

Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain

**JOHN VARLEY ROBERTS AND
RELIGIOUS MUSICAL LIFE
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY
BRITAIN**

David Baker



John Varley Roberts and Religious Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Britain

David Baker chronicles the extraordinary life and achievements of John Varley Roberts (1841–1920), a working-class Yorkshireman who became a popular composer and one of Victorian England’s most celebrated choral trainers as well as Organist of Magdalen College, Oxford.

Roberts’ influence was considerable and enduring at a time when church music was undergoing a significant transformation in Britain. Roberts influenced generations of choristers, musicians, and choir directors, sitting alongside John Stainer and Walter Parratt as one of the greats of his generation. During his long tenure of office at Magdalen (1883–1918), the choir was widely regarded as the very best in the country and beyond. He was a prolific and popular composer and wrote forty anthems, four complete services, organ solos, songs, part songs, and the cantata *Jonah*. His anthem ‘Seek ye the Lord’ remains popular internationally in countries as diverse as the USA and Japan. His compositions form a valuable indicator of taste and fashion, music making and publishing of the time. Roberts’ life, work and achievements are considered in the context of changes in Anglican Church music, and especially the rise of cathedral-type services, alongside educational and societal developments in Victorian and Edwardian Britain.

David Baker is the author of *The Organ* (1991), *Hymns and Hymn Singing: A Popular Guide* (1993), and *The Organs of Wymondham Abbey* (1996) and has published articles in the *Journal of the Royal College of Organists*, *Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies*, *The Organ*, *Musical Times*, and *Chelys: Journal of the Viola da Gamba Society*. Baker has also written numerous books on information management and librarianship.

Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Series Editor

Bennett Zon

Durham University, UK

So much of our ‘common’ knowledge of music in nineteenth-century Britain is bound up with received ideas. This series disputes their validity through research critically reassessing our perceptions of the period. Volumes in the series cover wide-ranging areas such as composers and composition; conductors, management and entrepreneurship; performers and performing; music criticism and the press; concert venues and promoters; church music and music theology; repertoire, genre, analysis and theory; instruments and technology; music education and pedagogy; publishing, printing and book selling; reception, historiography and biography; women and music; masculinity and music; gender and sexuality; domestic music-making; empire, orientalism and exoticism; and music in literature, poetry, theatre and dance.

Music and World-Building in the Colonial City

Newcastle, NSW, and its Townships, 1860–1880

Helen English

French Music in Britain 1830–1914

Paul J Rodmell

Singing the English

Britain in the French Musical Low-Brow, 1870–1904

Hannah L. Scott

A Social History of Amateur Music-Making and Scottish National Identity

Scotland’s Printed Music, 1880–1951

Karen E. McAulay

John Varley Roberts and Religious Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Britain

David Baker

For more information about this series, please visit: www.routledge.com/music/series/MNCB

John Varley Roberts and Religious Musical Life in Nineteenth-Century Britain

David Baker

First published 2026
by Routledge
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2026 David Baker

The right of David Baker to be identified as author of this work has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

For Product Safety Concerns and Information please contact our EU representative GPSR@taylorandfrancis.com. Taylor & Francis Verlag GmbH, Kaufingerstraße 24, 80331 München, Germany.

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-032-72784-4 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-72789-9 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-42261-7 (ebk)

DOI: 10.4324/9781003422617

Typeset in Times New Roman
by Apex CoVantage LLC

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	viii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xviii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xx
1 ‘Surrounded by music from the first’: Early life, education, career	1
2 ‘A most singular man’: First years at Halifax	20
3 ‘Such a state of perfection’: A cathedral choir	39
4 ‘Indefatigable thoroughness and tenacity of purpose’: Move to Magdalen	57
5 ‘Og, King of Basan’: Roberts as <i>Informator Choristarum</i>	75
6 ‘Splendid service to the cause of music’: In the university	93
7 ‘All the rest’s humbug’: Choir trainer of the highest rank	112
8 ‘Rare discrimination and taste’: Roberts the organist	130
9 ‘Sung in almost every Cathedral in England’: Roberts the composer	147
10 ‘The end of an era’: Later years, death, legacy	203

<i>Appendix A1 List of compositions and other works by John Varley Roberts</i>	223
<i>Appendix A2 Some principal singers at Halifax Parish Church</i>	242
<i>Appendix A3 Some of Roberts' organ students</i>	244
<i>Appendix A4 Testimonial writers for the Edinburgh application</i>	247
<i>Appendix A5 Organ 'openings' by Roberts</i>	248
<i>Bibliography</i>	250
<i>Index</i>	263

Illustrations

1. David Baker Collection	17
2. David Baker Collection	17
3. David Baker Collection	18
4. Stephen Gee Collection	18
5. David Baker Collection	19
6. Stephen Gee Collection	37
7. Stephen Gee Collection	37
8. Calderdale MBC Museums	38
9. Mary Auckland Collection	55
10. Stephen Gee Collection	55
11. Dr Christopher Kent	56
12. Magdalen College Oxford	72
13. Magdalen College Oxford	73
14. Magdalen College Oxford	74
15. Magdalen College Oxford	74
16. Magdalen College Oxford	92
17. Magdalen College Oxford	92
18. Magdalen College Oxford	110
19. Magdalen College Oxford	111
20. David Baker Collection	127
21. Magdalen College Oxford	128
22. Magdalen College Oxford	129
23. Magdalen College Oxford	200
24. Magdalen College Oxford	200
25. Mr Paul Hale	201
26. Magdalen College Oxford	202

Preface

It would be almost impossible to do justice to his many-sided character; there one could find tears and laughter very near to each other, a broad but far from subtle sense of humour, superb self-confidence tempered by humility, a most alarming bluntness of speech that tended to conceal the kindness of heart that lay behind it.¹

What more can be said of him than what has already been said? He is **Dr Roberts**. Can we say more than that?²

To know him it was essential to hear him, and to feel through his often-extraordinary utterances spoken in broadest Yorkshire the impact of his personality impinging upon you with masterful thrust.³

The compelling force of his own convictions made what might appear commonplace remarkably impressive.⁴

Roberts . . . was a bluff outspoken Yorkshireman of the old school, simple [and] thorough.⁵

‘There was always a fire burning within him, manifesting its heat either by warmth of heart, choleric impulsiveness, or occasional explosions and flying sparks. He had a tonic energy, an animated vigour, that exacted as much as it gave’.⁶

For myself, I am not content just to touch my hat to him; but . . . I take it off, and, in honour of the man I remember, stand uncovered.⁷

My first encounter with John Varley Roberts was in 1968, when I became organist at St Paul’s, Stanningley, Leeds. An elderly lady was a regular attender; she introduced herself as the niece of a famous choirmaster. I thought little of the encounter until 1972, when, for my dissertation at Cambridge University, I was researching the music of Halifax Parish Church, discovering that Dr John Varley Roberts had been organist and choirmaster there, 1868–1882, and the music had been second to none. I made the connection and sought out Edith Annie Roberts, the lady in question. As I walked into her front parlour, I saw a huge photograph hanging over the fireplace: Roberts in his Oxford DMus robes. She remembered him well, though had no letters or other material that I could use in my study. Edith Annie did, however,

stress how useful he had found his experience as a schoolmaster in developing his choir training skills. My dissertation duly submitted, I thought little else of Roberts, apart from giving a talk to the Halifax Antiquarian Society.

