



Famous Residents & Visitors #2

From the Abinger & Coldharbour Parish News archive

"A Very English composer ..." Dr. Vaughan Williams, OM (1872-1958)

Vaughan Williams' father, Arthur, was Rector of Down Ampney, Gloucestershire and died when Vaughan Williams was four. He was the son of Sir Edward and Lady Vaughan Williams who, for many years, rented Tanhurst on Leith Hill. In 1847 they bought Leith Hill Place. Following his father's death, Vaughan Williams moved with his mother Margaret, brother Hervey and sister Margaret to Leith Hill Place. Margaret, his mother, was the daughter of the third Josiah Wedgwood and Caroline Darwin, an elder sister of Charles Darwin, author of the hugely important, *Origin of the Species*.

So, Vaughan Williams' immediate relatives were commercially successful, lived very comfortably and had the resources and the drive to pursue physically and intellectually demanding tasks. An aunt, Miss Sophy Wedgwood, started to bring forward his precocious musical talents and teach musical theory well enough for him to compose little piano pieces by the time he was six and, shortly after, operas for a toy theatre whose cast was made up of china dogs nicknamed "The Obligers". He also escaped on his pony down to Ockley to a Mr Goodchild for more musical tuition. Added to this, at the age of eight, he enrolled for an Edinburgh University correspondence course in music.

He attended preparatory school in Rottingdean and then moved to Charterhouse in January 1887. Here he organised a concert on the 5th August 1888 with H. Vivian Hamilton, who became a distinguished pianist, and the programme included his first public performance of a Piano trio. He played the violin part.

Soon he became a diligent organ scholar and persuaded his mother to have an organ installed in the front hall at Leith Hill Place. During school holidays he liked to practice early in the morning, disturbing the household routine. The organ needed someone to work the bellows. He would recruit whichever servant he could catch. The butler did his best to avoid him because he had to get the dining room ready for breakfast. There were two maids, but working the bellows put them behind schedule. So it might be a groom or a gardener who helped the young master.

At Charterhouse, he was encouraged by his housemaster who was the school organist and in 1890 he was accepted as a composition Pupil at the Royal College of Music. He went up to Cambridge in 1892 to read history as well as music after which he returned to the Royal College of Music to resume lessons in composition with Stanford. Here he met Adeline Fisher and they were married on 9 October 1897. He also worked under Max Bruch in Berlin and Maurice Ravel in Paris.

Vaughan Williams' career as a very English composer was nourished by his deep knowledge of Tudor music and of English folk songs which he began collecting in about 1902. Some of this research was on his own doorstep. At Leith Hill

Place he persuaded a gamekeeper and a labourer to sing for him. He trawled successfully through Forest Green, Capel, Rusper, Kingsfold and Horsham. Mr Burrage and Mr & Mrs Verrall from Horsham between them contributed eighty-one folk songs to his notebook. Initially, singers were persuaded to meet Vaughan Williams at Leith Hill Place, but he soon found it more fruitful to do a leisurely pub crawl and record (occasionally by phonograph) in the singer's familiar surroundings. By 1913, he had collected over 800 songs and was an established leader of the English folksong movement. He might well have been started early on this trail by the pioneering work of people like Lucy Broadwood of Capel who started the Folk Song Society in 1898. He certainly did some collecting during his school holidays. Later Gustav Holst continued to encourage him.

In 1905 the Leith Hill Musical Competition was launched by Lady Farrer of Abinger Hall and Vaughan Williams' sister, Margaret. Vaughan Williams was persuaded to coach the combined choirs and conduct the final concert. He continued with this association for an astonishing 48 years, leaving a rich musical heritage.

He was for two years music editor of The English Hymnal which was published in 1906. Whilst he was no great churchgoer, he certainly wanted good music in church. And so in the new hymnal there were thirty-five tunes based on folk songs, some local. Mrs Harriet Verrall of Horsham provided the tune called "Monk's Gate" for the hymn "He who would valiant be". A Mr Garman, a labourer from Forest Green, contributed the tune for "O little town of Bethlehem".

