It’s a well-documented fact that the memory retreats in the face of advancing years. Memory for us oldies, as we totter purposefully into the kitchen, discovering ourselves in front of the fridge/stove/sink, and asking: What on earth did I come for? And the harder we think about it, the more elusive the whole thing becomes – ridiculous, humiliating, frustrating, absurd!

So there we were, the four of us: John Taylor, Hugh Keyte, Stephen Ralls, Errol Girdlestone.

No, not in the kitchen, but Merton College Oxford. Lordy, we even sat instinctively in the same chairs that we had occupied fifty-plus years ago. No struggling to remember – nothing like that - the bums all fell into place: the same old dream-team of second basses that had (dis-) graced rehearsals at Merton for the Schola Cantorum of Oxford, vintage 1964-67, under its then conductor, John Byrt.

The event-cum-reunion of which I speak took place one week ago, but there wasn’t even a hint of nostalgia (neuralgia very possibly, though) - we simply sat down and got on with it.

Got on with what?

You know, the rehearsal...for......ermmmm.........you know.......thingy......mm.........ha.........what did they say we’d come for?

Ah yes! A memorial thanksgiving evensong in Merton Chapel for one of our SCO contemporaries.

As I happened to be in England anyway on family business I thought why not? Never having been one for old boy networks I quite surprised myself - though after the Hilliard get-togethers in recent years I must admit that I’ve slightly changed my tune.

Besides, the family has Oxford links stretching back generations.

Ah.... those dreaming spires...

Pretty much everyone is familiar with the skyline seen from Christ Church Meadow. My great-great(³√²) aunt painted a rather spectacular panorama of part of the above vista, which I can’t show in its entirety because it’s simply un-photographable (at least with my funny little camera). Her name, Charlotte Girdlestone, is largely unknown outside art cognoscenti circles.

Her Oxford panorama was reviewed in Art Union of January 1846: “...The details of all the buildings are carefully given: and there is a singular truthfulness in this elaborate and well-executed panorama that must inspire its welcome reception”.

Ah...
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Here just to give you a taste is a single panel - a sample of Charlotte’s painstaking handiwork:

Quite intricate really – with scrupulous attention to detail and perspective.

Followed by the handiwork of another notable Oxonian Girdlestone – as scrupulous a worker as Charlotte maybe, although you probably won’t be quite as smitten by the vista:

Should you seek enlightenment, the Girdlestone procedure also goes by name of excision arthroplasty of hip, femoral head ostectomy or Girdlestone resection arthroplasty, and is, as I was saying (if you were paying proper attention) in terms simple enough for idiots to understand, an excision arthroplasty of the hip.

There.

My uncle Gathorne founded the Wingfield Orthopaedic Hospital in Oxford. One day during the summer of 1930 his wife, Mrs Ina Girdlestone, opened the door of the Red House where they lived to find an unknown gentleman who introduced himself as “Morris of the car factory” and gave her a cheque for £1,000 – a tidy sum in those days - to help keep the Wingfield Hospital in good repair. In 1933 it was rebuilt and renamed the Wingfield-Morris Orthopaedic Hospital.

Morris (of the car factory) later became Lord Nuffield and donated a further £70,000 which created five clinical chairs at Oxford Medical School. Gathorne Girdlestone became the first Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery in 1938, and in 1956 the Wingfield-Morris was renamed the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, rapidly acquiring the international reputation which it enjoys to this day.
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Although the Girdlestone hip is no longer quite the must-have operation, during my lifetime I have encountered many survivors, including Nico Henderson, British Ambassador to Poland when I was there to study conducting on a British Council scholarship during the late ‘60’s.

I loved his charismatic way of dressing (the tie, the rumpled suit, the chaotic mop). He never missed an opportunity to introduce me to people as the nephew of the man whom he considered had indirectly enabled him to enjoy his career - a distinguished one at that. Nico later became Our Man in Bonn, Paris, then Washington, and his wife, Mary (of Greek origin, if I remember correctly) was beautiful, elegant, and a superb hostess.

The Hendersons very kindly invited me over for drinkies from time to time, and on one occasion several of us music students on British Council scholarships in Warsaw to perform at the Ambassador’s Residence before a diplomatic gathering. One of said students was Roger Woodward (Łudłud, as he once appeared on a poster) →, who in those days had hair and a phenomenal keyboard technique. The hair’s mostly gone, as is the modish ciggie holder, but the technique remains blisteringly irreproachable.