My interest in Roberts was rekindled when I moved back to Yorkshire in 2009. I was struck by how little remembered he was, having to point out to *Choir and Organ* magazine that an article in the May/June 2015 issue had omitted to mention him alongside John Stainer and Bernard Rose as one of Magdalen College's most prestigious organists. There were no entries in standard musicological reference works; not even a Wikipedia entry until I had one created.⁸ Roberts was one of those forgotten Victorians who, in their day, had a considerable impact and influence on Victorian church music.⁹ If he was remembered for anything, it was as the Magdalen organist who told a member of the congregation to shut up when the choir were performing full choral evensong. There were brief mentions of his genius as a choir trainer at a time when cathedral and college music was emerging from its nineteenth-century nadir, but little else.¹⁰ His compositions, except for his most popular anthem 'Seek ye the Lord', had been largely abandoned, not least by Magdalen College Chapel. They were seen as exemplars of Victorian church music best forgotten.¹¹

I began researching Roberts' time at Halifax, publishing several papers in *THAS*, *JBIOS*, and *JRCO*. I even wrote a novel, *The Organ Loft Murders*, based on Halifax Parish Church in the late 1870s. To celebrate the centenary of his death in 2020, I edited all Roberts' organ works for publication by Fitzjohn Music. I encouraged my choirs to perform his compositions; they all much enjoyed doing so. It became clear that Roberts' rise from an upper working-class background in mid-nineteenth-century Leeds deserved further study as a contribution to the ever-developing rich interdisciplinary picture of music in nineteenth century Britain.¹² There was already a substantial and significant corpus of publications on Anglican choral and organ music in both cathedral and parish church, used and referred to as background to the research for the present study. Nicholas Temperley's definitive monograph on parish church music,¹³ and especially the sections on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (with Roberts' time at Halifax referenced) proved a useful starting point, along with monographs and substantial scholarly articles on leading figures of the time, such as Samuel Sebastian Wesley¹⁴ and Roberts' fellow cathedral and college organists. Much of the environment in which Roberts and his contemporaries worked is summarised comprehensively in Frederick Lang's thesis *The Anglican Organist in Victorian and Edwardian England (c. 1800–c. 1910)*.¹⁵ The same is true of the Victorian organ which Roberts championed, described in detail in Nicholas Thistlethwaite's *The Making of the Victorian Organ*,¹⁶ supported by a rich periodical literature, much of which is cited in this book. Bernarr Rainbow's classic study on the Anglican choral revival¹⁷ gives a valuable context against which the education of men like Roberts and the standards which he inherited can be discussed. Titles such as Dave Russell's *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914*¹⁸ provide a rich socio-economic background to the period in which Roberts lived, especially in terms of his upbringing, education, career progression, and 'secular' music making both for the home and in the concert hall. The same is true of Robert Demaine's work on the musical life of Leeds.¹⁹ Bennett

Zon's *Music and Performance in Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain*²⁰ provides a more detailed picture of many aspects of musical life and the environment that shaped men such as Roberts, Stainer, and Parratt, from the development of the church organ on Germanic lines, glee clubs, musical soirées, and morality, to psalmody and children's education, supported by Pippa Drummond's study of provincial music festivals.²¹ The status of musicians in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is well charted by authors such as Deborah Rohr²² and Judith Barger,²³ while Dave Russell examines the role and work of music teachers during the period in question.²⁴ Russell has explored extensively and perceptively the emergence and characteristics of both amateur and professional music teaching in this period. Against this backdrop, the second half of the nineteenth century saw the professionalisation of music and musicians with the founding of organisations such as the music conservatoires and especially the Royal College of Organists, whose foundation in 1864 and subsequent significant influence has been comprehensively documented in the College's scholarly journal. This work is reinforced by titles such as Rosemary Golding's *Music and Academia in Victorian Britain*,²⁵ while Susan Wollenberg²⁶ describes and analyses music at Oxford in the 18th and 19th centuries and the environment and milieu in which Roberts lived and worked, as does Laura Wiebe's thesis²⁷ on the specifics of the Tudor music revival in Oxford from the 1890s onwards. Studies by Judith Blezzard,²⁸ Michael Hurd,²⁹ David Wright,³⁰ and others provide much useful information on the important topic of music publishing in the nineteenth century.

In recent years, Victorian church music has undergone something of a renaissance since its almost complete dismissal in the middle of the twentieth century by Fellowes, Hutchings,³¹ and others, along with cathedral organists' abandonment of much of the repertoire, as discussed in Chapter 10. Stainer, the epitome of all that was deemed bad about the period, has now been rightfully rehabilitated thanks to studies such as Jeremy Dibble's *John Stainer: a Life in Music*,³² part of a much broader assimilation of a range of musical forms and genres which, as Golding points out, 'though shunned by the classical performing or academic canon, provide important insights into the fabric [and structures] of musical life . . . economics, careers and professional identity, publishing, musical instruments, and education', all important aspects of this study.³³ Henderson and Jarvis's extensive work on forgotten church musicians of the Victorian period has brought to light a significant number of organists who performed, composed, taught, and trained choirs, albeit within the context of their church roles.³⁴ Their book includes a short chapter devoted to Roberts, along with a list of his compositions, while his role in the development of church choirs and choral singing, especially in relation to boys' voices, has been referenced in works such as *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*,³⁵ Timothy Day's studies³⁶ and my own articles, referred to earlier, and listed in the Bibliography. Apart from this material, and passing mentions in other relevant literature, Roberts has remained largely unknown, unresearched, and unsung; why?

Joseph Kerman has argued that the serious study of Stainer and his contemporaries could hardly sustain British musicology for very long.³⁷ The music is not the

best, and the context in which it was written, dominated by the cathedral organ loft, is perceived as limited in scope, notwithstanding the continued significant interest in musical biography, including of the Victorian period.³⁸ Even when the research field is extended to include performance practice and the environment in which men like Roberts worked, Kerman suggests there is insufficient to attract musicologists, not least when there are more important and prestigious composers such as Elgar, Holst, Parry, Stanford, and Vaughan Williams, to study.³⁹ And yet, as will be demonstrated especially in Chapter 9, a vast amount of music was produced for church, chapel, concert hall, music salon, hostelry, and home; while it was not ‘art’ music of the highest quality, millions performed it, regardless. More centrally, Roberts, though not renowned for his ability as an organist (unlike Stainer and Parratt), played a crucial role in developing a new style of choral singing at a time when choir training was undervalued and standards of performance poor. The importance of this movement, and the lead provided by A.H. (‘Daddy’) Mann at King’s College, Cambridge, have now been recognised, notably by Timothy Day in *I Saw Eternity the Other Night: King’s College, Cambridge, and an English Singing Style*.⁴⁰ Roberts receives many honourable mentions, but the primacy of Mann’s work is clear, a not unreasonable approach when the author focuses on how the *present-day* cathedral singing style emerged, another reason why, perhaps, Roberts has not been studied to the same extent as his fellow choir trainers. However, as discussed in Chapter 7 in particular, at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, and despite his conservative approach to repertoire, it was Magdalen College Oxford that could boast the premier choir in the country, and internationally, thanks to Roberts.

Nevertheless, devoting a full monograph to Roberts only makes real sense when his life and work are considered more broadly than just his church music. The repertoires of the working classes were ‘traditionally . . . excluded from musicological consideration due to their perceived low musical value’:⁴¹ yet more reasons for the lack of enthusiasm regarding Roberts. However, the present study fits a conception of biography that includes ‘those whose lives rarely rose above the “trivial” and were thus of no interest to the traditional [biographer]’.⁴² In 1841, the bulk of the British population was still relatively marginalised, excluded from meaningful participation in political and economic, if not social, and cultural, life. Access to education, healthcare, and meaningful employment was limited. One has only to consider, for example, the conditions of his Stanningley school pupils to realise this was the way most people in Britain lived. Roberts’ work was inevitably conditioned by his background, family life, his upbringing, the influence of his early teachers, mentors, and heroes, his life at a strict training college, his work in a school for the sons and daughters of the working classes, and the significant opportunities church music offered for an ambitious man. The complex character that was Roberts lived his life at a time when Yorkshiremen were beginning to define themselves as a separate ‘race’ of independent, proud, confident, determined people who would make their way to the top come what may; and he became a living exemplar, recognised as such in the second part of his career as the Yorkshireman abroad in Oxford. Roberts is placed within the historical, social, and educational

context that shaped not only his work and output, and which also influenced his fellow students, colleagues, pupils, choristers, and superiors – members of a higher class in society to which he himself aspired, at least in part.

