

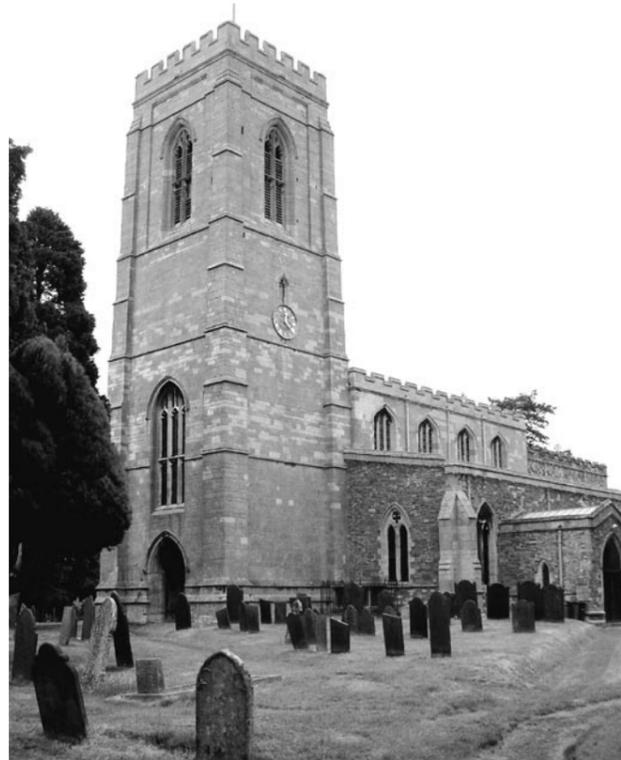
The year 2009 sees many commemorative events across the globe marking the 250th anniversary of the death of George Frederic Handel on April 14th, 1759. But in this south-eastern corner of Leicestershire we are celebrating our own special Handel 250th anniversary. For on Thursday September 27th, 1759 a unique performance of Handel's Messiah was given in the church of St Peter, Church Langton.

# HANDEL'S MESSIAH & CHURCH LANGTON AN ANNIVERSARY PERSPECTIVE

By David Johnson



This sturdy 14th-century church, which gives its name to Church Langton, is the most impressive of three churches serving the scattered settlements of the Langtons. It is by any standard a large church for a small village, but it serves both East and West Langton, and was originally the mother church for all the villages. The church stands out on slightly raised ground as a focal point, and its huge tower can be seen for miles around.

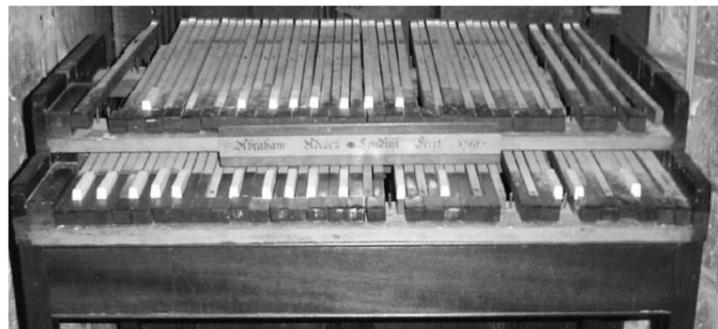


ST PETER'S CHURCH, CHURCH LANGTON

The performance of Messiah at St Peter's on September 27th, 1759 was extraordinary. It was the first performance ever given in a mere parish church (as opposed to cathedral or collegiate chapel), the first given in a village, indeed the first outside any major centre of population. The rector installed a new organ to mark the occasion. Sadly it hasn't survived, but its fine organ case still exists and the remains of the original keyboard with the name of the maker, Abraham Adcock of London and the date 1759, can be seen in the church.

The popular myths that exist about this occasion – that Handel conducted the performance and/or that he played the organ for it (he generally did both in earlier performances, conducting from the keyboard) have no substance – for Handel never visited Church Langton, and at the time of this concert he had been dead for five months.