Remember the film *Shine* about a young pianist’s struggle with mental illness? David Helfgott? Well, Roger was the one who beat him in the 1964 ABC Instrumental and Vocal Competition in Oz. Roger’s
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living in the San Francisco now, and is known worldwide as a performer of - and collaborator with – several internationally significant contemporary composers. On quite another tack, his 2010 recording of Bach’s Das Wohltemperierte Klavier earned him accolades, especially from Gramophone Magazine’s Jed Distler, who declared Imaginative performances by Woodward that rank alongside the very best. A fascinating antipode to Hewitt (Hyperion, 10/98, 9/99), Koroliov (Tacet, 6/00) and Ashkenazy (Decca, 3/06), among standout recent piano versions of the “48”.

(Could the use of antipode might be a touch of double entendre, I ask myself - Roger of course hailing from Deown Under……?)

Others compared him to Barenboim and Gould as setting a new standard.

Anyway, scrolling back to the late 1960’s, we foreign students in Poland during the communist years were under constant surveillance, and Roger, being the colourful character that he was, enjoyed quite a few brushes with the secret police – the Urząd Bezpieczeństwa, or UB. Just as well we had the British Ambassador on our side in case we needed bailing out!

Which returns us conveniently to the concert at his Residence. Despite the attentions of the UB we managed to get together a Polish orchestra from the People’s Higher School of Music (where we were students) and performed among other things Mozart’s double Piano Concerto and his Symphony No.29, both of which I conducted. I remember Wanda Wilkomirska, the marvellous violinist, playing Szymanowski – Roger accompanying – quite unforgettable.

When the time came for us to leave Warsaw, Roger and I were invited to the Polish Radio to do a live interview in English. As a final question the interviewer asked for our most treasured memory of Poland. I plunged in first, gushing about the music of Pęderecki and Lutosławski, the government’s enlightened attitudes towards the artistic community - additional living space allocated by the state etc etc etc - blah blah.....

Zink you, Meester Guddlestown......... Meester Łudłud..?

Roger’s turn.........long pause for thought..........finally - “you know those little teacake things with sliced almonds...”

Roger wasn’t the only gaffe-prone person in Poland. Władysław Gomułka was Polish leader at the time, and was not immune to dropping the odd verbal clanger himself.

On one occasion he delivered an impassioned speech declaring “At the conclusion of the War Poland teetered on the brink of a vast abyss. Since then the Polish People - with the encouragement of their loyal Soviet Comrades - have taken a mighty step forward!”

(Open mouth... then place foot very carefully inside......)

Not as though he was a lovable character either. Like nearly all the other eastern bloc communist leaders he was a Russian toady, capable of brutal ruthlessness in the execution of his duties - and of those who opposed him.

On my return to London after the Polish stint I found myself jobless – the UK symphony orchestras, strangely, weren’t queueing for my services. Having abandoned a mixed career as part-time
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schoolteacher at a rough Sec.Mod. in Befnal Green for half the week, and at a twee boys prep school in St. John’s Wood for the other two days - plus music editor, employed principally to proof-read compositions of Malcolm Williamson and to make piano reductions from his full orchestral scores, then, finally, playing the organ in our local Islington parish church on Sundays, I needed some money for grub.

I managed to get myself onto the professorial staff at Trinity College of Music, where I taught harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration for a couple of days a week. But it wasn’t really enough to live on, so I enlisted at St. Paul’s Cathedral as a deputy in the choir, and was soon lucky enough to be taken on as a permanent Vicar Choral. I also resumed activities with the Monteverdi Choir, where I had been singing as an amateur before Poland, but now I was wanting money for it, much to the disgust of conductor Jiggy Gardiner – these days, since 1990 in fact, Sir John Eliot.

By default I’d become a professional singer – something I never intended to happen. Neither did John Eliot. “I’m not bloody paying you to sing” he retorted when I announced that I was now a pro.

I wasn’t thrown off my stride though, having already got a taste of the action at a memorable audition for him as an amateur. His brother, Chris, who’d sung in the SCO at Oxford, having recommended me, I had been summoned round to his (sister’s?) house in Islington, arming myself with a full score of Messiah. The Monteverdi Choir was originally stuffed with people from the other place (like JEG), and I was uncomfortably aware of the slightly hostile situation.....

Me : “I’d like to sing The people that walked in darkness.”

JEG : “Where’s your pianist then?”

Me : “I thought you’d be providing an accompanist”.

JEG : “Well, you can see there isn’t one. And anyway I’m not playing for you. You can play your bloody self.” Thinking I’d stuff up the full score...little did he know... he was probably hoping for an accident. Instead he commented obliquely “Hmm, you’ve got a voice. Can you do the Monteverdi Vespers at the Proms in August?” No mention of admiration for my playing from full orchestral score, which I suppose was my come-uppance for hoping to trip up his non-existent pianist.

Anyway, after a year taken out at the Państwowa Szkoła Muzyczna I needed to sing for my supper, and to be fair to him the very next day, despite his seeming intransigence, I found myself hired. Not only did he accept me as a pro, but he occasionally asked me to conduct at rehearsals so he could listen, and used me once or twice as a paid accompanist.