By doing this, his biography provides a comprehensive exemplar of nineteenth century class structures, educational, religious, and social values, and the ways in which a man as determined as he could leave behind his upper-working-class origins on the one hand but stay true to his county and his Yorkshire *mores* and culture on the other. In this context, Roberts, his family, and his contemporaries – especially men like Parratt and Stainer – provide a substantial case study of the *embourgeoisement* (the transition of working-class individuals or groups toward middle-class norms, values, and behaviours) which pervaded much of Victorian society in the second half of the nineteenth century. Joseph Roberts was already adopting middle-class values while young John was still at school, and from early in his career Roberts was keen to gain access to more prestigious social circles than his own by adopting a career trajectory different from the rest of his family. He married above his then social status, acquired formal credentials that set him apart from most of the population, earned considerably more money than his peers and relations, bought property, rejoiced in first-class rail travel, expensive cigars, and costly drink and, above all, internalised those significant middle-class ideologies of individualism and self-improvement. The cultural capital thus acquired enabled Roberts to negotiate those elite institutions in which he worked throughout his life: The Church of England; the University of Oxford; the College of Organists and other professional bodies.

There is a rich and broad corpus of primary material – both archival and printed, as well as a few sound recordings – relevant to this study. The research draws on the many papers in the West Yorkshire Archive Service repositories at Leeds and Wakefield, Magdalen College Archives, the Bodleian Library, the British Library, and a range of other collections, as documented in the text. Roberts' time in York at the training college can be reconstructed from the printed reports still extant in the archives at York St John University, though records relating specifically to him could not be located. His work as a schoolteacher in Stanningley can be deduced from the daily logbooks (now in the Leeds Archives) that he compiled. Magdalen College Archives provide much detail about the chapel and its music through documents such as the vice-president's register and the president's notebook, together with the extensive range of papers relating to the choir and its repertoire. Sadly, little correspondence or other related documentation pertaining specifically to Roberts survives, and 'the person' has to be reconstructed from the reminiscences and recollections of others for the most part. It is fortunate that there are several such sources, some still in manuscript, written by former choristers, undergraduates, colleagues, or contemporaries, including testimonials in support of Roberts' application for the professorship in music at Edinburgh University in 1891, along with others' autobiographies and biographies, as listed in the Bibliography. The material includes a contemporary account of Roberts, John Stainer, and Walter Parratt, his two predecessors at Magdalen, by Paul Benecke, a Magdalen Fellow and grandchild of Mendelssohn, and a detailed, if somewhat

anecdotal, history of the Magdalen Vagabonds by James Carter, Chaplain at Magdalen, 1893–1902.⁴³ J.F.R. Stainer, John Stainer's son, persuaded Carter not to publish the reminiscences at the time, given that many of the people referred to were then still alive.⁴⁴ These works, and the many reports of Roberts' own sayings and doings, have been used extensively. They testify to his character, his approach to music, career, and life, though, as Watkins Shaw cautions, memories may 'have become garbled and exaggerated through the prism of age [and] sentimentality',⁴⁵ while the testimonials were designed to show Roberts in the best light to those who would be considering his application for the Edinburgh Professorship.

Similarly, contemporary (auto)biographical material must be treated with a degree of scepticism, not least given Roberts' tendency to hyperbole, among many other characteristics.⁴⁶ As Miriam Dobson stresses, 'to make sure of who they are at the present moment, human beings tell stories about their past'.⁴⁷ Roberts certainly did this during his time at Oxford, as can be seen from the memoirs of his colleagues, choristers, and friends. Could it be that he needed to 'big himself up' to compete with others, despite his success and confidence? Nevertheless, as David Carlson points out, while autobiography can be seen as 'essentially an act of self-deception', the writing 'is likely to offer at least as much illumination of the period *during which* it was written as of the period *about which* it is written'.⁴⁸ In Roberts' case, perhaps we are dealing, *inter alia*, with class and cultural differences and how they could be negotiated at the time. Other biographical information about Roberts, his family, teachers, colleagues, students, choristers, singing men, fellow musicians, and others was located through study of a wide range of manuscript and printed material. This included census returns, school and college records and reports, reviews and articles in newspapers, and the musical press. The resulting prosopographical framework has been used to underpin both the biographical and musicological aspects of the book, though, given the relative paucity of personal material, speculation was inevitable in terms of some of Roberts' actions and activities, such as his keenness to move to Halifax, his concentration on the chapel choir at Magdalen, and his resignation from other Oxford posts after 1893. This is also the case with his private life, with the partial exception of some friendships at York and Oxford in particular, his wife and daughter remaining especially shadowy figures. Roberts' attitude to women relates primarily to their singing ability or their troublesome nature and poor performance. All this 'educated guesswork' is, one hopes, clear from the narrative.

Printed literature – books, journals, magazines, newspapers, and other related sources – of the time has been extensively searched and used, though the low standard of much music criticism (not least given the fact that journals such as *The Musical Times* were published by the same companies that sold the music being critiqued) and the general tendency to 'hero worship', requires material to be treated with caution.⁴⁹ This must include the many reviews of Roberts' and others' performances and compositions. Concert and recital programmes and service lists from both Halifax and Oxford survive in quantity, as do substantial archival and printed collections relating to his attitude to the organ, its usage in church and concert hall, and his performances. The substantial monograph which he wrote concerning the

rebuilt organ at Halifax⁵⁰ has also provided much useful information, especially for Chapter 8. Critiques of Roberts' fellow organists and choir directors – such as those by John E. West⁵¹ and E.H. Fellowes⁵² – also formed an important element of the research. In addition to Victorian and Edwardian literature about music, including seminal texts such as SS Wesley's *A Few Words on Cathedral Music*,⁵³ works such as Francis Pigou's writings⁵⁴ are discussed. Sadly, the promise of access to Roberts' own scores of music performed at Magdalen, annotated with organ registrations and dynamic markings never materialised. His *A Treatise on a Practical Method of Training Choristers*,⁵⁵ first published in 1898, with four editions in total, forms the basis of an evaluation of his work and significant reputation as a choir trainer, especially of boys. Roberts' treatment of the subject is compared with that of his contemporaries, and in the context of the prevailing fashion and theory, as well as reports of his approach to technique, interpretation, performance practice, and repertoire at Magdalen College and the outstanding results he achieved there. All Roberts' compositions, some still in print or now available in new editions, along with his degree exercises (his only music to survive in original manuscript form, and part of a fascinating corpus of material in their own right),⁵⁶ have been located and analysed in the context of musical fashions, trends, and demands of the period. Comparisons are made with his contemporaries' music and the preferred repertoire and forms and styles of the period, especially in relation to his works for the church.

Chapters 1 to 5, and the first part of Chapter 10, take a broadly chronological approach, from his birth, early life, influences, education, and training right through to his last years at Magdalen. I have attempted to avoid the tendency to turn the narrative into an overordered and inauthentic 'neat trajectory' that smooths over the realities and inconsistencies of a life.⁵⁷ Rather, the biographical elements of these and, indeed, other chapters, are used as a framework within which facts can be organised, the key trends and fashions of the period discussed (such as the move to an all-male choir at Halifax) and Roberts' activities as performer, teacher, choir trainer, composer, and professional musician, contextualised and assessed. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the main aspects of his work at Oxford, firstly as *Informator Choristarum*, and then within the University and elsewhere. Chapter 7 is concerned with his approach to choir training, both at Halifax and Magdalen, with reference to his *Treatise*. Chapter 8 looks at Roberts' career as Organist (recitalist, accompanist, designer), underpinned by a discussion of the prevailing fashions and trends of the time, while Chapter 9 focuses on his compositions, alongside those of his contemporaries, matched against needs and expectations in the last part of the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth. The second part of the final chapter aims to summarise Roberts' life and work and provide an assessment of his contribution to religious musical life, the factors that influenced him, and the environment in which he had to work.

