

## 60 years of the Little Missenden Festival

The first Little Missenden 'Festival of Music and the Arts' took place in October 1960.



Founder Pat Harrison

Founder Pat Harrison was born in the village in 1905 and lived there most of her life. She was involved with the Festival until her death in 1998. Pat was inspired by the cellist Rohan de Saram who, during a country walk, commented on Little Missenden's "harmonious atmosphere" and suggested she might organize a music festival.

From its earliest days, the Festival has engaged top-flight performers as well as encouraging budding talents. The first event included performances by the composer and pianist Edmund Rubbra, the poet Louis MacNeice and the contralto Helen Watts.

One essential element of the Festival is St John the Baptist, Little Missenden's Parish Church. This remarkable building, started in Saxon times around 975, provides a fine acoustic and a beautiful interior. The Festival logo is based on the medieval wall painting of St Christopher which, along with other historic images, was restored in 2017. Thanks to research and digital projection, supported by Heritage Lottery funding, audiences can now experience the paintings much as they appeared when created some 700 years ago.



Pat Harrison, Jake Nicholson, Alan Mills, Michael Cox, Helen Watts, Tom Hilton and Richard Drakeford in 1960



Rohan de Saram and Ivor Keys (1961)

While audiences appreciate the atmosphere and beauty of this remarkable building, its layout and structure also create challenges as a music venue. But, as Eric White, Literature Director of The Arts Council and former Chairman of the Festival noted in 1970, "The Little Missenden Festival has always made a virtue of its natural limitations. Within the scale imposed by this lovely village, it has been found possible to produce an intimate festival of high quality".

For the past 60 years the Festival, now held over 10 days in October, has included music, poetry, talks on the visual arts and literature, drama, dance, cinema, bell-ringing, art exhibitions and even a judo display.

A concert for, or by, children was included in every Festival for the first 30 years and, since then, music workshops have brought professional musicians to local schools. The children perform the songs they have created at a concert in Great Missenden Parish Church. Canon Rosie Harper, vicar at St Peter & St Paul, commented recently "the children are inspired by the music, learn how to work together, use different parts of their brain, and work across school and age boundaries".



After a children's concert

From the start, the Festival's philosophy has been to 'choose worthwhile music first and then to select the best person to perform it'. In its early years, singers Peter Pears, Ian Partridge, John Shirley-Quirke and Janet Baker all appeared, as did instrumentalists Trevor Pinnock, Osian Ellis and Rohan de Saram. Since then, performers have often come from further afield, including the Janacek and St Petersburg Quartets. The Festival also provides a platform for young musicians at the start of their careers, many of whom return when better-established.



The St Petersburg Quartet made a stunning Festival debut in 2006 with a performance of Beethoven's first Razumovsky quartet and two Shostakovich quartets.

The Festival has always been keen to promote early music – David Munrow, Christopher Hogwood and Anthony Rooley all appeared during the formative years.

Contemporary music, both in performance and via commissions, has been another focus. Composer Richard Drakeford was one of the founders and his works featured in several programmes.

John Taverner was a frequent visitor to the Festival and, thanks to his link with Pat Harrison, 16 children from the village school sang at the premier of his *Celtic Requiem* in the Royal Festival Hall.



The Festival also commissioned his *Greek Interlude* in 1979 and *The Bridal Veil* – in memory of Pat – 20 years later. In total, over 90 new works have been commissioned and the tradition continues this year, with a new string quartet from John Woolrich.

But, as mentioned earlier, it's not just about music. From the outset poetry and drama featured, with performances from Ted Hughes and Geraldine McEwan. It isn't just about classical music either. Folk music has been included since 1987 and jazz since 1997. And for the last 8 years, we've also put on an extra concert just before Christmas.



*Laura Jurd and her group Dinosaur explored the future of jazz in 2018*

Ticket sales account for about two-thirds of the cost of running the Festival, the remainder being covered by support from the Friends and grants from other generous funders, some closely involved with the organisation, some external.

As a brochure commemorating the Festival's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary noted 'it takes true dedication for volunteers to tackle an event of this kind'. This involves a huge amount of work for the Committee and other volunteers, but it's work done with enthusiasm which in no small way accounts for the continuing vitality of the Festival after all these years.

After her discussion with Rohan da Saram, Pat Harrison recalled lying in bed the following morning mulling over the idea until she thought "I believe we could do something".

She did, indeed, do something rather wonderful and we're delighted to continue her work and welcome you to the 60<sup>th</sup> Little Missenden Festival.



The Festival logo is taken from this magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century wall painting of St Christopher on the north wall of St John the Baptist Parish Church.



Visit [www.little-missenden.org](http://www.little-missenden.org)



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