It was at one such occasion that I first encountered Paul Elliott, who had just come down from Oxford. At his audition for Jiggy he volunteered the information that, among other things, he sang in the choir at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

Time for a full and frank discussion, I thought :
“No you don’t.”

“No I do.”

“Well, I sing in the choir at St. Paul’s, and I’ve never seen you before in my life.”

“That’s hardly surprising - I only got the job this afternoon.”

Things moved on a bit from that slightly inauspicious start – Paul and I became co-founders of the Hilliard Ensemble (+ Paul Hillier and David James) and he was actually round here in Villeneuve Loubet – approximately 45 years later – with his gamba-playing wife Wendy Gillespie, having dinner with Susie and me last night. He’s also singing in two of our upcoming Ristretto concerts. Hey-ho.

1971/2/3 - Paul was very soon singing with the Deller Consort: Here he is with the Dellers, father and son. (For all I know, I might well have been playing harpsichord continuo there, as I did on many occasions with Mark.)

Those 1970’s Indian linen shirts – you can’t get them anymore. Mark (conducting) is godfather to my son, Ben, and was also denizen of St. Paul’s choir stalls. We were all there at the same time: Al Hume and Tony Holt from the original team of King’s Singers, David Thomas, plus Pauls Hillier and Elliott of the Hilliard Ensemble, Mark Deller......

Mark’s dad, Alfred, had likewise been in the choir. His generation there included other household names like Gerald English, Robert Tear, Thomas Hemsley, and John Shirley-Quirk.

BUT the most distinguished of all was Alpha Newby, tenor, who was called in one day to make a recording with some gentlemen – names of Harry Secombe, Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan (now, where has one heard of them before?). If you want, you can listen to the result here :

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nebe1zuEtbc

Alpha, having absolutely no idea what it was all about, recorded with great seriousness the opening recitative “There’s a song that I recall,” etc, collected his cheque, and went home. In my day Alpha was Senior Man and used to draw up the roowerdha (Geordie for rota). Only years later, when in Norway, did I realise that everything up around Newcastle and beyond is Danish – courtesy of the Vikings. Alpha’s very name – Newby – is of Viking origin. “By”, meaning “town” or “built-up area”, is Scandiwegian. How many places ending in “by” do you know up there? Millions.

I likewise discovered that Norwegian and Danish are virtually identical when you read them, but sound totally different when spoken – unlike Swedish, which is of course closely related, but reads noticeably differently. However, Swedish actually sounds much more like Norwegian than Danish does. The big thing about Danish is the gutturals – everything disappears down the back of the throat, which explained perfectly the way Alpha spoke. How ever he managed to sing beats me, but
even at his ripe old age the voice was stupendous – I know, because I used to stand next to him!
They said that, in the St. Matthew Passion, when Alpha sang the Evangelist’s “Then the veil of the
Temple was rent in twain” bits of plaster came tumbling down out of the Dome. I can well believe it.

Mark Deller and I have kept up over the years, and I had the honour to conduct the music for his 70th
birthday surprise concert in 2008. Poor chap knew nothing of the plans – all arranged secretly
beforehand by Al Hume – but many of the Deller Consort and Stour festival associates took part. Just
to give you an idea, here’s part of the choir line-up on that happy day: Charles Daniels, John Mark
Ainsley, Paul Elliott, James Bowman, Lynne Dawson, Robin Blaze, Stephen Barlow (conductor, and
husband of Joanna Lumley, who sat in the audience). The orchestra likewise had some distinguished
names, and the harpsichord from which I directed belonged to Trevor Pinnock. He should have been
there that day, but had an annoying conducting engagement which came up at the last minute...
with the Berlin Philharmonic (oh well – as one does).

Sadly during my Oxford years the chapel choirs were distinctly under par – the SCO was the only
consistently decent ensemble at the University. The other place annoyingly held all the cards, and as
a result many of the performers who started their UK careers in early music were Cantab alumni. As
a result I lost touch with a good number of my Oxford contemporaries, with the notable exception of
James Bowman, of whom I saw a fair bit in London during the early 70’s. I wonder how many
remember his extraordinary performance opposite Janet Baker in the Glyndebourne production of
Cavalli’s La Calisto...the first countertenor ever to sing at Glyndebourne.

When we were at Oxford James
used to sing in the choirs at
Christ Church and New College.

Until he was discovered by
Benjamin Britten!

From that moment on the
University hardly saw him again.

I did, though, because he was
singing at Westminster Abbey
when I was at St. Paul’s.