This, then, is John Varley Roberts' biography. But it is about much more than one Victorian musician's life. The distinctiveness of this book comes not only from the documentation and analysis of the life and work of an extraordinary individual, but also the opportunities that it presents to understand the impact of a music

practitioner whose regional origins and distinctive road to national acclaim provide insight into the many cross-cultural themes evident during the long nineteenth century.

Roberts' name

Roberts' grandfather William (born 1766) married Anne Varley in 1789. Son Joseph was given the middle name Varley after his mother's maiden name. Joseph's sons (apart from Charles, who had the middle name Hartley after his mother's maiden name) all had the name Varley, which became a family tradition. Given that John Varley Roberts' use of his middle name changed over time (he later signed himself J. Varley Roberts), I have chosen not to use the name Varley Roberts in the main text.

A note on dialect

Many writers refer to Roberts' accent and attempt to capture it (however inadequately) when quoting him. It is a pity that, unlike his best Lay Clerk John Lomas, Roberts never made any recordings, at least of his speaking voice. I have nevertheless kept the spelling used in the original sources, even though, as a Yorkshireman with a longstanding interest in local dialects, I doubt he will have spoken as in the transliterations, not least because none were made by people from the West Riding. Indeed, I have a suspicion that, at times, some authors exaggerate Roberts' accent for dramatic effect, as discussed in Chapter 10. The 'inaccurate and inauthentic' portrayal of Yorkshire dialect speech by people from outside the county has long been a bone of contention!⁵⁸

References to money

Pounds, shillings, and pence were the divisions of currency in Victorian and Edwardian Britain. Twelve pence made one shilling; Twenty shillings a pound. A pound is represented by the £ sign; 's' = a shilling; 'd' = a penny. A guinea is 21 shillings or £1 1s 0d. I have added suggested modern-day values in [] using the Bank of England's inflation calculator.⁵⁹

Notes

- 1 W.H. Ferguson in Venables, E.M., *Sweet Tones Remembered*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1947, p. x. Hereafter Venables, *Sweet Tones*. Venables was a chorister at Magdalen 1895–1900.
- 2 GB-Omc: P293/MS1/1. Vine Hall, E., *The Magdalen Vagabonds: A History of Their Wanderings and Their Doings, 1862–1899*. Hereafter Vine Hall, *Vagabonds*. Inscribed in Stainer's memory. This revised version was finished just before the author's death. A companion history covering the second half of the Vagabonds' existence was proposed but never written.
- 3 Venables, *Sweet Tones*, p. 54.
- 4 Day, T., *I Saw Eternity the Other Night: King's College, Cambridge, and an English Singing Style*. London: Allen Lane, 2018, p. 112. Hereafter Day, *I Saw Eternity*.
- 5 Beecham, T., *A Mingled Chime: An Autobiography*. London: Putnam, 1943, pp. 63–64.

- 6 Venables, *Sweet Tones*, pp. 54–55.
- 7 Venables, *Sweet Tones*, p. 70.
- 8 John Varley Roberts – Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Varley_Roberts
- 9 Wollenberg, S., ‘Charles Garland Verrinder and music in the West London Synagogue’. In Zon, B. (ed.), *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley*. London: Routledge, 2012, p. 60.
- 10 See, for example, Day, T., ‘Sir Richard Terry and 16th-century polyphony’. *EM* 22: 1994, pp. 296–307. Day, T., ‘Where did the boy treble come from?’, *Journal of the Royal College of Organists* 8: 2014, pp. 82–90. Hereafter Day, ‘Boy treble’. Day, *I Saw Eternity*.
- 11 Phillips, P., ‘The golden age regained’. *EM* 8: 1980, pp. 3–16. Hereafter Phillips, ‘Golden age’. *The Choir of Magdalen College, Oxford: Archive Recordings 1906–60*. OxRecs OXCD-116. Sleeve note p. 9. Hutchings, A., *Church Music in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Herbert Jenkins, 1967, p. 95. Hereafter Hutchings, *Church Music*.
- 12 Zon, B. (ed.), *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley*. London: Routledge, 2012, p. 1.
- 13 Temperley, N., *The Music of the English Parish Church*. Cambridge: CUP, 1979.
- 14 Horton, P., *Samuel Sebastian Wesley: A Life*. Oxford: OUP, 2004.
- 15 Lang, F.D., *The Anglican Organist in Victorian and Edwardian England (c. 1800–c. 1910)*. PhD thesis, University of Hull, 2004. <https://core.ac.uk/display/5222530>.
- 16 Thistlethwaite, N., *The Making of the Victorian Organ*. Cambridge: CUP, 1990. See, also, Thistlethwaite, N., ‘Re-making the English organ: Musical and liturgical contexts, 1830–1870’. *NCMR* 12: 2015, pp. 71–93.
- 17 Rainbow, B., *The Choral Revival in the Anglican Church, 1839–1872*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 1970.
- 18 Russell, D., *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914*. 2nd edition. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1997.
- 19 Demaine, R., *Individual and Institution in the Musical Life of Leeds 1900–1914*. PhD thesis, University of York, 2000.
- 20 Zon, B. (ed.), *Music and Performance Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays in Honour of Nicholas Temperley*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- 21 Drummond, P., *The Provincial Music Festival in England, 1784–1914*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- 22 Rohr, D., *The Careers of British Musicians, 1750–1850: A Profession of Artisans*. Cambridge: CUP, 2001.
- 23 Barger, J., *Elizabeth Stirling and the Musical Life of Female Organists in Nineteenth-Century England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007.
- 24 Russell, D., ‘Key workers: Toward an occupational history of the private music teacher in England and Wales, c.1861–c.1921’. *RMARC* 47: 2016, pp. 147–172.
- 25 Golding, R., *Music and Academia in Victorian Britain*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.
- 26 Wollenberg, S., *Music at Oxford in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.
- 27 Wiebe, L.J., ‘*Peopled with Invisible Presences*’: *Oxford and the Tudor Revival, ca. 1890–1939*. DMA thesis, University of Iowa, 2011. Iowa Research Online. <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2788>.
- 28 Blezzard, J., ‘What choirs also sang: Aspects of provincial music publishing in late nineteenth-century England’. In Talbot, M. (ed.), *The Business of Music*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2002, pp. 62–95.
- 29 Hurd, M., *Vincent Novello and Company*. London: Granada, 1981.
- 30 Wright, D., ‘Novello, John Stainer and commercial opportunities in the nineteenth-century British amateur music market’. In Bashford, C., and Marvin, R.M. (eds.), *The Idea of Art Music in a Commercial World, 1800–1930*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2016, pp. 60–85.
- 31 Fellowes, E.H., revised Westrop, J., *English Cathedral Music*. London: Methuen, 1969. Gatens, W.J., *Victorian Cathedral Music in Theory and Practice*. London: CUP, 1986. Hutchings, *Church Music*.