To understand how unusual this occasion was, we need to explore the early history of Messiah performances. Messiah (or The Sacred Oratorio, as it was sometimes called in its early days) was written at breakneck speed by Handel between August 22nd and September 14th, 1741. All of it is original work except four choruses adapted from earlier duets. It is sometimes claimed that it (or some of it) was written while Handel visited the home of his librettist, Charles Jennens at Gopsal Hall, in West Leicestershire, possibly in a temple in the grounds. But there is no definitive evidence for this. It is most likely that it was composed at his house, 25, Brook Street, London. Maybe Handel visited Jennens to discuss progress and exchange ideas, but probably no more.



THE ORIGINAL ORGAN AT ST. PETER'S CHURCH

Messiah was an unusual piece. It was not church music – that is, it didn't relate to the liturgy of the church service as psalm-settings or anthems. The only other church music then written were musical versions of Christ's Passion, like Bach's famous settings. Handel himself had earlier composed two passions. But Messiah was conceived as oratorio – a form invented by Handel for dramatic stories which were not intended to be acted on stage as operas. There was therefore no scenery, and a much bigger role was given to the chorus. Immediately before Messiah, Handel had composed Israel in Egypt, and Saul – both highly dramatic tales from the Old Testament, but intended for concert performance in the London oratorio season during Lent. More importantly they were intended for, and performed in, music halls and theatres. Handel became the master of concert oratorio.

But Messiah, although conceived as oratorio, was not dramatic. It was and is his least theatrical, yet most sacred piece. Despite being the story of the Messiah, prophesied, born and crucified, then of the redemption of the world, the drama is played out in texts which are in turn prophetic, reflective or triumphant. Oddly for a largely New Testament story, most of the texts come from the Old Testament.

Handel intended to include Messiah in his oratorio season at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in Lent 1742, but in the event he accepted an invitation to Dublin, where after a public rehearsal on April 9th the first performance was given in Neal's Music Hall in Fishamble Street on April 13th, the Tuesday in Holy Week. It was presented again in June, both performances raising money for charity. The hall was a new purpose-built music hall, accommodating up to 700 people as well as the musicians. The reception given to Messiah in Dublin was rapturous.

Messiah reached London in 1743 where three performances were given at Covent Garden, to only limited approval. Apparently its subject matter was not regarded as suitable for a theatre! No doubt the change of title from Messiah to Sacred Oratorio was intended to deflect this criticism. However, the early Messiah performances were all given in secular buildings because the church regarded oratorio as a sort of watered-down opera, and definitely not appropriate for performance in a sacred building. Indeed the first performance in Dublin had nearly faltered because Jonathan Swift, Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, initially refused a request for the boys and gentlemen of the cathedral choir to join the chorus.

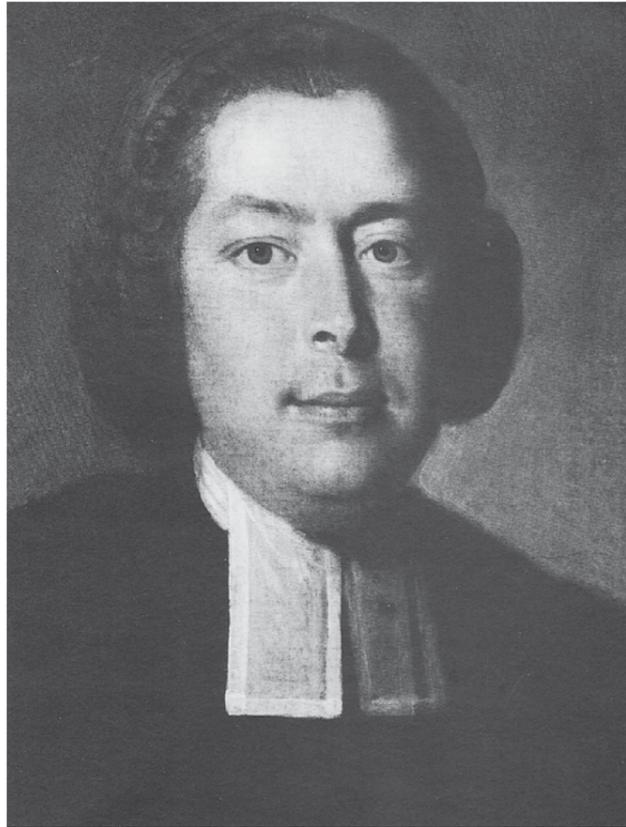
In 1749 Messiah received its first performance in Oxford, in the Sheldonian Theatre as part of the celebrations marking the opening of the Radcliffe Camera. This is significant because it was conducted by Dr William Hayes, Professor of Music at Oxford and organist and master of the choristers at Magdalen College, and later at Worcester Cathedral. He had his own copy of the score (there were very few in circulation) which put him in a commanding position; he was also to be the conductor at Church Langton ten years later.

