



Chairman's Message

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As foreshadowed in the August Newsletter, the Museum officially reopened on 21st September, albeit with a rather smaller event than we had anticipated due to the restricted numbers permitted under the Covid-19 rules. Cheltenham MP Alex Chalk cut the ribbon: we are grateful to him for his support. We were also delighted to welcome Gustav Holst, on his 146th birthday, and his good friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, in the persons of Richard Watson and Phil Collins respectively. We thank them, as well as John and Mandy Rowlands - who also donned Victorian dress - for adding a touch of vivacity and period charm to the event.

We opened to the public for two days per week from 26th September on the basis of pre-booked and timed visits. This proved popular, with over 80% of the available time-slots being filled, until we had to close again under the new lockdown. Especial thanks are due to Mike Jenkinson for his general oversight of the reopening and booking process and to David Hewitt for his work on the website, including making advance booking possible. Thanks also to the Volunteers who performed the front of house service and looked after our guests. We very much hope that we will be able to resume visits after 2nd December.

There have been significant developments in the constitution of the Board of Trustees. We were delighted to co-opt Martin Renshaw, to oversee our activities in the digital world, and Mike Jenkinson in his role as Newsletter Editor and as Project Manager for rebranding, which we are looking to move forward more urgently. Martin is or has been associated with several Cheltenham organisations, including as Trustee and Newsletter Editor of the Friends of the Wilson. Mike is well known to Holst supporters, as a Volunteer for many years and having taken on several activities and lent his enthusiastic support and expertise in a variety of ways.

David Addison has decided to step down as Collections Trustee. We are fortunate that an extremely well qualified replacement was on hand, namely Sarah Staniforth. Sarah has been supporting the Trustees for the past few months and has a wealth of experience of the heritage sector in general and museums in particular. She will chair the newly established Collections Committee, which will include David Addison (so we can continue to benefit from his input), Steven Blake (past Collections Trustee and Chairman), and Curator Laura Kinnear. I am pleased to welcome our three new Trustees.

I would also like to remind Holst supporters that two Trustees will be standing down at the next AGM in July 2021, having completed their maximum six-year terms. We are therefore looking for a new Membership Trustee and Chairman. If you are interested in either role, or know of somebody who might be, then please let us know. We will be advertising these vacancies in the New Year.

It is pleasing to note that in these unsettled times we have been able to welcome three new Volunteers: Trevor Hartley, Shannon Meade and Alison Noble. We hope that they will enjoy a long and happy association with the Museum.

In addition to the events listed overleaf, I would like to mention the AGM of the Holst Society, which will be held at St Andrew's Church on 12th December at 2.30pm. After the AGM there will be a recital by James Gilchrist, accompanied by John Wright. The programme has yet to be finalised but it will include some Holst pieces and have a Christmas flavour. If you would like to attend please let Chris Cope (chairman@holstsociety.org) know as soon as possible as tickets (£20) will be limited.

This will be the last Newsletter of 2020 and so I wish all readers as safe and enjoyable a Christmas as possible and offer the sincere hope that we can return to life as normal at some point early in 2021.

Steve Wood

Lights, Camera, Action!

Many of you will have visited museums, stately homes or other buildings of historical interest recently and been able to access an audio-visual guide on your smartphone. A knowledgeable voice introduces you to important aspects of the building, with an option to go into more detail about areas of particular interest. You can enjoy the treasures on display unencumbered by large, wordy signs. Wouldn't it be great if we could have the same available at the Holst? Well, the plan is that we shall and that it will fit in with the work to rebrand the Museum as Holst Victorian House.

We are very fortunate to have secured £15,000 from the **L G Harris Trust** to improve our 'digital offering' and are grateful for their generosity in supporting the Museum in this way. We are currently at the stage of choosing a local film maker to collaborate with us.

We already have a documentary film of the life of Holst - *In the Bleak Midwinter* by Tony Palmer - with which many of you will be familiar. We plan to make films about the House and the way that it tells the story of a Victorian way of life. There will be a number of films that visitors will be able to watch.

There are so many other things that we would love to do when resources allow, including Victorian cookery demonstrations and a short film for schools. Our aim is to build up a library of resources - adding to what we have already - that we can use opportunistically to attract visitors. We will include material on our website and social media. We would like the film makers to help us become ever more creative in this area.

There will be some who are interested in the House and fascinated to find out more about Holst who may never be able to visit because of distance, health or other reasons. We hope to be able to inform and entertain them via our website and give them an opportunity to donate in support of our work.

There will be opportunities for Volunteers to get involved, so if you are interested, please get in touch.

