

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



St Edmundsbury Cathedral Choir **Handbook** for Choristers, Probationers and Families

Message from the Director of Music



Welcome to St Edmundsbury Cathedral Choir! As a chorister here, you take your place in two great traditions: that of joyful music-making in this beautiful Cathedral, present ever since its foundation in 1914; and more widely that of the whole Anglican Church, which has always celebrated music as part of worship, and the roots of which stretch back over a thousand years.

For the next few years, you will have the special privilege of looking after this tradition, nurturing it and passing it on to the next generation of choristers who come after you. Not only will you gain excellent musical skills, but also skills which will help you in all other aspects of your life, such as teamwork, professionalism, leadership and commitment.

You will find your place in this close-knit team and build strong friendships as you work together to create something wonderful. Together you will travel, make recordings, and may even appear on the television! At the heart of it all is the Cathedral's pattern of worship, which is lifted by your voices as you sing and make music together.

Take pride in your time as a chorister. It is truly a unique experience.

I hope your years with us will be filled with joyful memories to last you a lifetime.

Claudia Grinnell
Director of Music

1. Who's who?

The Cathedral is led by the **Dean, The Very Reverend Joe Hawes**, who is passionate about the Cathedral Choir. He leads the Chapter, which is the Cathedral's governing body.

One member of Chapter is **The Revd Canon Katy Cunliffe**, who is the **Precentor**. She is the priest in charge of the music at the Cathedral, and has oversight of the Cathedral Choir's activities.

The **Director of Music, Claudia Grinnell** is the choir's conductor and the person primarily responsible for the training of the choristers and running the Music Department.

The **Assistant Director of Music** is **Richard Cook**. Richard is the principal organist for most services, and also takes rehearsals with the choristers and sometimes conducts the choirs.

We also have an **Organ Scholar** who spends lots of time working with the **Probationers** (more on that below) to prepare them for choristership.

Philomena Brunner is the **Chorister Supervisor** who signs the choristers in and out when they arrive and leave the Cathedral and who also ensures the choristers are looked after while they are on-site.

The Cathedral also has a **Singing Teacher** who works with all the choristers on their singing technique.



2. Information for Probationers

If you are new to the choir, then the chances are you have just become a Probationary Chorister. This is a bit of a mouthful, and they're often known simply as 'probs'.

As a prob, you are a **trainee chorister**. You will spend a period of time – up to a year, depending on age and ability – learning the ropes from the older boys and girls and building up towards the full routine that the full choristers undertake. Probationers will have special sessions during rehearsals with the Organ Scholar to help prepare you to become **full choristers**. This training will focus on teaching you the basics of singing technique and helping you to access parts of your voice you never knew were there, and they will also help you understand how to read music.

Probationers wear a **cassock** – that's the maroon-coloured robe – and when you sing at services you will be stood next to at least one full chorister (who will be wearing a **surplice**, the white garment that goes over the cassock) who will help you to follow the music and keep up with what's going on.

In starting as a probationer, you agree to commit to attend every session at which the probationers are expected. The timetable for probationers is a reduced version of the full timetable, so whilst you are a probationer it will look like this:

	Boys	Girls
Tuesdays	Rehearsal, 4.00 pm – 5.15 pm Plus on alternate weeks: Evensong, 5.30 pm – 6.15 pm	Rehearsal, 4.00 pm – 5.15 pm Plus on alternate weeks: Evensong, 5.30 pm – 6.15 pm
Thursdays	No commitments	Rehearsal, 4.00 pm – 5.15 pm Evensong, 5.30 pm – 6.15 pm
Fridays	Rehearsal, 4.00 pm – 5.15 pm Evensong, 5.30 pm – 6.15 pm	No commitments

3. Becoming a Full Chorister

Your progress as a prob will be monitored by Miss Grinnell, Mr Cook and the Organ Scholar, and when they feel the time is right they will offer you a place as a **full chorister** in the Cathedral Choir.

Becoming a full chorister is like passing your driving test. Receiving your surplice is a sign that you have reached a good level of knowledge and ability as a singer, but there is still a long way to go and there are several more ranks to climb over the next few years.

In becoming a full chorister, your parents commit to supporting you throughout the rest of your choristership, which usually would continue until the **end of Year 9** for both boys and girls. It is important that this commitment is made because there are many incredibly rewarding times to come as your vocal confidence and maturity blossoms, thanks to the time, effort and money the Cathedral invests in training the probationers and all our choristers. As you progress through the choir, younger choristers will look up to you and emulate you, so it's important you set a good example.

Once you become a full chorister, you will be entitled to receive free **music theory tuition** every other Tuesday, 5.15 pm - 5.45 pm (usually led by Mr Cook and the Organ Scholar) and **singing lessons** with our resident teacher. These are provided by the Cathedral free of charge as part of the remuneration for being a chorister.

Choristers (and even probationers) receive **payment** for their work. The fee is modest for probationers but increases on becoming a full chorister, and on a gradual sliding scale thereafter. Payment is done through the Cathedral's finance department, and is paid to your nominated bank account at the end of each term.

