owner Mohammed Al Fayed, head of Easyjet airlines Sir Stelios Haji-loannou and the father of Formula 1 Champion Jenson Button. However, it was the tremendous performances by the Treorchy Male Choir that was judged the highlight of the entire evening. Principal Guest Conductor Dr Alwyn Humphreys and pianist Helen Roberts led the large Choir through a vast repertoire of popular tunes, operatic arias and many Welsh favourites that caused thunderous applause from the rich and famous.

As the drinks reception progressed the Choir gave a varied repertoire of songs, much to the delight of all who attended. Each of them stopped to applaud, with Dame Shirley giving the loudest response of all with constant "Bravos!" from her table. The Drinks Reception Programme was:

Llef
Morte Christe
I Dreamed A Dream
Do You Hear the People Sing
Laudamus

A lengthy period of relaxation, where clearly some choristers were beginning to feel the effects of little sleep and the euphoria of the occasion, took place. Choristers spent the next two hours in their ante-room, enjoying the many boxes of local beer which was shipped to them by the organisers of the dinner. The guests were treated to plenty of entertainment also, including an auction which raised tens of thousands of pounds and a question and answer session with Gareth Edwards and Ieuan Evans. However, one of the other highlights of the evening was a presentation of Dylan Thomas's Under Milkwood by Rhys Ifans himself, who was dressed in a suit sporting the Treorchy Male Choir tie presented to him earlier that day.

At 9.30pm the Choir was again called upon and once more marched onto the stage, this time to rapturous applause from the well-refreshed diners. Stood to attention, eyes fixed firmly on their Musical Director, the Choir began this short pre-dessert performance with a beautiful performance of "Calon Lan" to the melody of "The Rose". The song was exquisite and set the tone for the splendid music that was in store for the guests. This section of the dinner saw the following items performed:

Calon Lan (to "The Rose")
Myfanwy

Let It Be Me
Unwaith Eto'n Nghymru Annwyl (Tenor Soloist Dean Powell)

As always "Myfanwy" received a typically enthusiastic response from the many Welsh people who attended the dinner. It was also another lovely rendition of "Let It Be Me" which Dr Humphreys conducted with such brilliance that received another loud applause. However, nothing prepared the Choir – let alone the soloist - for the response to the final item of this selection of music. For the first time that evening the Choir's Master of Ceremonies Dean Powell addressed the audience with a respectful welcome to Their Serene Highnesses and celebrity guests, explaining the significance of "Unwaith Eto'n Nghymru Annwyl" and how it was regarded as the song of the Welsh exiles and dedicated to all those in the audience who no longer lived in their homeland. Those present will confirm that Dean, who sang as soloist in "Unwaith Eto", (which he first sang 21 years earlier in concert with the Choir) gave one of the most rousing performances of his career. Ultimately the response to this performance displayed how well it was sung because Their Serene Highnesses, Dame Shirley Bassey and the entire Salle Empire ballroom of celebrity guests rose to their feet in a thunderous standing ovation with Rhys Ifans in particularly cheering and shouting loudly from his table. It certainly was a momentous occasion for Dean and the entire Choir as they left the stage someone awe-struck by the appreciation of their singing. Somewhat teary eyed they returned to their room, filled with excitement and a true sense of adrenalin coursing through the veins – determined to give a magnificent final performance that evening.

It wasn't long before the Choir were able to sing their last selection of songs. As 11pm approached they were ushered once more into the majestic surroundings and stood upright, facing their Conductor and prepared for the musical invasion (in the nicest possible term) ahead. Once again the response was overwhelming. The programme was:

Men of Harlech
Llanfair

Gwahoddiad
Cwm Rhondda

Sospan Fach
Nessun Dorma

We'll Keep A Welcome
Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau

Master of Ceremonies Dean Powell interspersed the programme with several introductions of pieces, relating to Welsh culture, the enthusiasm for rugby and the choruses often heard from the terraces of many a sporting stadium whenever Wales play their national game! Clearly this was welcomed by the rugby fraternity in the room, with many singing along to favourites such as "Cwm Rhondda" and "Sospan Fach", including Rhys Ifans whose arm

swaying enthusiasm, along with Dame Shirley's constant shouting of "Bravo!" made the evening all the more surreal for the Treorchy men. "Sospan Fach" is a firm favourite of the Prince's and it was noticed how he sang along to the item. Also "Nessun Dorma" and "We'll Keep a Welcome", which saw another standing ovation, brought many an audience member to tears, not least of which Dame Shirley herself. The Choir's new friend, Wain Powell, also infiltrated the ranks and sang alongside choristers on stage!

At this juncture Dean Powell stood forward again to address the audience and explained that this was one of the most unforgettable events in the lives of all those on stage, adding this was probably the most prestigious engagement the Treorchy Male Choir had undertaken in a generation. He went on to explain that the opportunity to perform in Monaco had come due to the kindness of one man, Mark Thomas. Amid rapturous applause (particularly from the Prince), Dean announced that Mr Thomas was to be made a recipient of Honorary Membership of the Treorchy Male Choir. Clearly taken aback by this generous presentation, Mark Thomas rose to accept a Choir plaque from Secretary Selwyn Jones, deeply moved by the gesture. As the audience calmed from the surprise announcement, a second was given! Dean went on to explain that Honorary Membership of the Choir was also to be bestowed on someone else in the audience, His Serene Highness Prince Albert II of Monaco no less! Amid a standing ovation he walked forward to receive the Choir plaque from Dr Alwyn Humphreys, delighted and overwhelmed with the honour.