Martin Renshaw

Holst's Vedic Hymns

In the second half of Queen Victoria's reign there was, shall we say, a degree of enforced cultural interchange between this country and those in the east, particularly India, and this brought about an interest in eastern culture and religion. London staged the India & Colonial Exhibition in 1886, with the Indian Empire Exhibition nine years later, and popular authors such as the philologist Max Müller (not to be confused with the Cheeky Chappie) sold well. Holst read at least one of Müller's works and in 1899 was inspired to visit the British Museum to look up some original Hindu documents. When these were produced he saw, of course, that they were all written in Sanskrit using Devanagari script and far less decipherable to him than double Dutch. Maybe he felt, like we all would, 'the perfect fool.'

Many of us would have thrown in the towel at that point and stuck to translations but Holst was determined to learn Sanskrit, enrolling at the School of Oriental Languages and working around his job with the Carl Rosa Opera Company. His dedication paid off; pencilled notes in surviving copies of some of his Sanskrit books show he had at least a working knowledge of the language.

As well as studying the ancient writings Holst also worked at the structure of Indian music, the scales and the time signatures, and listened to it when he could. There had been recitals of Indian music when he was at the Royal College and he would have hunted down the public recitals and lectures which were not uncommon in the Capital at that time. How we take the internet for granted.

His first 'Indian' works were the tone poem *Indra* written in 1903 (partly when he was on his honeymoon) and *Invocation to the Dawn*, one of *Six Songs* op.15. Then in 1908 he finished the opera *Savitri*. But to my ears it is the *Hymns from the Rig Veda* published in 1911 which really bring to fruition all Holst's skill, talent and determination. The earliest Vedic hymns date from approximately 1000BC; they are, one might say, the Gregorian chant of Hinduism. In Holst's hands they are both sublime and uplifting.

John Rowlands

Editor Note: Tenor Peter Martin, together with piano accompanist Matthew Jorysz, is recording a performance of Holst's first 3 Vedic Hymns and some Christmas music, which will be available online in the run-up to Christmas - watch out for details. As this is in aid of the Holst Birthplace Museum there will be a small charge to view the performance. We are hoping that they will be able to come to Cheltenham to give a live concert for us once life gets back to normal in 2021.

Walking into Alchemy

When I was appointed Curator of the Holst Birthplace Museum in 2004, I began what will probably be a lifelong quest to understand and appreciate Gustav Holst more intimately. My time at the Museum opened up a whole new world to me. I began to understand the links between creativity and movement: Gustav Holst liked to walk as walking helped him to compose.

In summer 2005 I extended my research, wanting to know more about Gustav's daughter Imogen Holst, who like her father was also a composer, conductor and teacher. Imogen relocated to Suffolk in the early 1950s to take up her role as Benjamin Britten's amanuensis.

My trip to Aldeburgh was a revelation - I had never ventured so far to the east of the UK before, and I was astounded by the beauty of the coastline and the vast open skies. I expected it to be a holiday filled with books, libraries and listening - more cerebral than physical. As soon as I arrived, I was drawn to the beach, to the call of the sea and the sound of the waves crashing and rushing across the stony shoreline. Luckily my desire for more in-depth knowledge chimed with my walking because I soon discovered that Imogen took bracing walks every day, especially when she was working with Britten on his score *Gloriana*, his commission for the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. Sometimes she would transcribe as many as 28 pages a day, and afterwards would walk from the Red House, Britten's residence, to the beach to clear her head.

Britten too was a walker; after a morning of writing, he would take his daily 'composing walks' on the marshes or near the estuary in Aldeburgh with his dogs, no matter the weather. Unlike Holst, Britten's work was very much meshed with the natural environment of the Suffolk landscape that he breathed in every day. Accepting the inaugural Aspen award in 1964, Britten said: "I belong at home - there - in Aldeburgh ... and all the music I write comes from it." The sounds of the sea and the birds - the redshanks and reed warblers - are embroidered into Britten's musical tapestries and are especially evident in his magnificent *Four Sea Interludes* (1944).

Gustav Holst drew inspiration from walks in his native Gloucestershire: the tune for his wonderfully lyrical Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter* is known as *Cranham* (1904-5), named after the small Cotswold village where he lived for a short time. But he completed his *Cotswold Symphony* (1900) in Skegness. It seems that as long as he was out in the world, he was drawing inspiration. A trip to Algiers inspired one of his most mesmerising and beautiful pieces. Walking through the hot and dusty streets, he stopped to hear the strains of street music rising up and later in homage to that seminal moment he composed his *Beni Mora Suite* (1909-10), one of his best and most original pieces.