- 32 Dibble, J., *John Stainer: A Life in Music*. Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007.
- 33 Golding, R., 'Musical samplers in the museum of musical works: The nature, status, and value of nineteenth-century Oxford degree exercises'. *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 2025, pp. 1–36. Published online. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2024.46>. Hereafter Golding, 'Musical samplers'.
- 34 Henderson, J., and Jarvis, T., *They Fly Forgotten, as a Dream' Some Lesser-Known Church Musicians from the Victorian and Edwardian Eras*. Salisbury: RSCM, 2020.
- 35 Potter, J. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Singing*. Cambridge: CUP, 2000.
- 36 Day, 'Boy treble', pp. 82–90.
- 37 Kerman, J., *Contemplating Music: Challenges to Musicology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985, pp. 39, 70.
- 38 Pekacz, J.T., *Musical Biography: Towards New Paradigms*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016, p. 1. Hereafter Pekacz, *Musical Biography*.
- 39 McGuire, C.E., *Music and Victorian Philanthropy: The Tonic Sol-fa Movement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 210.
- 40 Day, *I Saw Eternity*.
- 41 Golding, 'Musical samplers', p. 4.
- 42 Pekacz, *Musical Biography*, p. 7.
- 43 Carter, J., *Memories of a Magdalen Vagabond*. GB-Omc: MC F33/1/MS7/1.
- 44 GB-Omc: F33/1/MS7/4.
- 45 Watkins Shaw, H., *Sir Frederick Ouseley and St Michael's Tenbury*. Birmingham: University of Birmingham for St Michael's College, 1986, p. 48.
- 46 Huebner, S., 'Maurice Ravel: Private life, public works'. In Pekacz, *Musical Biography*, p. 75.
- 47 Dobson, M., 'Letters'. In Dobson, M., and Ziemann, B. (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History*. 2nd edition. London: Routledge, 2020, p. 65.
- 48 Carlson, D., 'Autobiography'. In Dobson, M., and Ziemann, B. (eds.), *Reading Primary Sources: The Interpretation of Texts from Nineteenth and Twentieth Century History*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 180–181, 201–202, 204.
- 49 Pekacz, *Musical Biography*, p. 6.
- 50 Roberts, J.V., *The Parish Church Halifax: History of the Organ and Its Successive Enlargements*. Halifax: Guardian Printing Works, 1878.
- 51 West, J.E., *Cathedral Organists Past and Present*. London: Novello, 1899.
- 52 Fellowes, E.H., *Memoirs of an Amateur Musician*. London: Methuen, 1946.
- 53 Wesley, S.S., *A Few Words on Cathedral Music, 1849*. London: Hinrichsen, 1965, reprint edition.
- 54 Pigou, F., *Odds and Ends*. London: Edward Arnold, 1903.
- 55 Roberts, J.V., *A Treatise on a Practical Method of Training Choristers*. London: Henry Frowde, 1898.
- 56 Golding, 'Musical samplers'.
- 57 Pekacz, *Musical Biography*, pp. 2, 6.
- 58 Cooper, P., *Yorkshire Dialect in the Nineteenth-Century: Enregisterment, Authenticity and Identity*. London: Routledge, 2025, p. 76.
- 59 Inflation calculator | Bank of England. <https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>

Acknowledgements

A significant number of people have contributed to this book. All of them made my task easier. I am especially grateful to Mary Auckland OBE for all her work on my behalf searching through many and varied archives, especially in the early days of the project. Jennifer Baker spent many hours helping me find biographical and related information about the singers, organists, and other musicians referred to in the text as well as spending time in the archives at Magdalen College. Dr Lucy Ellis was a constant source of encouragement throughout the project as well as helping with initial research. Simon Fowler aided my work accessing material in the British Library. Ted O'Hare undertook bibliographic research on my behalf and helped prepare the edition of Roberts' organ music. Benjamin Craig, Milly Craig, Zachary Smith, and Charlie Swinhoe, four of my organ students, carried out clerical and related tasks throughout the project which allowed me to focus on the musicology. Carolyn Tristram did much sterling work transcribing documents from various archives with remarkable speed and accuracy. Ann Kilbey gave valuable technical assistance with the illustrations, while Lukas Russell did a first-class job of creating the music examples. Francis Vaughan compiled the initial list of works and assisted with the index, while Lucy Rainer helped organise the bibliography. Laura Wilson gave superb administrative support throughout.

Special thanks must go to all the archivists and librarians who assisted me in locating material by and about Roberts. Martin Holmes, Alfred Brendel Curator of Music, the Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, and his colleagues, were superb in responding to my requests. Martin's help was crucial in tracking down all Roberts' compositions, as was that of staff at the British Library. Frances Pond, former librarian, Royal College of Organists, assisted with my attempts to locate Roberts' organ music, though, mysteriously, one set of *Three Pieces for Organ* (London: Pitman, [n.d.]: Andante in F, Diapason Movement in G, Fuga in G.) remains elusive despite extensive searches. Similarly, Dr Emily Jennings, assistant archivist at Magdalen College, ensured that I had comprehensive access to the college archives, as did Dr Robin Darwall Smith, now archivist at University College, and Julian Reid, archivist at Merton. Dr Jennings and Dr Darwall Smith also gave me much useful advice about the archival material both in the colleges and elsewhere. Timothy Xu, history assistant at Oxford History Centre provided material about Roberts' activities in the City of Oxford, while Anne Courtney, assistant archivist, St George's Chapel

Archives and Chapter Library, facilitated my access to documents concerning George Elvey at Windsor. The staff of the West Yorkshire Archive Service in Leeds and Wakefield must be thanked for providing access to the significant collections of material about Halifax Parish Church and St Thomas' School, Stanningley. Mike Breaks, archivist at Manchester Cathedral, responded to my requests for information about the choral set-up there in the 1870s, while Kathryn Kendon, Secretary and Registrar at York St John University made sure I had extensive access to the original teacher training college archives. John Henderson was willing to share much information about Roberts from his book on forgotten Victorian musicians. My thanks also go to David Slattery-Christy for sharing information about David Davies (Ivor Novello).

I am more than grateful to Dr John Hargreaves and Mr David Glover, of the Halifax Antiquarian Society, for their help, advice, and support over the last ten years. Dr Andrew Hayden, Mr Andrew McCrea, deputy director of the Royal College of Organists, and Professor Dave Russell have always been prepared to provide advice and feedback as the book project developed. Kate Stoneman has been a considerable help as copy editor and proofreader, while Soumya Singh deserves especial thanks and praise for all her excellent work on the production side of this project. Finally, I must thank Heidi Bishop, of Taylor & Francis, for her tolerance and forbearance throughout this project and the challenges that I had to face in delivering it, and also to Julie Taylor, who put up with John Varley Roberts as a dominant figure in my (and her) life for so long. To all the people listed here, I give my sincere thanks. Any errors or deficiencies that remain in this book, including the possible tendency to 'hero worship' a fellow working-class northerner made good, are mine and mine alone.

David Baker,
Mytholmroyd,
Halifax, West Yorkshire,
January 2026

Abbreviations

ARCM	Associate of the Royal College of Music
ARCO	Associate of the Royal College of Organists
ATTB	Alto Tenor Tenor Bass
BA	Bachelor of Arts
BCM	British College of Music
BDP	Birmingham Daily Post
BerA	Berwick Advertiser
BIOS	British Institute of Organ Studies
BMus	Bachelor of Music
BO	Bradford Observer
CC	Christmas Carols (Novello)
CT	Church Times
DC	Dewsbury Chronicle
DMus	Doctor of Music
DSc	Doctor of Science
EM	Early Music
ff	following
FCO	Fellow of the College of Organists
FRCO	Fellow of the Royal College of Organists
FRCS	Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons
GB-Lna	The National Archives, London
GB-LEbc	Brotherton Library, University of Leeds
GB-Ob	Bodleian Library, Oxford
GB-Omc	Magdalen College Archives, Oxford
GB-Ome	Merton College Archives, Oxford
GB-Ouc	University College Archives, Oxford
GB-WRch	St George's Chapel, Windsor
GP	General Practitioner
HC	Halifax Courier
HG	Halifax Guardian
HM	Her/His Majesty
HRH	Her/His Royal Highness