Regular performances were thereafter given in London, Dublin and Oxford. The most significant was the series given in the 1750s at the Foundling Hospital, London, in the newly opened chapel, which really established Messiah's popularity. The Foundling Hospital had been established ten years earlier by Captain Thomas Coram to care for very young children abandoned by their parents. At his death in 1759 Handel left a fair copy of Messiah's score to the Hospital, an institution that continued to benefit from annual performances of the work. Thereafter performances were increasingly given in sacred buildings, in Bristol Cathedral, Hereford Cathedral (as part of the Three Choir Festival), Winchester Cathedral, and then Church Langton in September 1759. The Church Langton performance was only the sixth given in a public sacred building and clearly the first in an ordinary parish church.

This prestigious event was due to the enthusiasm of Langton's most famous and eccentric rector, William Hanbury, who served from 1750 until his death in 1778. Eccentric is hardly the word, for Hanbury had the most ambitious plans, which he pursued relentlessly, ignoring adverse comment and continually brushing off his critics. He clearly had the gift of the gab, and was well-connected. Most of his musical contacts came from his time studying at the University of Oxford between 1745 and 1748. He was also unashamedly self-promoting, and wrote his own account of the extraordinary events that took place during his music festivals. Secure because his father had



GEORGE FREDERIC HANDEL



WILLIAM HANBURY

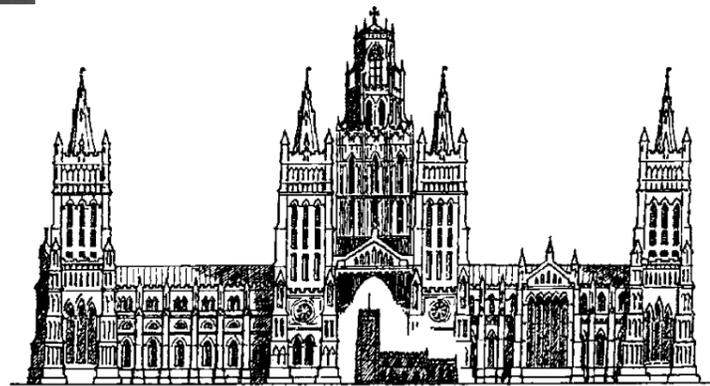
bought him the living, which would then pass down through the family, he was able to pursue his objectives freely, even autocratically. But he did meet a great deal of opposition from other landowners in the area, and there is more than a hint that he badly neglected his clerical and pastoral duties. He was said to have missed services, refused or delayed baptism; and delayed the burial of corpses. Despite having to serve churches in Thorpe and Tur Langton, he refused to appoint a curate to help him.