The divine Janet Baker! Surely England’s
greatest mezzo of all time. The realisation
of Cavalli’s score was made by Raymond
Leppard, with whom I worked as assistant
conductor and chorus master many years
later in Chicago. Without his sumptuously
anachronistic orchestral textures early
Italian opera would not have caught on at
quite the speed it did during the 70’s.
Our paths crossed frequently on the London professional circuit, and all through our lives we’ve bumped into one another at regular intervals – here and there, at one time or another……yes, even in France - at the Aix en Provence festival, for example, where were both working in 1991.

This is a quote from Britten’s War Requiem natch, but at Aix James was actually singing in the Robert Carsen production of Britten’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream.

Britten had originally written the role of Oberon for Mark Deller’s dad, Alfred, but James took it on after, and soon made it his own, rapidly becoming the go-to Oberon in the world’s top opera houses.

Later, Britten was to write the Voice of Apollo in Death in Venice for James, and his Canticle The Journey of the Magi, which he performed alongside Peter Pears and John Shirley-Quirk, Britten himself at the piano.

And don’t even ask which opera is being performed below …. don’t think it’s one of Britten’s….

James being as outrageous as ever – never a dull moment. A propos, I had an e-mail from him after another “even in France” musical event organised by Mark last summer, which I was unable to attend. Among other things James reassured me that he had thoroughly enjoyed himself and was particularly relieved to find that at the age of 75 he was still “able to get it up”.

The voice - idiot!

His (Britten’s) The Journey of the Magi became a Hilliard party piece from the earliest days – in fact I seem to remember us doing it at our very first concert in 1973 when the piece was only two years old.

More recently, we resurrected Magi again during the 2013 Hilliard 40th anniversary concert tour, managing to get it up in the space of one 30-min. rehearsal. In the event it came off quite nicely…

(OK – that’s quite enough - ed.)
Here’s the review from Robert Hugill, though:

Then David James, Rogers Covey-Crump and Gordon Jones sang Britten’s Journey of the Magi with Errol Girdlestone playing the piano. What was magical about this performance was the amazing blend of the voices in the tutti passages, the singers experience singing together really counting. Though the counter-tenor part was written for James Bowman, it is clear that Britten must also have had Alfred Deller’s voice in his inner ear. James’s rather distinctive voice is perhaps closer to Deller’s than Bowman’s is, and the part fitted James’s voice like a glove. The solo contributions were admirable, but the ensembles such as ‘This was folly’ were pure magic, and the unison passages in the closing pages very powerful indeed. Errol Girdlestone made a strong fourth partner at the piano.
(Too many Jameses – reads a bit confusingly....)

Anyway – back to the other day..... the evening before travelling from London to Oxford I popped into the Abbey (Westminster) in the company of David James and his wife Mirjam to see their little boy sing at Evensong. Following in his father’s footsteps, young Sebastian is as pleased as punch to be an Abbey chorister. Clearly he was always set for a musical career:

Lovely! And of course he’s six years older now.

So, after Evensong, supper in an Islington pub on the Regent’s canal with my son Ben, then next morning bright and breezy off to Paddington catch the Oxford train in the company of two more Schola Cantorum alumni – Howard Williams and his wife Emma Kirkby.
On arrival we all joined up at Merton College for a brief rude awakening-cum-pre-rehearsal conducted by Howard. These days Oxford is an even busier city than when I was there. It always was pretty hectic, thanks to the chappy who gave my uncle’s wife £1,000 back in 1930, but since then the decibels have risen.

Not when you’re within the haven of peace that is an Oxford college quad, though:

\[A\ quiet\ sanctuary\]

Poor old Howard, trying to cope with a rehearsal where everyone’s attention was focused on asking all in the immediate vicinity what they had been up to for the last 50 years! Still, we got through it in time to drift over to the Chapel and meet their choir, with whom we were singing Evensong.

Times have changed indeed. It’s a very decent choir. In my day there was no choral foundation at Merton – now the college boasts a mixed undergraduate choir of very respectable standard indeed.

Same goes for Queen’s. I heard their R3 Choral Evensong the other day and was quite gobsmacked.

So, two fingers to the other place!!

Not only has Merton a fine choral foundation, but a spanking new organ at the west end of the Chapel, built by Dawbson Pahp Oorgun Bulders – sorry, that should read Dobson Pipe Organ
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Builders, Iowa, USA. Strange to have a 2013 American instrument installed in mediaeval Oxford college, but there you go.....

A handsome beastie in its way, it sounds the article, although there’s something not quite European about its looks.

Bit flash really – not quite in keeping with my notion of a quiet sanctuary. Never mind, when a few cobwebs have been allowed to gather and the dust of ages has settled on the garishly gleaming metal I’m sure I won’t feel like being such a grumpy old fart

er... curmudgeon I meant to say.

This is Oxford.