HudC	Huddersfield Chronicle
JBIOs	Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies
JHRME	Journal of Historical Research in Music Education
JOJ	Jackson's Oxford Journal
JP	Justice of the Peace
JRCO	Journal of the Royal College of Organists
JRMA	Journal of the Royal Musical Association
KCVO	Knight Commander of the Victorian Order
LCM	London College of Music
LEP	Lancashire Evening Post
LG	London Gazette
LH	Local Historian
LI	Leeds Intelligencer
LM	Leeds Mercury
LT	Leeds Times
MA	Master of Arts
MC	Manchester Courier
MD	Doctor of Medicine
MEN	Manchester Evening News
MG	Manchester Guardian
MH	Musical Herald
MMR	Monthly Musical Record
MN	Musical News
MOaMTR	Musical Opinion and Music Trade Review
MP	Member of Parliament
MS	Musical Standard
MT	Musical Times
MW	Musical World
n	note
NBDM	North British Daily Mail
NCMR	Nineteenth-Century Music Review
n.d.	No date
NPOR	National Pipe Organ Register
NS	New Series
NTSM	National Training School for Music
OA	Octavo Anthems (Novello)
OC	Original Compositions [for the Organ] (Novello)
OC & RG	Oxford Chronicle and Reading Gazette
OG	Oxford Gazette
ODN	Oxfordshire Daily News
OJ	Oxford Journal
OO	Ossett Observer
OT	Oxford Times
OWN	Oxford Weekly News

p/pp	page(s)
PCB	Parish Choir Book (Novello)
PMA	Proceedings of the Musical Association
PSB	Part Song Book
RAM	Royal Academy of Music
RCM	Royal College of Music
RCO	Royal College of Organists
RMARC	Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle
RSCM	Royal School of Church Music
SA	Short Anthems (Novello)
SAB	Soprano Alto Bass
SAT	Soprano Alto Tenor
SATB	Soprano Alto Tenor Bass
SDT	Sheffield Daily Telegraph
SI	Sheffield Independent
SR	School Review
SS	School Songs (Novello)
SSATB	Soprano Soprano Alto Tenor Bass
THAS	Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society
TOrg	The Organ
US-NYpm	Morgan Library and Museum, New York City
WDP	Western Daily Press
WYA	West Yorkshire Advertiser
WYAS	West Yorkshire Archive Service
YCDS	York Central Diocesan Society
YEP	Yorkshire Evening Post
YH	York Herald
YO	Yorkshire Orchestra
YP	Yorkshire Post
YS	York Series (Banks Music)
YStJ	York St John University

1 ‘Surrounded by music from the first’

Early life, education, career

Introduction

John Varley Roberts was born on 25 September 1841 at Stanningley, Leeds, fourth son of Joseph Varley Roberts (1800–1881) and his wife Elizabeth.¹ Joseph was a clothier, a maker and finisher of woollen cloth, part of a group in the area.² Roberts had seven siblings, all living at Poplar House, Town Street.³ Stanningley was birthplace of John Naylor (1838–1897), organist, York Minster 1883–1897,⁴ and Joseph Lumby (1831–1895), professor of divinity, Cambridge University, who was ‘very friendly’ with Roberts’ father.⁵ James Chadwick, Curate, St Thomas’ Church, lived with the Roberts family, 1850–1857.⁶ Young John would no doubt have met Lumby and perhaps been tutored by Chadwick, who later supported Roberts in his teaching career. The children worked in the home-run business, boys as spinners or weavers, girls as burlers, removing burs from wool, though such ‘cottage industries’ were later largely replaced by mill working. By 1851, Joseph also farmed seven acres; becoming a landowner was a way of aspiring to gentleman status.⁷ All but two children lived at Poplar House: Three (two boys, one girl) were schoolteachers, one a cloth manufacturer.⁸ John, aged nine, and Frances (pupil teacher), were at Stanningley National School, built 1846.⁹ The family was always ‘in a state of affluence [with] “port wine, either on the table or in the cupboard”’, and in later life, Roberts advised his colleagues to drink a glass after a hard day’s work as ‘a good sediment’.¹⁰

Victorian Britain experienced significant demographic change: High birth and falling death rates meant rapid growth: 15.7 million people in 1801; 41.5 million in 1901. West Yorkshire was one of six most populous areas.¹¹ While life for working people was hard, free time (1873 saw the Saturday half-day holiday introduced), leisure opportunities (some provided by churches), and disposable income, increased.¹² The railways, public transport, tramways, and the safety bicycle facilitated travel and tourism.¹³ There were significant developments in education, with a strong emphasis on self and mutual improvement. Friendly societies, mechanics’ institutes, working men’s colleges, and trades unions were formed. By 1884, most adult males could vote.¹⁴ The population of Leeds was 60,000 in 1811; over 250,000 by 1871.¹⁵ According to William Spark (1823–1897), Town Hall Organist from 1851 until his death, Leeds comprised ‘dingy-looking mills, warehouses, poorly built houses,

badly paved streets, uninviting shops, and huge chimneys that poured forth . . . black smoke, begriming and blackening all that lay in its course'.¹⁶ For many inhabitants, however, the focus was on villages like Bramley, Farsley, and Stanningley, where people had close and constant contact with 'manufacturers . . . who thronged their streets and filled their Cloth Halls twice a week'.¹⁷

Music making

Music making was well established by the 1840s.¹⁸ Albion Street's Music Hall (1794), a regular concert venue, attracted international performers such as Jenny Lind, Paganini, and Sims Reeves.¹⁹ The Theatre Royal received opera and drama companies.²⁰ In 1818, Richard Fawcett (1761–1837), Vicar of Leeds 1815–1837, introduced a professional surpliced choir, supposedly 'the first . . . in an English parish church since . . . the Reformation', and, though there were others before Leeds, it was some time before this was widely replicated.²¹ John Jebb advised Walter Farquhar Hook (1798–1875), Fawcett's successor, to develop full daily choral services (not without opposition), given the need to improve the state of Anglican Church music.²² In 1841, Samuel Sebastian Wesley (1810–1876) was appointed organist and later choirmaster.²³ The Leeds Choral Society was founded, with Wesley as conductor, followed by Robert Senior Burton, who directed the West Riding Orchestral Union, appearing 'with great success in orchestral and choral performances'. A Madrigal and Motet Society was created; the Yorkshire Amateur Musical Society performed major orchestral works, including Beethoven's Ninth.²⁴ In 1858, the first Leeds Music Festival took place, drawing musicians from across Yorkshire and beyond.²⁵ That same year, Leeds Town Hall opened, and in 1859, Gray & Davison's large, innovative organ was installed.²⁶

There was much amateur music making.²⁷ In 1837, Walton's Music Saloon opened, and chamber concerts organised. Choral singing grew exponentially as part of a national movement, led by Joseph Mainzer (1801–1851), John Hullah, and John Curwen.²⁸ Through publications such as *Singing for the Million* (London, 1841), and *Music and Education* (London, 1848) Mainzer developed a vision of choral singing.²⁹ John Hullah (1812–1884) promoted the singing class movement, teaching children sight singing, training teachers in his fixed doh tonic sol-fa at Battersea College, London.³⁰ John Curwen (1816–1880) established the Tonic Sol-Fa Press, and, in 1879, the Tonic Sol-Fa College.³¹ 'Singing was a healthy pursuit, and a good discipline';³² classes, choirs, and choral societies 'sprang up everywhere'.³³ By the 1890s, 'the government was spending £170,000 [£18,500,000] annually on providing musical education in the elementary schools set up under the Education Act of 1870; some two million children were learning tonic sol-fa'.³⁴ Music education in West Yorkshire was especially praised.³⁵ The number of musicians grew in absolute terms and as a proportion of the population.³⁶ Home ownership of pianos and harmoniums was widespread;³⁷ choirs with singers capable of reading music proliferated.³⁸ Music was cheap, and easily obtainable, much of it advertised through a monthly journal published in succession to *Mainzer's Musical Times* (1841) from 1844 by Alfred Novello. Priced at 3½ d [£1.90], every issue of *The*