A horticulturist and architectural enthusiast, Hanbury initiated a widespread but unpopular tree-planting scheme in the Langtons. He created extensive commercial nurseries in Tur Langton and Gumley, and sold plants, shrubs and trees. But his major plans centred on the village church. This was to be enlarged to become the centrepiece of a collegiate foundation inspired by the University of Oxford. Four great quadrangles were planned, incorporating a 'temple of religion and virtue', library, museum, observatory, music school, physic garden, printing office, and county hospital. The new gothic church was to be larger than any English cathedral with a tower and lantern modelled on Ely cathedral but higher than Salisbury's spire. There was also to be a school in the village, and funds were to be made available to help the poor of the parish. All this he said was "conducive to the glory of God and the good of mankind". "Here", he proclaimed, "the distressed shall ever find relief". The grandiose nature of Hanbury's plans would, said an obituary in the Leicester Journal, have taken a thousand years to implement fully.

These plans were to be financed by profits from Hanbury's horticultural schemes and a series of music festivals initially held in St Peter's church, which Hanbury hoped would give great publicity and generate trade for his plant and tree sales. To administer his schemes he set up a charitable trust, The Hanbury Trust, which still exists today. But the chosen trustees were to prove less than enthusiastic about his great schemes, especially the music festival. Hanbury gave them 80 tickets each to sell for the first Messiah performance, but was to be disappointed at the many who were absent and failed to sell their allocations.

The first music festival was planned for September 26th and 27th, 1759, and was to be devoted to the music of the greatest composer of the age, George Frederic Handel. It was to be no ordinary event. A new flagpole for the church was to fly a specially designed flag with an oak tree on one side and the words Faith Hope and Charity on the other - charity of course being the operative word. Sadly the wind blew it into tatters on the first morning! The new organ was ready, and Hanbury erected spacious galleries in the church in anticipation of an audience of 2,000 for Messiah on the second day. Tickets were on sale in Market Harborough, Northampton and Leicester. Profits together with those from the sales of trees and plants were to be disposed of in acts of charity and benevolence according to the grand scheme.

On the first day - Hanbury's birthday - a ceremonial entry by the new trustees (or rather eight out of twenty-four) was effected to the sound of the overture to Handel's Occasional Oratorio. Then the church resounded to a selection of music sung by a choir assembled for the occasion, which included Handel's Te Deum, Jubilate and the coronation anthem Zadok the Priest, interspersed with the prayers and psalms that make up the traditional Matins service.



HANBURY MINSTER

A sermon was preached by the vicar of Theddingworth, the Rev Slaughter Clarke, one of the trustees, on "The duty of decorating Religious Houses deduced from the example of Mary anointing our saviour." Admission was free, but a collection disappointingly produced a "very inconsiderable" amount. Sadly also the ceremonial reception of the deed of trust was omitted because it had not been prepared in time.

For Messiah on the second day, 200 horse-drawn coaches brought a society audience including "a great number of beautiful ladies" from all over the midlands. It was a sight as Hanbury observed "that hardly ever before graced a country village". The side roads were lined with 'commoners', ordinary folk who were curious to see what was happening. Most roads around the village were jammed. Local inns and ale-houses were fully booked for the night, and "stable-room, beds and lodgings were bespoke at Harborough and almost every village" so that Duke of Devonshire was obliged to lodge with a tradesman. The Swan at Harborough provided 30 beds in their own house on the evening before the concert.

After staying overnight with local families, the performers arrived for a morning rehearsal, and in response to public demand the 'common people' were allowed in free to listen. Some 'of the nobler sort' who heard the rehearsal, were so impressed that they bought tickets for the actual performance.