In addition to this, each full chorister is able to claim a **'pension'** of which will be paid to them once they complete their choristership at the end of Year 9. Exceptions are made for boys whose voices change before this point. The chorister pension you receive depends on the age you were when you joined the choir, but is a substantial sum: if you joined in Year 6 or below, you will receive a pension of £500; if you joined in Year 7, £350; and if you joined in Year 8 £250.

Eventually, you might have the opportunity of becoming a **Head Chorister** or **Deputy Head Chorister**. You will get to wear a special **medal** for services and Head Choristers have their name on a board in the Song School. The appointment of these roles is within the gift of the Director of Music and the Precentor, and it might not necessarily be the longest-serving or oldest choristers who are selected for this duty.

4. Information for Parents

Choir Timetable

The choir routine works on a bi-weekly rotation so that up to five choral services per week are shared out between the girl and boy choristers. Please note this is the timetable for full choristers.

Week A	Boys	Girls	Week B	Boys	Girls
Tuesday	4.00-5.15 pm: rehearsal 5.15-5.45 pm: Music Theory	4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong	Tuesday	4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong	4.00-5.15 pm: rehearsal 5.15-5.45 pm: Music Theory
Thursday		4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong	Thursday		4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong
Friday	4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong		Friday	4.00-5.20 pm: rehearsal 5.30-6.15 pm: Evensong	
Sunday	9.00-10.15 am: rehearsal 10.30-11.50 am: Eucharist 2.00-3.15 pm: rehearsal 3.30-4.15 pm: Evensong N.B. choristers must sign out between Eucharist and the afternoon rehearsal		Sunday		9.00-10.15 am: rehearsal 10.30-11.50 am: Eucharist 2.00-3.15 pm: rehearsal 3.30-4.15 pm: Evensong N.B. choristers must sign out between Eucharist and the afternoon rehearsal

**“The music skills for life
are incredible.”**

Cathedral Chorister, 2026



Holidays

As a rule, the choir term broadly follows the school pattern of holidays in Suffolk. However, some of the choir's most important times are at **Christmas and Easter** and there are commitments on both those days and the days leading up to them, so you should expect to be in Bury at those times. A Cathedral Christmas makes for a wonderful family occasion and is a lot of fun for the choristers too.

Normally, the choir will have the following time off:

- A week at every Half Term break, including at least one Sunday
- Around a week in the period leading up to Christmas (remember, we sing on Christmas Day)
- Around ten days after Christmas
- At least a week around Easter depending on where it falls in relation to the school holidays
- A summer break from mid-July (the last singing day is usually the second Sunday of July) until the beginning of September

Full termly schedules will be circulated well in advance, together with regular email updates with reminders. It is expected that families will plan holidays around the choir terms, especially as many of the most important occasions happen immediately before or after a holiday.

Attending services

Families and friends are warmly invited and encouraged to attend all services sung by their children. There are many ways in which you can become involved with the Cathedral beyond your role as chorister parents: it is a friendly community which is always pleased to welcome and involve new people in all sorts of ways. In particular, for siblings of choristers, please be aware that Junior Church runs each Sunday during the 10.30am Eucharist, to which all children are invited.

Commitment and attendance

As with any serious team activity, especially one where professional standards are pursued, it is hugely important that every member of the team is present each time it meets. We expect 100% attendance at choir commitments, so please make a careful note of dates (which are circulated well in advance) and prioritise them in your diaries whilst your child is a chorister.

In special circumstances, permission can be granted by the Director of Music for a chorister to miss a choir commitment. Please make requests for absence in writing well in advance, noting that examples of situations where permission is likely to be granted include:

- A major family event, such as a wedding or funeral
- A compulsory one-off school activity such as a school trip
- An activity related to the child's future education, such as attendance at an open day

Examples of situations where permission is not likely to be granted include:

- A club or team which clashes with choir, especially if it's more than a one-off instance
- A friend's birthday party / social activity

In the event of your child falling ill whilst at home or at school, please let us know as soon as possible because we want to avoid causing unnecessary concern by ringing their school if they fail to turn up to choir without explanation. Please keep us fully informed of their progress and try to give us an accurate idea of when they might be back in action. As a rule, if the child is deemed well enough to be at school then they should come to choir.

If your child feels ill during a choir commitment, the first port of call is the first aid trained Chorister Supervisor, Philomena Brunner. She will make contact with you, if possible, to arrange collection if the child is too unwell to go back to singing; otherwise she will ensure they are comfortable and suitably looked after until the end of the session.

"I really like the opportunity to make new friends."

Cathedral Chorister, 2026



**“I am relaxed and
happy.”**

Cathedral Chorister, 2026

Drop-off and pick up

Please bring your children to the cloister entrance by Pilgrims' Kitchen for each rehearsal. Punctuality is important and we ask that you ensure your child is there at least five minutes before the advertised rehearsal time. This is also where to pick your child up from. When you drop your child off, they will be signed in by the Chorister Supervisor: from that moment on they are in the care of the Cathedral until they are signed out at the end of the session.

