



Friends of Cathedral Music

RONALD SIBTHORP

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Founder of the Friends of Cathedral Music

An appreciation by Philip Barrett

Ronald Sibthorp, who died on 12th October 1990 aged 79, has a very special place in the affection of the Friends of Cathedral Music as Founder of the Society in 1956. This was the outstanding achievement of his life, and it was with a profound sense of gratitude that he saw the Society grow and develop beyond his wildest dreams. His diffident manner and rather shy demeanour probably led to his considerable gifts being undervalued in the church, but he was a humble and delightful man, a good musician and a faithful priest, with a passionate enthusiasm for cathedrals. Shortly before he died, Ronald Sibthorp published a highly entertaining autobiography, *The Memoirs of a Minor Canon*, in which he described his amusing experiences on the staff of three cathedrals, Peterborough, Truro and Lichfield.

Ronald Ellwood Sibthorp was born in 1911, the son of a Lincolnshire parson. Educated at Marlborough College and Keble College, Oxford, he was trained for the ministry at Lincoln Theological College. Here his interest in cathedral music was kindled and he was greatly influenced by Lincoln Minster's organist, Dr Gordon Slater. He was ordained at Lincoln in 1935 and served his curacy at the famous Boston Stump, under the legendary Canon Cook. Michael Ramsey, later Archbishop of Canterbury, was a fellow curate.

In 1959, Ronald Sibthorp was appointed Precentor, Minor Canon and Sacristan of Peterborough Cathedral. Here he was fully absorbed in the wartime life of the cathedral and successfully combined his responsibilities in the Close with a wide variety of honorary posts for various church societies, as well as odd jobs caring for servicemen. The Peterborough chapter and their wives included some remarkably eccentric characters, but he revelled in the Trollopean atmosphere.

In the summer of 1945, Ronald Sibthorp married Jessie Dickenson and shortly afterwards moved to be Rector of St Peter's, Northampton. Within a few months he realised that he could only really be happy at a cathedral, and shortly afterwards he was appointed Succentor of Truro Cathedral. The outstanding personality at Truro was the organist, Francis Guillaume Ormonde, about whom Ronald Sibthorp told many entertaining stories. After ten happy years in Cornwall, the Sibthorps moved to Lichfield where Ronald became Subchanter in 1957. Once again he took on all kinds of extra duties in and around the cathedral in addition to his musical



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and liturgical work, but eventually he grew tired of running the bookstall and organising the Friends of the Cathedral and returned to parish life.

In 1965 Ronald Sibthorp was appointed Vicar of Farley with Pitton, two small parishes near Salisbury, and Warden of Farley Hospital, a set of almshouses designed by Sir Christopher Wren. Here he stayed for seventeen years until his retirement in 1981, when Ronald and Jessie moved to a bungalow just outside the Close at Salisbury. In addition to founding the FCM, Ronald Sibthorp also founded the now-defunct Association of Minor Canons and compiled and edited the Anglican Chant Book. But it was the FCM that increasingly absorbed his spare time. For fifteen years from its foundation he was also Chairman. At first, he personally welcomed every new member, maintained the Society's address list (which he knew by heart), edited and distributed the Annual Report, sent out parcels of the Society's leaflets for display in cathedrals, bound sets of music presented by the Society to different cathedrals, and arranged the various regional gatherings. By 1971 many of these burdens had been shared with others, but he continued to take a close interest in its activities and greatly valued his election as a Vice-President of the Society.

Over the last 150 years there have been many distinguished priest-musicians who have felt themselves called to what Ronald Sibthorp once described as 'a sub-vocation within the sacred ministry' – the names of Ouseley, Dykes, and Fellowes among them. It was Ronald Sibthorp's particular vocation to grace the office of minor canon in the mid-twentieth century and to inspire many people to join with him in expressing in a tangible way an unswerving belief in, and support for, the music of English cathedrals which he loved so dearly.