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Feast Sings in the Holme Valley between 1882 and 1990
Sing Holmfirth! 2018

by Heather Norris Nicholson



LOTTERY FUNDED



Music and singing have been at the heart of many communities in the old West Riding of Yorkshire for centuries. By the mid-nineteenth century, a rich and varied musical life had developed particularly in and around Huddersfield and its adjacent valleys, the Colne and Holme valleys, and stretched across a far wider area.

Visitors to this region noted the 'love of singing' and its abundance of amateur musical activities - choirs, brass bands, orchestras and societies. Churches and chapels enabled people to learn to sing, read music and play instruments. Choirs often rivalled each other in size, technical excellence and reputation at festivals. Sponsored public events promoted 'sacred music', particularly oratorios, for wider enjoyment. Taverns and public spaces offered other venues for music, ballads and singsongs. People entertained each other by singing and music-making in the street, in their homes, backyards and gardens.

Sings emerged from this vibrant mix of amateur and professional musical interests. Sings were concentrated within a relatively small area between Huddersfield, Wakefield and Barnsley. Longwood Sing, dates to c.1873 when Jabez Iredale, then secretary of the Longwood Working Men's Club, sang hymns outside the Thornhill Reading Rooms with some friends. Well-received, the event was repeated in 1874, at 7.00am so that church attendance was not disrupted. A collection was donated to local needy causes. A photograph (c.1880) shows another Sing pioneer, Olivier Ainley with musicians in his garden. Longwood Sing's claim to be the 'Mother of All Sings' is unchallenged and it established a form that was followed by later Sings.



Holmfirth held its own first 'Musical Gathering' in May 1882 at the cricket field on 'Feast Sunday', the week before Whit Sunday, an important date in the Christian calendar. Locally printed programmes, available in advance, provided hymn tunes and words and promised choruses from Handel's Messiah and other works. Proving successful, similar events followed as interest grew and nearby villages launched their own Sings. Shifting between the cricket and football field (and once to the Quarry Field near Holmfirth Station) and later to Mr Burton's field at the top of Victoria Street (later to become Victoria Park), Holmfirth Sing readily tapped into choral and musical expertise and enthusiasm, established organisational networks and community pride.



To the Public of the District

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The Holmfirth Feast Sing Committee again appeal for your generous support in connection with the annual "Sing," the proceeds of which are devoted to charity.

By far the greater portion of our "profits" go to the Holme Valley Memorial Hospital and the Huddersfield Infirmary, but contributions are also made to a number of other hospitals in Yorkshire.

In these unsettled times the hospitals have a very strong claim for our support. In times of peace their work is constantly extending and new apparatus and equipment needed. Should war come—and we all hope it can be averted—they would be called upon to treat either civilian or service casualties.

We ask therefore for your contributions to assist in keeping the Holme Valley Hospital—and other hospitals—ready to perform their normal calling and at the same time to assist them in their heavy expenditure should war ensue.

Do help to make the 1939 "Sing" a "bumper"!

On behalf of the Committee.

S. G. DILNOT,
President.

Committee members planned with care. Their duties included all aspects of programming, copyright issues for hymn tunes (including alleged infringements), and providing performance platform and seating. They sourced music stands and scores, supervised the distribution and return of collection boxes (and debated the reported impropriety of misused donations for a textile strike fund in 1930). They organised refreshments ('meat teas' only for the instrumentalists), clearing up work and made contingency plans for when it rained. In the early 1900s, most people arrived on foot but some cars and carts were provided and additional rail services augmented the four trains that ran on Sundays. In contrast, by the early 1970s, arranging for a bus from Baddeley Bros. to collect music students from Huddersfield Polytechnic were under review (possibly due to declining interest, rising car ownership or even access onto campus via the newly built ring road).

So much energy went into preparations, that written comments were often little more than a passing reference in the following year's programme. Sing programmes often linked to wider events, coronations and royal occasions, the sinking of the Titanic, two world wars, economic hardship, the Holmfirth Flood, the Festival of Britain and many anniversaries. The written introductions ceased mid-century, with a couple of exceptions: the 1990 centenary event highlighted hymns from Holmfirth's first and other early Sings; the 2009 programme provided greater historical detail. For years, reusing the same black and white cover design saved money but earlier covers display varied artistic and graphic styles.

Fund-raising strengthened Holmfirth Sing's appeal and programmes often referred to the valley's 'warm-hearted', 'sympathetic' and generous inhabitants. Prior to the National Health Service (1948), charitable help provided access for many people unable to afford to pay for their healthcare. Sing programme sales, admission tickets and collections (on the day and door to door) raised money mainly for local hospitals (including the Holme Valley Memorial Hospital, opened in 1919 as a tribute to wartime fatalities) but supported national and international appeals too.



Holmfirth Sing gradually became a smaller event and print-runs of 2500 programmes became a distant memory. Brass bands, dance bands and dancing, amateur dramatics, opera, local cinema, the radio and later television thrived as recreational alternatives to hymn singing and people travelled further to find their entertainment. Numerous social, economic and cultural changes weakened community ties and affected support for the Sing too. Other needs, opportunities and distractions diverted attention and energy.

As memories of the Sing's founder generation and their equally dedicated successors began to fade, sustaining the Sing became the responsibility of a shrinking band of stalwarts. Without those people from later generations who stepped in as conductors, leaders of the orchestra, accompanists, committee members and helpers, Holmfirth Sing might have ceased altogether. Thanks to the enthusiasm, public-spiritedness and love of music-making offered both by newcomers and people with long family connections to the Holme Valley, the Holmfirth Sing passed its centenary year in 1882, attained its hundredth performance in 1990 and yet another commemorative occasion in 2009.

The Big Sing in 2018 marks another step in that journey, a fresh opportunity to pay tribute to the early vision, dedication and expertise of the people who brought and sustained the Holmfirth Sing. As part of Holmfirth Arts Festival, Sing Holmfirth! builds from past strengths as it combines professional and amateur energy to celebrate the valley's legacy and enduring importance of music and singing.



Photograph of Sing Holmfirth! by John Coombes

Further reading:

Angela M Griffith (1993) *Yorkshire Sings: An Account of a Musical and Social Phenomenon*. Thesis (Bretton Hall, University of Leeds) See also her chapter, 'Church Music and the Sings' in Adrian Smith (ed) (2000) *Music Making in West Yorkshire*. Dave Russell (1992) 'Music in Huddersfield' in E. A. H. Haigh (ed) (1992) *Huddersfield. A Most Handsome Town*.



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www.holmfirthartsfestival.co.uk

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