In 2015 I left the UK and relocated to Austria. In the weeks before I left, I quite naturally began to feel afraid. I thought about Holst and how, when suffering from one of his bouts of depression, he still found solace in walking. I took myself off into the woods and looked around me. Hearing the song of a blackbird and touching the trees I knew that Austria would in a very real sense be exactly the same; nature is beyond language and knows no boundaries or borders. Even during this terrible pandemic, nature and walking are still able to provide solace and inspiration.

Amelia Marriette

*Editor Note: To find out more about **Walking into Alchemy: The Transformative Power of Nature**, please visit www.ameliamarriette.com/my-book. Amelia is raising money for the Holst Birthplace Museum and will donate £5.00 for every paperback and £1.00 for every e-book sold.*

Future Events

On 16th December at 7.30pm you can see the classic film *Brief Encounter* starring Celia Johnson (former pupil of Gustav Holst) and Trevor Howard at the Regal Cinema, Evesham. Proceeds will be divided equally between the cinema and the Holst Birthplace Museum. Tickets cost £10.

On 25th September 2021 the Holst Birthday Concert featuring the Cheltenham Symphony Orchestra will take place at Pittville Pump Room. The programme will include two pieces by Holst, hitherto not known to have been performed in the UK: the '**New Zealand manuscripts**.'

But for now ... If you are interested in a walking tour of places in Cheltenham associated with Gustav Holst, his father and grandfather, then download the free **PocketSights** app onto your smartphone. Thanks to the expertise of Andrea Creedon, '*Holst's Cheltenham*' on the app will take you on a 90-minute walk from Montpellier, through the town centre, and ending in Pittville and All Saints.

Alan Parker

Gin and Christmas

No, not a new type of cocktail! Former restaurateur Lits Phillipou has returned to our screens with two more entertaining Zoom presentations to appreciative audiences.

In September his talk celebrating gin 'From Mother's Ruin to Queen's Top Tiddle' was well attended, some with glass to hand. Lits spoke with enthusiasm and humour about the origin and current revival of this famous spirit. Most of us will know London Dry gin, but it's just one of six categories that gin falls into (juniper and citrus in London Dry's case). By the end of the evening we had many famous brands under our belts - Slingsby, Gordon's, Bombay Sapphire - knowing which botanical was used and at what point in the process it was introduced to the spirit base. It was a revelation. Locally we have Sibling Gin, an offering new to Lits. So we will have to remedy that some time. Cheers!

More recently, and as we approach the festive season, Lits took us through the evolution of Christmas and the importance of Queen Victoria's reign in making it our premier annual celebration. Hitherto Christmas had been quietly marked but, once Prince Albert brought the Christmas tree idea from Germany, things changed quickly. The Queen and Prince Albert made it a family affair that the whole country would want to emulate. Henry Cole, founder of the V & A, introduced the Christmas card in the early 1840s, to take advantage of the new penny and halfpenny post. Many other Victorian additions followed - mistletoe, stocking fillers, crackers (created by Tom Smith in 1847), the feast and pudding, mince pies, gifts, and much later in 1880 the Nine Carols service by the Church.

I didn't know about 'Stir-up Sunday' for the pudding (last Sunday before Advent), with its origins in the Collect of the Day in the Book of Common Prayer. One of our alert participants pointed out that Dickens was early in the action with *A Christmas Carol* published in 1843, with its emphasis on the family and charitable side of Christmas so beloved by The Queen. Some think the hats found in a cracker go back to the crowns of the Three Kings; the holly atop the pudding possibly evokes the Crown of Thorns. Everywhere you look Christmas has truly complicated stories. But we can at least celebrate Holst's contribution with his works *In the Bleak Midwinter*, and his *Christmas Carol* of 1890.

Tom Clarke

Membership of the Friends

Our thanks for the many Friends renewals now received. Membership cards have been posted out giving advance information on the reverse side about the 2021 AGM and Holst Birthday Concert.

If you are not already a subscribing Friend of the Trust, please do consider joining and also tell your friends. Not only will you have the satisfaction of giving financial and general support to the Museum, but you will also enjoy many other benefits. The Museum leaflet contains an application form.

Annual Membership rates are:

Single £20, Joint/Family £30, Young £5, Single Benefactor £60, Joint/Family Benefactor £100, Single Life £300, Joint Life £400, Gift Membership £20. For further details please contact me at membership@holstmuseum.org.uk or 01242 227720.

If you would like to become a **Volunteer** at the Museum, and thus a Volunteer Friend, please email volunteers@holstmuseum.org.uk.

We would like to be able to deliver this newsletter exclusively by email where possible, which would save us both postage costs and effort. If **any readers** (whether already on our mailing list or not) would like to take up this option, please email membership@holstmuseum.org.uk.

Tom Clarke



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