Musical Times and Singing Class Circular contained a simple piece of choral music (secular and sacred alternately).³⁹ 'The Novello choral catalogue was . . . characteristic of period taste to a degree that no other English publisher could match'.⁴⁰ Religion dominated most people's lives; the population was largely 'biblically literate', thanks to religious education in church and school.⁴¹ In 1851,

'a census in England and Wales of . . . attendance at religious services on 30 March [of that year] . . . was nearly 11 million out of a total population of 17.9 million, with 5.3 million attending Church of England services'.⁴²

The Anglican establishment controlled much of the country's life, including its music.⁴³ S.S. Wesley argued that, because of the 'great encouragement . . . to impart to the working classes a knowledge of the rudiments of music', the church should ensure 'its musical services become such as musically informed persons can respect' to maintain and, indeed, increase attendance.⁴⁴ There was unprecedented church building, bringing opportunities for musicians.⁴⁵ Music was a means of advancement; working as a church organist offered a basis on which to build a career.⁴⁶

Education and early career

Roberts was 'surrounded by music from the first'.⁴⁷ According to his 1862 letter of application for the post of organist at Halifax, he had 'from infancy been brought up in the musical art'.⁴⁸ Much of his experience was provided by the church, like contemporaries such as Parratt, Stainer, and Sullivan.⁴⁹ Roberts' father was organist at St Thomas', Stanningley, with a strong musical tradition under its Tractarian vicar, with (by the 1860s) a surpliced choir.⁵⁰ Roberts' teachers, whom he regarded 'with the greatest affection', were John Whitley (1817–1881), Frederick Hird (1826–1887), and John Burton [junior] (1834–1881), all church organists and 'professors of music'.⁵¹ Whitley, a cloth drawer, was a cornet player, brass band master, and arranger, with a (bogus?) DMus.⁵² He organised church choral festivals, judged music competitions, gave organ recitals, and was organist at Harewood Church, Leeds, for 53 years from age 14.⁵³ Roberts played piano for Whitley's bands and the local choral society.⁵⁴ Hird played the organ at an early age, was organist of Bramley Parish Church, then (1883–1887) All Souls, Leeds. He was reputedly a fine player, 'an indefatigable and painstaking teacher', and RAM local representative.⁵⁵ A notable pianist, Hird, a student of William Sterndale Bennett and Julius Benedict, gave chamber concerts with George Haddock, leader of the Hallé orchestra.⁵⁶ Hird's anthem 'O God, our Defender' was performed in York Minster on Jubilee Day, 1887.⁵⁷ He grew wealthy enough to own a large pipe organ blown by hydraulic engine, and rebuilt by Edmund Schulze (1874).⁵⁸ Hird taught Roberts (his most successful student) piano and theory. He was 'a true teacher, [who] trained my ear by playing music . . . in four-part harmony, which I had to write down'.⁵⁹ Roberts adopted this approach in his choir training, making boys 'listen to and feel chords', striking 'notes for them to imitate, [then] triads [asking]

4 *John Varley Roberts and Religious Musical Life*

the pitch name of each of the three constituent notes',⁶⁰ Hird may have taught Roberts composition; his *Allegro Vivace* and Roberts' *Postlude in F* for organ are similar.

Robert Senior Burton (1820–1892), a student of Cipriani Potter, was organist of Leeds Parish Church from 1849, training the choir 'to a level of perfection', resulting in 'a truly efficient choral service'.⁶¹ Burton edited *The Choral Service, as used in the Parish Church of Leeds*, arranged for priest and choir, as befitted fully choral services.⁶² His 'musical ability [was] far in advance of his discretion as a man', and he moved to St Peter's, Harrogate, after the final in a series of disputes at Leeds.⁶³ Burton directed the Bradford Festival Choral Society, the Leeds Festival Choral Society, the Halifax Choral Society, the Halifax Glee and Madrigal Society, the Huddersfield Choral Society, the Sheffield Choral Union, and the West Yorkshire Choral Union, among others.⁶⁴ John Burton, Robert Senior's younger brother, and Roberts' teacher, described himself (aged 17) as 'professor of music', and was 'amongst the highest class of organists'. By 1861, he was a 'teacher of music' in Little Horton, Bradford, and ten years later lived at a fashionable address in Manningham with his family and two servants.⁶⁵ The Burtons, Hird, and Whitley were 'self-made' men, part of an 'aristocracy of labour . . . [which] enjoyed a combination of good wages, steady employment and craft skills that secured their independence'.⁶⁶ These 'local heroes', when not focussing their energies on performing, directing, teaching, and composing, worked in industry or commerce until sufficiently successful to become full-time 'professors of music'.⁶⁷

Roberts was described as 'something of a prodigy'.⁶⁸ William Popplewell (1843–1929), Vicar of All Souls', Bolton, a childhood friend from Stanningley and student contemporary at York, wrote: 'when quite young he displayed such wonderful taste and ability in music that many . . . expressed the opinion that he would rise to eminence'.⁶⁹ Roberts was soon playing the organ publicly, and in 1855, aged fourteen, became organist at St John's, Farsley.⁷⁰ This was not untypical. John Stainer (1840–1901) was fifteen when appointed organist of St Benet's, Paul's Wharf, London, and occasional deputy at St Paul's Cathedral.⁷¹ Walter Parratt (1841–1924) was eleven when organist at Armitage Bridge Church, Huddersfield.⁷² St John's had a 'powerful new organ' built by Nicholson's of Bradford in 1843, paid for by subscription, and opened on 20 December 1844.⁷³ Roberts was at Farsley for five years, helping with the family business when not at school, 'the course of education received [being] so often interrupted, and so early broken off by the demand of juvenile labour'.⁷⁴ He became a pupil teacher at St Thomas', age 13.⁷⁵ There was no remuneration in year one; then £10 [£1,200] in year two, rising to £17.10s [£2,000] in year five. The school was also paid if the year was completed.⁷⁶ The next step was to attend one of the teacher training colleges founded in the 1840s to provide working and lower-middle class children with educational opportunities and job prospects.⁷⁷ Roberts sat the Queen's Scholarship examination, widely available from the 1860s.⁷⁸ There were sections on arithmetic, algebra and mensuration, school management, music, grammar and composition, dictation and penmanship, geography and history, domestic economy, languages, with different questions for males and females. The music exam (within the School

Management paper) had practical and theoretical parts, including ear tests and sight reading, questions on note intervals, scales, and other topics, using either staff or tonic sol-fa notation.⁷⁹ St Thomas' sponsored Roberts to attend York Diocesan Training College, founded in May 1841 as a residential institution for masters for national schools in York and (from 1843) Ripon dioceses.⁸⁰ A new building was opened in 1845 in Lord Mayor's Walk, purposely located near the Minster, with grants from government and the National Society, founded in 1811 'for the education of the poor in the principles of the established church'.⁸¹ The original buildings in Monkgate housed a training school for mistresses, which moved to Ripon in 1862.⁸² A chapel was built in 1859.

