



Charity Registration Number: NIC108830

## **TRUSTEES' REPORT 2024-2025**

Ards Choral Society had another very successful season in 2024-2025, during which membership numbers grew to 73, concerts and activities were widely publicised and supported and there continued to be diversification and experimentation in the direction of the choir under the leadership of Mr Ian Bell, whilst still maintaining focus on musicianship, comradeship, social and local relevance and supporting new and upcoming talent.

At the same time, the season was tinged with some sadness as our Chair, Dr Maureen Thatcher, stepped down from her role at the latest Annual General Meeting in October, after almost 5 years' notable service. This included leading the Society through the pandemic, undertaking risk assessments to allow the choir to rehearse and perform again, establishing a new committee structure to manage concerts, growing membership and the use of social media to promote performances more widely, achieving charity status with the Charity Commission and making a major contribution of Society archive materials to the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland.

At the AGM in October, the Musical Director provided a review of the three main events which had taken place during the 2024-25 season and also paid tribute to Dr Thatcher's work as Chair.

The 'Come and Sing *Messiah*' workshop and concert, which took place in December 2024 in St Mark's Parish Church, Newtownards, had evolved from the Society's historic tradition of performing the full work each Christmas. It was felt that such an event would align closely with spreading the influence of the choir beyond its own surroundings, getting others involved who may wish to join the choir at a later date, and would provide a challenge for all. Some 20+ new participants (even one from Dublin!) joined us to rehearse and perform the seventeen main choruses and, while the organisation of the event was complex, this first foray into the Come and Sing format was a massive success.

The growing awareness of the healing and meditative powers of music were pulled together into our Spring Concert, *In Paradisum*, performed by candlelight, again in St Mark's, and featuring the music of John Brūning, Howard Goodall, Dan Forrest, Eric Whitacre, Karl Jenkins, Will Todd, Ola Gjeilo and many others. The ambience of the candles in the windows around the church, combined with the book lights the choir all had, created a haven of calm and reflection. Guest performers Cabhan McKeague and Brian McClean added to the stillness and serenity of the occasion and the MD summarised the event as "the most memorable concert that I have had with the choir in 32 years of being Musical Director!"

Celebrating VE Day, combined with celebrating the 25th anniversary of *Wicked* and the 40th of *Les Misérables*, resulted in a terrific Supper Theatre concert in May, featuring the return of guest artistes Naomi Smyth and Mark Leeman. The sing-along wartime medley encouraged avid audience participation and added to that was a visiting dancing troupe who entertained everyone with wartime frolics! In all, a very memorable event, thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated by everyone.

In closing the MD summarised the season as another very busy and rewarding year and thanked the committee for their time, talent and commitment in ensuring the success of the concerts. He paid tribute to Dr Thatcher whose work over the five years of her leadership as Chair he described as "truly transformative". He highlighted that rebuilding and reinventing the Society following Covid had been a mammoth task and that her effective management and communication skills,

enthusiasm to embrace the new and commitment to maintaining a healthy financial position, had been instrumental in the successful re-emergence of the choir as bigger, more audience-focused and re-energised in terms of the music now being performed.

He thanked her for her encouragement, wise counsel and 'go-gettedness' and concluded by thanking Joanne Cruise, our faithful accompanist, for sharing freely her unique and special talents and all choir members for making his work so worthwhile.

Dr Thatcher, in acknowledging the MD's praise noted that she had always believed strongly in setting and maintaining the highest of standards, in treating people with generosity and in providing the best possible opportunities for others to achieve and shine. She hoped that these tenets would be maintained and developed by the new Chair and committee in taking Ards Choral Society forward.