On settling back into their seats the Choir concluded the evening's performance with the Welsh National Anthem, sung with such spirit from the thrilled audience on that spectacular night. Choristers marched from the stage to the terrace entrance of the Salle Empire ballroom to enjoy a free bar for the remainder of the evening. However, many enjoyed the opportunity of meeting their rugby and entertainment heroes, all of whom generously stopped to applaud the choristers on a remarkable performance. Dean Powell was personally thanked by Prince Albert, while Princess Charlotte called on Secretary Selwyn Jones and Assistant Conductor David Hutchings for photographs.

Dame Shirley Bassey was probably the most photographed guest of them all. She stood and talked at length with the choristers about various concerts where they had seen her perform. Others had programmes signed and reminisced on highlights of her career. She was the most gracious of guests, readily meeting and greeting each of the singers – even Stuart Smith who inadvertently stood on her foot as a photograph was taken! Similarly Rhys Ifans and Kevin Allen were called upon for photographs and autographs while Mark Thomas's brother Greg and sister Caroline filmed the proceedings, calling on members of the audience and Choir to give interviews to the camera which Dean did on behalf of the Treorchy party.

The hours passed by in a state of absolute euphoria. Copies of the large tome celebrating the 125th Anniversary of the British Lions was presented to every chorister, who met with the rugby giants in the room and asked for their

signatures on it. Spirits, beer, champagne flowed until the early hours and the party atmosphere prevailed throughout. Choristers of course remained on the very best of behaviour, not singing after the concert, but enjoying the opportunity to talk with members of the audience and revel in the success of their performance. It was in this atmosphere that the evening turned into early morning and finally the guests began to disperse, leaving a largely Welsh contingency of celebrities and choristers in the ballroom until almost 2am. Eventually they returned to their hotels with the last of the choristers joining Rhys Ifans on uphill struggle to the hotel where he duly marched to the reception and said there was an “international emergency” and the bar had to be opened! Fortunately, the staff refused and the revellers soon went to their bedrooms.

At 7am the next morning, after only a few hours sleep, the Treorchy party met for breakfast and began to load their luggage onto the two coaches outside the Novotel. At 8.45am they departed, but not before admirer Wain Powell appeared in his open-top Porsche and marched on the coach to entertain the choristers still further with his humour and good character. Finally the coaches left the French Riviera and returned to Nice International Airport. Choristers chatted endlessly all of the way, reminiscing about the incredible evening they had witnessed. The flight departed at 11.30am and 1hour 35minutes later they arrived at Gatwick Airport, where once again faithful Wally and the double-decker Ferris coach awaited their arrival. On the long journey to the West country, chorister Daryl Stacey once again took on the roll of “Captain Clec”, relaying to the audience all of the silly errors (twp!) that choristers had made over the weekend. The list speaks for itself:

Mention in Dispatches

John Weaver	For thinking an air steward looked like Mo Farrow (brother of Mia possibly?!)
Tom Belmont	Asked Ceri Warren to hold his boarding card as he used the toilet, but Ceri walked through security and passport with it.
Gareth Evans	Turned up late for rehearsal and is now known as “Last Man Walking In”
Martin Wilkins	Thought a club sandwich in the hotel would cost £2 at 2am. When it arrived and cost £12 he refused to pay for it. What do you expect in Monaco in the middle of the night!
David Birch	Disappointed the free bar didn’t have orange juice!
Ceri Rees	Was in a blind panic that he had lost his bag, but it was on his shoulder
Daryl Stacey	Pushed Dean through security and the alarm went off. Daryl said Dean had some metal in his legs which was due to the alarm. The security said it may have something to do with the metallic wheelchair he was sitting in at the time!
Gerald Emmanuel	Bought a £7.99 bottle of brandy in Duty Free which actually cost £25.00 so he left it there!

Roger Watkins Blew a candle out in the hotel and the wax splashed all over his face and dinner jacket

Dean's Group Islwyn, Reg, Mark and Dean were stood outside the Novotel in their tuxedos waiting for a taxi. A car pulled up with American tourists who though the foursome were concierge and asked them to help with their baggage!

Bronze

Paul Evans Had a Winchester bullet from Denver on his key ring which was confiscated at security in Nice airport. Paul quipped "they haven't found the pound of semtex in my shoes yet!"

Silver

John Weaver When Passport Control in Gatwick asked him where he was going he said "Morroco"

Gold

Dean Powell On meeting the Prince he was unsure of protocol so immediately bowed. Then he met Scott Gibbs and reminisced about their schooldays but Scott denied he went to that school – which he did!

It was a long and weary journey on the coach for the next few hours with many catching up on some much-needed sleep before eventually reaching the seaside town of Weston-Super-Mare. It was there that the Choir was to perform another concert that evening to a capacity audience in the Playhouse Theatre. Such is the popularity of the Choir! The performance in Monaco was undoubtedly one of the most remarkable concerts ever undertaken in the living memory of the Treorchy Male Choir. The make-up of the Royal Audience made it an incredibly prestigious event, coupled with the breathtaking venue and the generosity of the people of Monte Carlo. Such an event will remain unforgettable for those who attended. As for the Treorchy Male Choir and their momentous performance? They were deservedly treated like superstars.