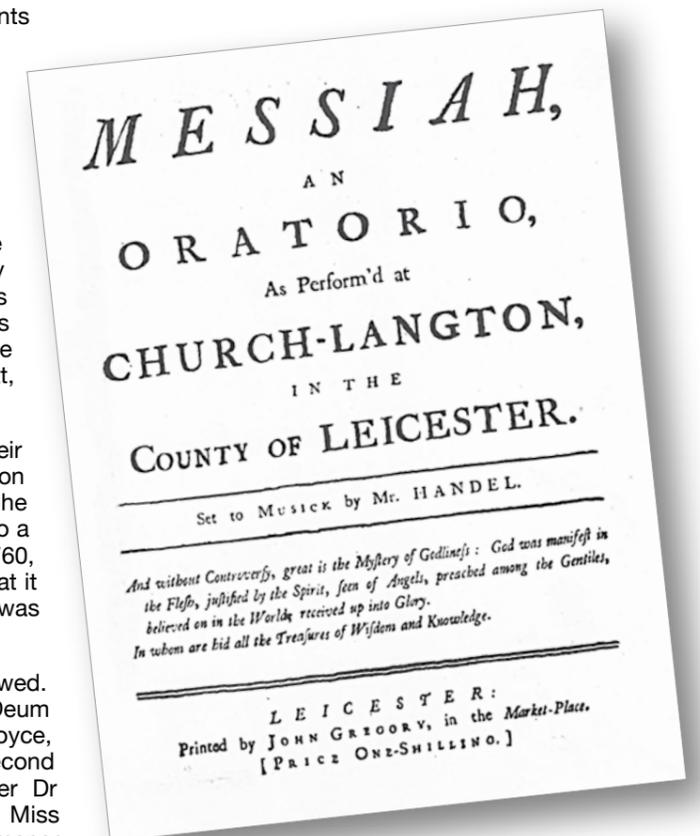
In the afternoon (the performance started at 12 noon) ticketholders, who paid five shillings each, crowded the church as Dr Hayes, Professor of Music at Oxford University, led the performers in what was an amazing event. Hanbury noted 'The music, on so solemn a subject, by so good a band, was most affecting'. Such was the crush inside the church that after the overture the doors had to be barricaded against late-comers. Hanbury had word-books specially printed in Leicester. At the end the audience left to enjoy a large buffet of 104 cold dishes, including a dozen ham pies a yard wide, served at long tables in large marquees (one each for 'ladies and gentlemen') erected in the rectory grounds, and toasts were drunk to a further meeting a year hence. Drinks were provided by the jovial landlord of the Three Crowns in Harborough. Then the company were entertained by some of the vocalists with catches and part-songs. Meanwhile 'the common people', were admitted free to the church to hear some popular excerpts repeated. This was by all accounts pretty chaotic as people stood sat or crouched in any space they could find to listen. Amidst this crush 'the people's oratorio' was born.

The festival was not a financial success. Hanbury had hoped for a profit of £400 to £500. He afterwards observed bitterly,

"Some few indeed gave generously; others who came as spies only, and hated the scheme at heart, we may suppose gave nothing." He continued "The expenses of so grand a band of performers from different parts of England, together with the charge of erecting the pro tempore galleries, advertising etc, were so great, we had but just enough to make our way clear."

He was particularly critical of his trustees for their lukewarm support. Despite this, Hanbury's vision encouraged him to give the experiment another go; he had received much publicity for his schemes, and so a second festival was planned for the following year, 1760, the dates chosen (July 30th and 31st) suggesting that it was prudent to mount the festival when the weather was a little warmer.

On July 30th, 1760 a similar pattern was followed. Morning service included 'new' settings for the Te Deum and Jubilate, a specially written anthem by William Boyce, My heart is inditing, and Zadok the Priest. On the second day, Messiah was given with similar forces under Dr Hayes as in 1759, and the organ was played by a Miss Thompson. There was as much interest in this performance as the last; the inns were again crowded, and the price of accommodation and provisions soared. Afterwards a similar feast, and the 'same sociable unanimous spirit' were exhibited. But Hanbury's trustees were no more enthusiastic, and this time Hanbury had barely enough to pay his expenses. He paid the band but there was insufficient for the conductor and singers judging from the rumblings that came from that quarter.



