

The Choir Founder

The Lancaster and District Male Voice Choir is the 5th oldest in Great Britain. The Choir was founded by **Richard Thomas Grosse**, who was well-known in the area for his singing ability.

Richard was born in the town of Over in Cheshire on the 18th of October 1855, the youngest of a family of ten. He was endowed with a beautiful alto voice and at the age of nine he joined the choir at the Chapel Royal, Windsor. He sang on many occasions before Queen Victoria and members of the Royal Family. He also sang solos at the weddings of some of the Royal Princesses.

He studied as a pupil of Sir George Elvey until the age of thirteen, when he was appointed Alto soloist at Norwich Cathedral under Dr Buck, to whom he was articled as an assistant organist. When his voice broke, he continued in this position for a further two and a half years. He then went to London as assistant organist to a Mr Redhead at St. Mary Magdalene's Church. Mr Redhead was the composer of the tune to which the hymn 'Rock of Ages' is frequently sung. Richard was also a member of the Association of Old Choristers of St. George's, Windsor.

Relinquishing the music profession, he became a schoolmaster in Over Kellet for 23 years during which time he was Choirmaster and Organist at St. Cuthbert's Church there. In November 1876 he married Elizabeth Pratt, the daughter of Ralph Pratt of Over Kellet, and they had ten children. He moved to Lancaster in 1894 and became Choirmaster and Organist at the Centenary Congregational Church, where his choir won many prizes at the leading Music Festivals in the North of England. The Centenary Prize Quartet was formed comprising of T Whittaker, E Ellis, F Cockerhill and Richard himself. This quartet went on to win about seventy prizes at the leading music festivals in the North of England. Richard personally won several prizes as Alto soloist, his voice being 'wonderfully mellow and pure'.

In 1899, Richard founded the Lancaster Male Voice Choir and was its first conductor. In December 1906 he was appointed by the Reverend Ker Cooper to be Choirmaster and Organist at Christ Church, Lancaster, where he served for nineteen years. This included the period when the church celebrated its Jubilee in October 1907. He was the recipient of an illuminated scroll from the Vicar and the Choir, congratulating him on the music at the Jubilee Festival.

In 1909, under his direction, the Lancaster Male Voice Choir gave the first-ever concert in the Ashton Hall in what was known then as the 'New Town Hall' in Dalton Square, Lancaster (the Town Hall having just been re-located from the previous premises in Market Square). How proud he would have been in the knowledge that his choir would celebrate its centenary in 1999 in the very same hall and celebrate the centenary of the Town Hall likewise ten years later.

He retired through ill-health in 1925. On the 9th of November 1926, he and his wife Elizabeth, celebrated their Golden Wedding at their home at 42, Dale Street, Lancaster. Among the guests were their fourteen grandchildren.

The Founder's family history

Richard Thomas was born into a family which can trace its ancestry back to the 18th century to a part of Germany called Anhalt Dessau. This was one of the minor German principalities, and the area around Dessau and Leipzig was where the family estates were located. Richard's great-great grandfather was Master of the Horse at the Court of the Grand Duke. This man's son, Leopold Moritz Grosse (1740-1825), was highly regarded by the Grand Duke and he bestowed upon Leopold the prestigious Order of Albrecht the Bear, an honour which was given only for meritorious service or bravery. Apparently, Leopold bore a scar on his cheek from an encounter with an enraged stag in the local forests.

Leopold married twice. His first wife was Henriette Schneider (1747-1779), by whom he had two children -- Wilhelmine Christiane Marie and Moritz Wilhelm (1778-1844). The British branch of the family comes from Moritz Wilhelm.

Moritz Wilhelm was Master of the Forests, was an intimate friend of the Crown Prince, and he was obviously destined for high office within the State. Unfortunately, one incident put paid to this. One of Moritz's servants was set upon by another Court Official and his retinue. They said that the servant was wearing a uniform which was an insult to the State, thereby criticising the behaviour of Moritz himself. Moritz was outraged that his honour had been besmirched, so he issued a challenge to the rival official. This challenge was ignored so he set out to find the gentleman and set about him with a horsewhip. Such an action could not go unpunished and the sentence was banishment from the State. He was disowned by his father, so he left Germany and came to London.

Moritz lived in Halle where he went into partnership with an Englishman in a music shop, but the venture was not a success. However, this time coincided with Napoleonic forces across Western Europe, so he went to Belgium where he became a commissioner in the Napoleonic Army. In the siege of Flushing he was taken prisoner and sent back to England as a prisoner-of-war -- manacled and forced to feed from buckets. After he had been registered, he was sent to Ashby-de-la-Zouch.

Following his release in 1807, he went to London once more and tried to enlist in the army of the Duke of Cumberland, but (probably because of his previous affiliations) he was refused. So once again Moritz resorted to his other pursuit – music - and he became a music teacher on the periphery of the Court. In 1812, he married a lady called Maria Thurston (1786-1878), the daughter of John Thurston of Attleborough in Suffolk. They had six children, four girls and two boys. The elder of the two boys was christened William John Thurston Grosse and he, in time, married Susanna Scholl and they had ten children, six girls and four boys. The youngest boy was Richard Thomas Grosse.

This article is based on that produced by Roland Brooke, a member of the Choir from August 1987 to his death in May 2013, during which time he was also the author of the first Choir website. He acknowledges his indebtedness to Richard Thomas Grosse's great-granddaughter, Mrs. Barbara Robinson and her husband Terence, of Penrith, for the invaluable information regarding their family history from which his original article was compiled.