As editor he also came to know some marvellous church tunes. One great discovery was the melody which in 1910 he worked into his first masterpiece, the Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis.

During World War I, Vaughan Williams served with the Royal Army Medical Corps and with the Royal Artillery. Although he was over forty and an established composer and conductor, he carried out the most menial of tasks in this country, Salonika and France. Fellow soldiers helped this famous but large and ungainly man who probably had flat feet and certainly had great difficulty dressing in a soldierly manner. His cap was never straight and fitting his puttees neatly was beyond him. But he was willing and always amiable even when trying to fit his bulk into the tiny tents in Salonika.

After the war, the Vaughan Williams were based in London until 1928 although they were frequent visitors to this part of Surrey. They left Cheyne Walk, Chelsea and rented the Old Barn in Holmbury St Mary whilst they did some serious house hunting in and around Dorking; they moved to a house called "Glorydene" in St Paul's Road before taking the White Gates (then called Chote Ghar, whatever that means) off the Westcott Road. Here they lived until 1953 when he moved back to London with his second wife, Ursulla Wood.

White Gates was a large bungalow with a corridor around a large central room used as a lounge/dining/music room. It

was big enough to take a fifty strong choir with ease. The roof was thirty foot high.

In the Dorking years, Vaughan Williams was involved in many organisations. He wrote in the Abinger Chronicle in 1939: "It is better to be vitally parochial than to be an emasculated cosmopolitan. The great names in music were at first local and the greatest of all, John Sebastian Bach, remained a local musician all his life. History emanates from the parish pump. We musicians of hundreds of Abingers all over the country are making history because we are laying well and truly those foundations from which alone the great artist can spring".

His commitment to this part of Surrey was wholehearted. He was a Rotarian, he actively supported the Dramatic & Operatic Society and for a time chaired the Dorking and Leith Hill Preservation Society. He collaborated with E M Forster to write the Abinger Pageant in 1934 and "England's Green and Pleasant Land" in 1938. When he finally in 1944 inherited Leith Hill Place from his brother, Hervey, he promptly presented it, with its four hundred and twenty one acres, to the National Trust together with an endowment to keep it.

In the Second World War he was not above the mundane task of filling sandbags. He was an air raid warden, he sold savings stamps, and was an enthusiastic grower of vegetables, promoted sturdy growth by the liberal use of "activated sludge" from Leatherhead Council.

And of course he made sure that music was kept alive. The Leith Hill Festival, with which he will always be associated, continued. He organised and paid for a while range of concerts in Dorking.

It was during those years that Vaughan Williams started annual performances of The St Matthew Passion by his hero,

J S Bach. He had been made conductor of the Bach Choir and gave his first performance of the work in 1923. As soon as the Dorking Halls were built in 1931, he conducted the Passion there, the performance being dedicated to his sister, Margaret who died that year. By the time of his last performance in 1954 he was over eighty years old and deaf.

Inspired by Vaughan Williams, the Dorking Bach Choir was formed in 1947 and never sang anything but JS Bach's 'St John Passion'. This was performed regularly at St Martin's Church and continued under several conductors for a decade after Vaughan Williams' death in 1958.

He wrote about his feeling for the singing of amateur choirs in the Abinger Chronicle in 1939. "On a certain day in spring we shall meet all the other small bands of singers who like us have been struggling alone. Then we shall realise the profound mathematical formula of all choral singing: $2 + 2 = 40$. By the very force of our numbers we have each magnified our own power and imagination tenfold. Not that we have lost our own individuality, but that we have merged it in harmonious concert with the other devotees who like us have been working for this same end".

Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams was awarded the prestigious Order of Merit in 1935. He left behind him a large number of works in all forms, vigorous and exploratory in style. His English and perhaps local roots made him the first fundamentally national composer since the 16th century. He wrote nine symphonies, three operas, a ballet, concertos for piano and oboe, a huge range of choral work and music of equal excellence for the stage and films.

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