Still Hanbury persisted, and despite further setbacks in his horticultural schemes and a plan for a public library in the village, a third festival was arranged (without even consulting his trustees), this time for three days – July 8th to 10th, 1761 – with not one, but three Handel oratorios to be performed. To Messiah was added Judas Maccabaeus and Esther. More jollification took place with a cold collation for 2 shillings and 6 pence per head (more than a week's wages for a typical skilled artisan). Only Messiah attracted the usual crowds – already an indication of Messiah's pulling power. But those who turned out to hear Messiah stayed at home for the other oratorios. There was a meagre profit of £15.

Declining support led Hanbury to mount his next festival in 1762 in Leicester. It lasted three days in an unidentified church with similar forces, but this time £100 was made for Hanbury's charity. Demands for performances at Nottingham and Derby followed, and for a time Hanbury, whose ambitions seem to have been limitless, had thoughts of a triennial festival in the East Midlands modelled on the Three Choirs Festival. A Nottingham festival in 1763 was beset with problems. No church was available, and conductor Hayes did not make the first performance which was cancelled amid scenes of confusion. An angry female mob forced its way into the theatre, and there followed a very public argument. This fiasco marked the end of Hanbury's relationship with Hayes and his love affair with oratorio presentation. A subsequent slanging match in print saw Hayes accuse Hanbury of grossly inadequate payments to him, his singers and his musicians. It seems that even for the first performance of Messiah at Church Langton in 1759, few performers were paid in full, and some received nothing at all. It was a sad end to the music that had begun with such high hopes and expectations.



CHARLES JENNENS

Hanbury's gargantuan vision for Church Langton was never realised, though his son built the splendid neo-classical rectory next to the church in 1786. The Hanbury Trust continued to operate and was responsible for commissioning the extensive Victorian school buildings opposite the church erected in 1873.

What was the link between William Hanbury and Messiah? This usually focuses on local Leicestershire squire Charles Jennens, who selected and arranged the texts from the bible for Handel's music, and indeed Jennens deserves more credit for this than he is usually given. He was a fabulously rich landowner who had Gopsal Hall rebuilt in 1747, making it the most expensive and lavishly decorated 18th century house in Leicestershire. The hall was demolished in 1951, but a set of gates from the estate now forms the entrance to the memorial garden in Market Harborough. Handel certainly stayed frequently at Gopsal.

But the link is more complex than that. It stems from Hanbury's Oxford days (1745-48) at Magdalen Hall where Dr Hayes was the organist. One of the tutors at Magdalen was Edward Holdsworth, a brilliant classicist who may well have taught Hanbury. Holdsworth was Charles Jennens' closest friend while he was briefly at Balliol College. Dr Hayes had close contact with Handel, and owned a score and set of parts for Messiah. It was, if not close knit, a recognisable circle of contemporaries.

It is difficult to say with any accuracy what the Church Langton performance was like. These days we are used to hearing performances with anything from 30 to 150 singers. But we do not have precise information on the number or the disposition of performers Handel used, except that his singers numbered fewer than we often experience today. In Dublin he probably had 16 men and 16 boys in the chorus, with six soloists, some of them drawn from the chorus, and all of whom would in any case have sung both solos and choruses. Apart

from the soloists, most were local singers – men and boys from the two Dublin cathedral choirs. But there is no one version of Messiah. Rather there were, even in Handel's lifetime, several Messiahs. And what is certain is that the Church Langton Messiah was not the same as that in Dublin in 1742, or many of the early London performances.

Messiah was intended to be a transportable and adaptable oratorio – it could be performed with a minimum of four soloists, strings (Handel usually employed 20 or 22 string players), continuo (organ), two trumpets and drums. In 1742 Handel took to Dublin his own portable organ – there was then no organ in the hall. Handel often varied his soloists both in numbers and in voice; likewise his orchestra, chorus and programme varied according to local circumstance. He added oboes and bassoon for his 1749 London performance where more strings were available. But from Oxford in 1749 onwards the general pattern was to import soloists and leading singers and players from London or later from Oxford, and to recruit performers drawn from local groups and choirs for the remainder.