Roberts went in 1860. The tuition fee was one guinea (21s) per quarter, payable in advance; board was £20 [£2,400] a year, including bed linen, but no washing.⁸³ Subjects included holy scripture, church catechism, liturgy, church history, reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, history, geography, bookkeeping, mensuration, elements of algebra, geometry, and practical mechanics. There were lectures in botany, natural history, and natural philosophy. Modern languages and instrumental tuition were extras.⁸⁴ Students 'faced a daily programme of activity which would daunt the most energetic student today'.⁸⁵ Hours of teaching were 9.00am–12.00 noon and 2.00pm–5.00pm, with a rising bell at 5.30am, the first study period 6.00am–6.45am being followed by breakfast and prayers. 5.00pm–6.30pm there was gardening work or military drill; after supper, more study 7.00pm–9.40pm, then prayers and 'Gas Turned Off' at 10.00pm.⁸⁶ Roberts was the only family member to go, though brother Joseph sat at least one examination externally.⁸⁷ The York Central Diocesan Society gave an allowance for board and lodging 'during the time it may be necessary for [students] to remain [in the city]'.⁸⁸ Roberts signed a declaration accepting the award 'with the full and honest intention of devoting [himself] to the profession of Teacher'.⁸⁹ The sponsor had 'to ascertain that [Roberts possessed] those fundamental qualifications . . . [including] intellectual capacity and studious habits; a love for . . . teaching, sympathy with . . . children, a lively temperament, an amiable and truthful disposition'.⁹⁰ He lived in St Maurice's Parish with some 70 other men aged 18–21.⁹¹ In December 1861, Roberts was placed in the second class.⁹² Because of concerns about standards, time spent on music education increased, and the numbers taking the examination reduced.⁹³ Class music was emphasised, with a focus on tonic sol-fa. The general expectation was that all graduates would be capable of teaching children singing.⁹⁴ Dr Edwin George Monk (1819–1900), organist, York Minster, taught music at the College for Mistresses.⁹⁵ It is not known if Roberts knew Monk at this point, and there is no evidence of other links between college and cathedral, though such an arrangement was suggested at Chichester as early as 1855.⁹⁶ Roberts' music teacher was Robert Sutton, assistant master of the Model School, whose *Elements of the Theory of Music* contained 'the full lecture notes delivered . . . during [1860–1867]'.⁹⁷ Published by Robert Cocks, who specialised in training college texts, the book proved popular, reaching its 17th edition by the early 1880s.⁹⁸ Cocks also published some of Roberts' songs, written during his later years at Halifax. Roberts' fellow students were mostly from Yorkshire. After graduating,

some went into industry or commerce, often becoming successful. The majority worked as certificated schoolmasters until retirement and a pension, frequently marrying a teacher (usually untrained). Their daughters (typically) also taught.⁹⁹ None of Roberts' cohort were as successful as he became, except Colonel John Howarth Clark (1841–1901), who won a Queen's Scholarship to the College in 1860, graduating two years later. Commissioned in the 12th Lancers, he was headmaster of St Barnabas' School, Manchester for two years, moving in 1865 to Cheetham Collegiate School. For nearly 20 years, he was either churchwarden or sidesman at Manchester Cathedral. A leading light in the volunteer movement (one of the first to join, in 1860), Clark was a JP, and a Freemason. Roberts played for his funeral, and dedicated *Story of the Incarnation* (1896) to him.¹⁰⁰

First application to Halifax Parish Church

On 18 August 1862, Joseph Henry Frobisher (1813–1869), Halifax Parish Church Organist from 1838, resigned after disquiet at the 'inefficiency' of deputies employed because of his ill health, much as S.S. Wesley became well known for leaving assistants in charge, often to the detriment of the music. This was a sad end to a distinguished career as Halifax's leading musician, like Thomas Parratt in Huddersfield, the only full-time professional locally, and 'the best . . . out of London'.¹⁰¹ Frobisher led performances of *Messiah*, other Handel oratorios, Haydn's *Creation* and *Seasons*, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah* and *St Paul*. He continued the church's long-standing tradition of choral singing of anthems, service settings, and chants¹⁰² with a reputation as a fine performer, notably of Bach's organ music, from memory. Despite being offered opportunities to play in London, he remained in Halifax. On 30 August 1862, the *Leeds Mercury* advertised the post 'at £24 a year [£2,800], raised to £50 [£5,900] from the subscription fund for the general expenses of the church'.¹⁰³ 31 applications were received. Frobisher applied, offering to practise the choir 'once a fortnight or so', which he had not done previously. As in 1868, he did not turn up for audition.¹⁰⁴ Roberts, now 21, applied, describing himself as 'Precentor' of the Training College. In the 1840s, Archdeacon Wilberforce of York had asked the noted Frederick Helmore to organise a choir. The visit was 'cut short by an outbreak of scarlet fever among the students, and York Training College was thus deprived of an opportunity to establish a choir rivalling that of the sister college' of St Mark's Chelsea. This may have given Roberts the opportunity he needed to develop his choir training skills.¹⁰⁵ He was also organist at St Denys' (where Postill built an organ in 1857)¹⁰⁶ and described himself as 'fully competent to take the position', being 'classed . . . at the head of the College', though he eventually graduated in the second class.¹⁰⁷ His referees were Robert Sutton, John Whitley, and William Lee Howarth, curate (1857–1862) and then vicar (1862–1864) at St Thomas'.¹⁰⁸ The recommendation from York Principal Hugh Robinson stressed that while Roberts faced 'competition older and of more experience . . . his skill [was] really far above what might naturally be looked for in a youth'. Despite the enthusiasm in reference and application letters, Roberts was unsuccessful. Lack of experience was a disadvantage, age not so. John Stainer

became organist at St Michael's College, Tenbury at the age of 16,¹⁰⁹ thanks to Professor Sir Frederick Arthur Gore Ouseley (1825–1889), precentor at Hereford Cathedral, professor of music at Oxford, and Tenbury's founder. S.S. Wesley was 22 when he became organist of Hereford Cathedral,¹¹⁰ George Elvey (1816–1893) 19 when appointed to St George's Windsor.¹¹¹ George Sinclair (1863–1917) was recommended for Truro Cathedral aged 19.¹¹² The successful applicant, Henry Edwin Moore (1842–1915) was a year *younger* than Roberts, but organist of the grammar schools, deputy at Leeds Parish Church, and protégé of Robert Senior Burton, Frobisher's successor (1859) as Halifax Choral Society's Conductor.¹¹³ Moore's father was Registrar at Leeds, a role with considerable influence.¹¹⁴ Moore was appointed without a formal application.¹¹⁵ Most of the other applicants were Yorkshire church organists, often with music as a family occupation, albeit a part-time one in many cases.¹¹⁶ Some applicants lived further afield, evidence of the trend for major posts not to be filled by 'local' candidates.¹¹⁷ One turned to a life of crime. Another left music altogether. Some eventually made a living from music teaching, alongside being organists. One became a schoolteacher for part of his working life. Two died as paupers.

Organist, schoolteacher, and 'professor of music' in Armley

After leaving York in December 1862,¹¹⁸ Roberts was appointed to 'his first organist-ship' (sic) of (old) St Bartholomew's, Armley, Leeds, though his predecessor, Zaccheus Wright, did not receive his final half-yearly payment of £5.5s [£635] until July 1863.¹¹⁹ Roberts was paid three times as much, the same annual salary as a 15-year-old John Stainer at St Benet's Wharf, London.¹²⁰ There was a separate choirmaster at Armley, still in post in 1881.¹²¹ Roberts performed at local concerts, notably as pianist, using newspapers to advertise his services.¹²² As early as January 1863, he was offering organ and piano lessons, and (like some organists) piano tuning.¹²³ He must have had stiff competition, including from Robert Senior Burton, who bought S.S. Wesley's 'teaching connection' for £500 [£62,000] in 1846. The organist profession was 'so deplorably overcrowded that many very able and in all ways excellent men have the greatest difficulty in making ends meet'.¹²⁴ Initially, Roberts' musical activity was insufficient to give him a steady income, so he lived in the family home, teaching full-time at St Thomas', along with elder brother Joseph, 'an uncertificated master', and two sisters: Esther, who instructed only the lower classes, and Frances, who taught the girls sewing. The four were responsible for some 140 students. Roberts was lucky to have a job, for there were more graduates than posts.¹²⁵ He was one of that first generation of teachers who were required to complete a daily logbook, begun in Roberts' case on 5 January 1863. He had 'the chief conduct of the school', with an emphasis on discipline and attendance. 'Severe punishments', typically for larger boys, were administered. Students who came in the morning were more studious, active, intelligent, and cleaner than those in the afternoon, as they had done a shift in the mills. Devising a timetable and improving the discipline were Roberts' initial achievements. Near the end of his first month, he asked boys in the top two classes