

THREE "ROOKIES" REPORT ON THE NWEMF SUMMER SCHOOL AT AMBLESIDE 2010

Half-way through the holiday, we three were persuaded by Elizabeth Dodd to write a report for the NWEMF magazine. She asked us so nicely - how could we refuse! We decided to pool our impressions and, as a member of NWEMF, I, (Jeanette) would put the report together with the E-Mails from Margaret, now back in Scotland and Angela, in Bournemouth

Before we arrived we each had received the pages detailing arrangements. As Margaret said, it arrived in good time but was rather daunting until as the week progressed, it became clear that the excellent organisation meant that the course ran very smoothly. Angela and I travelled together and, like Margaret, who arrived later, we overshot the tiny site entrance even though we were looking out for it. It all added to the excitement of arriving as newcomers in a new place. We found reception buzzing with greetings and laughter as people met friends from previous years' summer schools. When we were seen to be new-comers we were warmly welcomed and helped to settle in. Throughout the week everyone was eager to help us if we looked lost as we all went our separate ways to the next session. Like a kaleidoscope, the groupings split up and locations changed as we all moved cheerfully from small choirs, to single-voice ensembles, coaching sessions in lute songs, dance, viol and recorder playing. Looking back now, it still seems a blur. The organisation was brilliant.

As the days passed we gradually got used to the hilly site and threaded our way up to the Barn for larger group events. Some of these had originally been scheduled to take place at the Hilltop site, but the University had since sold Hilltop as they prepared to close the whole Ambleside campus. We also used the smaller rooms above the Barn, or went higher up the hill to the Dance Studio which was used for singing throughout the week. We began to recognise the different tutors; Roger Wilkes and Peter Syrus, as the two principal choral conductors, with Jonathan Morgan (tutor

of wind instruments), Martin Eastwell (lutes, early guitars) and Philip Gruar (recorders and flutes). Being female, Deborah Catterall, (all the "warm-up" sessions and the voice training) and Elizabeth Dodd, (viols and dance) were easier to identify as they all took charge of varying sized vocal/instrumental ensembles. Angela and I agreed with Margaret, who said that she especially enjoyed working with such a talented group of conductors, each of whom brought his or her particular expertise to the individual sessions.

The weather was kind and we only needed umbrellas once or twice. We three were principally there for the singing and were soon immersed in beautiful works by Lassus, Victoria, Byrd, Tallis, Parsons and others. It is impossible to list all the individual pieces that we sang as the list varied for everyone, depending on which group you were singing with, which changed at nearly every session. To prove my point I am grateful to my friend Rhoda Bramhall who took note of what she sang and listed over 30 pieces, not including the music sung at the late night sessions. These ran from 10pm to about 11.15 and Margaret and I went on the Wednesday evening. We enjoyed it, but could not have done it every night and admired the stamina of those who did.

Picking out highlights, for me, was hard, as everything was so enjoyable, but they include singing Byrd's *Aspice Domine*, where Peter Syrus had us all doing a "walk-about" while singing, also singing Robert Parson's *Deliver Me from Mine Enemies* at the final Banquet under Roger Wilkes where we finally achieved the meaning Roger wanted us to express. I enjoyed the two dance sessions that I attended where we learned, not only the dances, but the correct way to hold our arms for a fifteenth century dance. This all helped me put the music into a broader context. Sadly I also discovered that I had two left feet and no head for remembering the steps - Elizabeth was very patient! At the Presentation evening on the Wednesday, when people showed what they had been doing in the specialised sessions, I discovered that I had missed out on

trying the Lute Song. It was a revelation to see how the song was transformed by Deborah in 5 minutes. I definitely hope to try it if I get to next year's summer school!

Margaret remembers the 4.15 slots of special interests as being fascinating, reminding her of how much she has to learn and providing insight into very specialised playing. Also she enjoyed the chance to play recorders and Elizabeth's very patient lesson on trying to play a viol.

She and I remember the lovely session singing with Vivien and Richard playing their viols in the little house called the Beehive and all three of us thoroughly enjoyed the session in the Barn on the final day where everyone crammed in to play and sing the 40 part motet by Striggio – very exhilarating! I can still see the neck of the theorbo/chittarrone narrowly missing the light fittings.

So far I haven't mentioned the food which we all agree was unfailingly delicious. I took great pleasure in tucking into the cooked breakfasts as a change from my normal daily porridge.

The final banquet brought the week to a resounding end with the courses interspersed with so many different performances including limericks, madrigals and readings, some serious others hilarious. Roger gave a final speech, saying farewell to Ambleside with all its happy memories. He also commented in particular on this year's Summer School as being one of the best, having so many instruments, being played so well.

Then we all started to say our goodbyes except those who were staying up for the very last late night singing. Many people were sad not to be returning to Ambleside again after so many happy years. But Burton Manor looks very interesting, even if it doesn't have the back-drop of Lakeland fells. Perhaps after a few years it will hold happy memories for everyone too.

So, all in all, a week of very enjoyable experiences. We all three agree that we are looking forward to next year and meeting newly-made friends again.

If you think that Angela has been rather silent during this report it is because I have kept her contribution in one piece. I think it makes a good finale.

Thoughts of a "First-timer"

I can understand why NWEMF Summer Schools have been attracting students for 29 years and look set to do so for the foreseeable future! There was no sign of cliquiness among the "old hands", instead there was a welcome to all newcomers in and out of class sessions.

In my case the therapeutic effect of the social and music-making sides of the course was very evident. My recovery from a viral infection was achieved during the week with the "coup de grace" being delivered by the Striggio on Thursday afternoon. I've sung the work before but not with such an array of instruments. I take my hat off to Roger who managed to sort out an, at times, unruly mob of singers and produce such a splendid performance!

The range of all the activities was very impressive. Next year, when I'm not busy singing I'd love to "have a go" at dance and lute playing.

Above all, my admiration for Roger and Valerie is boundless. Between them they assembled an excellent team of tutors, sorted out 67 students of varying ages and backgrounds, gave us a well-planned, clearly-set-out programme for the week and contrived to keep everyone happy!

I just hope there'll be room for us at Burton Manor in 2011 – I'll be watching the website in January like a hawk! – Angela.

Margaret Miller, Jeanette Burden and Angela Wood