Over time the number of performers tended to increase. Handel had a band of 35 players in 1754, and for a performance at Bath in 1756 performers came from London, Oxford, Salisbury, Gloucester, Wells, Bath and other places. So we can guess that at Church Langton there were

more performers than had earlier been the case, and that they were a mixture of professionals and amateurs. Dr Hayes brought score and parts, instrumentalists and singers, with him. We know the names of eight principal instrumentalists, and seven vocal soloists. Hanbury called them

“a list of the very best performers in the kingdom to be at the head of every instrument, together with the best singers that could be collected from the different choirs.”

They were the leaders of the various sections; the rest of the performers in Hanbury's words comprised

“a sufficient number of able and staunch musicians were engaged to fill the other parts.”

Boys from Lincoln Cathedral were certainly used for some, if not all, of the performances. We know too that Hayes used a boy soloist for first female part in the meetings between 1761 and 1763 to save money. It foreshadowed the performance at the Foundling Hospital in 1771 which had 30 professional singers, supplemented by 26 amateurs, who were unpaid volunteers, a chorus much larger than the band. The commemorative concerts in Westminster Abbey in 1784 involved over 500 performers, and set the pattern for large-scale Messiahs for almost 200 years.

Just how important were the Church Langton Messiahs? From the very start Messiah was in a different class to other choral works. Despite its early lukewarm reception in London, it gained in popularity until the Foundling Hospital performances established its reputation. That has continued ever since. It is the only work to have received at least one performance in each year since its composition, and is probably the most performed of all oratorios. By 1759 performances were no longer controlled by Handel; and other conductors, soloists and performers had given it a life of its own. But there is one aspect of the first performance at Church Langton that set Messiah on the course it has taken since. The common people were drawn in substantial numbers to the event. Hanbury described the scene in 1759:

“they flocked in from all the towns and villages beyond the distance of twenty miles; and the number of common people whom curiosity assembled were supposed to exceed 20,000.”

They could not afford tickets at 5 shillings each, but it was as much curiosity at this strange intrusion into country life that motivated them. It was the ordinary people who jammed into the church to hear a selection of pieces from Messiah after the main concert.

The scale of this festival, the overt emotions it aroused, and the mixture of artistic, religious and charitable motives that were involved, looked to the future. It seems to have been a vastly enjoyable experience for all – the common people not only appreciating the music, but also profiting from visitors and selling provisions at inflated prices. Messiah had begun a path that could not be reversed – it had come to the English provinces, it had come to Leicestershire, it had come to the little hamlet of Church Langton, in a real sense its spiritual home – and for better or worse, it became the property of increasing numbers of musicians and societies, and finally of the mass market throughout the world.

Over recent years there have been a number of performances at Church Langton recalling that first festival. In this anniversary year it is fitting that two more have marked this anniversary. On September 19th, 2000 the Harborough Millennium Chorus gave a performance in Market Harborough Parish Church which attempted to recreate something of the atmosphere of the original. The chorus was made up of local amateur volunteers, but the professional soloists and players were brought in for the occasion. The rehearsal before the concert was open freely to the public as in 1759. It was a very public Messiah. Then, on the anniversary day itself, September 27th, Messiah was performed by the Harborough Singers in its original location, the church of St Peter's, Church Langton.

Pitfalls sometimes beset anniversaries. Handel has had his share of bad luck with these. The year of his birth was wrongly given on his memorial in Westminster Abbey as 1684; so the great centenary performances in 1784 were given a year early! And some sources give the date of Handel's death as April 13th, 1759 (which would have been Good Friday and the anniversary of Messiah's first performance). This probably came from Handel's express wish to die on Good Friday. As he lay dying he explained:

“I do this in hope of rejoining the good God, my sweet Lord and Saviour, on the day of his resurrection.”

In fact it was on Easter Eve, 17 years and a day after the debut of Messiah in Dublin, that Handel died.

However there is no doubt about the date of the Church Langton Messiah – William Hanbury made sure of that. **It was the day after his birthday!**