When they are signed out, the Chorister Supervisor should at the very least make eye contact with the parent or responsible adult collecting. Permission must be given in writing for a child to sign out without an adult. If this is the case, they must leave the site immediately (i.e. a child cannot sign themselves out but then sit and wait to be collected in the cloisters).

On a Tuesday, we ask that you do not pull into the Cathedral car park for drop-off or pick-up, as it gets extremely busy. Instead, Angel Hill car park is free after 3pm on Tuesdays.

Refreshments

On arrival at the Cathedral on weekdays, choristers are offered a light snack, and there is a water fountain to fill up water bottles. Choristers are encouraged to bring a water bottle into rehearsals, and we have plenty of breaks to have a drink.

Safeguarding

The Cathedral is committed to upholding the highest standards of safeguarding while your child is in our care. All our staff undertake training in safeguarding and hold enhanced DBS certificates. If you wish to report any concerns, please contact the Director of Music, the Precentor, or the Cathedral's Designated Safeguarding Lead, Sarah-Jane Powell, as soon as possible. For contact information, please refer to the section at the end of this handbook.



Dress code

It is important that the choristers come to the Cathedral smartly dressed each time they sing. On weekdays, it is assumed that they will be wearing school uniform; games kit is also permissible. On Sundays, choristers should wear a **choir jumper** and the **choir tie** (you will be issued with these), with a white shirt and black or grey trousers / skirt and tights. Hair should be tidy and tied back if it is longer than shoulder-length. Most importantly, every child should be wearing **smart black shoes** (black sports shoes or trainers are not acceptable) for every service, including times when they attend choir during the week in games kit. Discreet make-up and jewellery is permitted, but the conductor may ask a chorister to remove accessories which are deemed distracting.



Choristers in choir uniform

Behaviour

We expect and require high standards of behaviour and discipline among the choristers in order to achieve what we do. The choristers must remember that they are ambassadors for the Cathedral; the whole community is rightly very proud of them and it's important that they live up to their high reputation. Examples of things to bear in mind include:

- Use of mobile phones during choir activities is not permitted.
- Listen to what everyone has to say, and don't talk over others in rehearsals.
- When gathering in the Cloister Garth prior to rehearsals, always bear in mind the general public by keeping your distance and your voices down: be especially mindful of people visiting the Pilgrims' Kitchen.
- Treat everyone at choir with kindness and respect.
- Please note that any unkind or bullying behaviour towards other choristers will not be tolerated and may result in being asked to leave the choir.

Tours, recordings and broadcasts

The activities of the choir go far beyond singing for the regular services in the Cathedral. Every chorister should get the chance to participate in at least one international tour: most recently, we went to Normandy in April 2024. In July 2025 we visited Carlisle Cathedral and in July 2026 we toured to Sweden. Two CDs have been recorded in the last two years, and sometimes the choir might be invited to perform on the radio or television.

Friends of the Cathedral Choirs

The Friends of the Cathedral Choirs (FOCC) is a body of current and former choir members, parents, family members and wider supporters of the Cathedral's music who work to raise funds for the Cathedral Choir, the St Edmundsbury Singers and the Cathedral Youth Choir. They organise numerous events throughout the year and also often run the interval drinks at the Cathedral's concerts. Recently, the FOCC has been able to offer generous grants towards the choir's recent tours. They have also contributed towards the cost of choir robes and to the choir's recent CD recording, alongside many other things.

The FOCC is a volunteer-led organisation which depends on many people, especially chorister parents and families, giving generously of their time to help with the many fundraising events that are of such great benefit to the singers at the Cathedral. There is a hope that chorister families will wish to become involved with this volunteering. The current chair of the FOCC is Helene Utting who is always happy to hear from people who would like to offer their time; you can find her number at the end of this handbook.

Leaving the Choir

Choristers reach the end of their choir career at the end of Year 9. Their final service is Valedictory Evensong which usually takes place on the second Sunday of July, along with a celebratory get-together.

Sometimes, a boy's voice may change before he reaches the end of Year 9. Vocal transition in boys may feel worrying, especially when it cuts short a great treble career, but rest assured that it is a normal part of growing up and we will manage this carefully. It is important that the professional opinions of the Music Department staff and the Vocal Coach are fully respected by parents as the decision will be made purely with the boy's health and wellbeing in mind. In the event of a boy leaving earlier than Year 9 due to vocal change, his contribution will be properly marked and he will receive a good send-off, as well as the full pension due to him mentioned earlier in the handbook. He will still be entitled to continue with Cathedral singing lessons and music theory tuition until the end of Year 9 should he choose.

After leaving, many choristers join the Cathedral Youth Choir. This is intended for teenage singers to be part of high-level choral singing in the Cathedral, but at a lesser commitment level, usually meeting to rehearse and/or sing Evensong on Wednesdays. It is also open to current senior choristers who are keen to take on as much singing experience as possible, as well as young singers in the area who have not previously been choristers. For more information about this, please contact Miss Grinnell.

5. Quick contact guide

Claudia Grinnell, Director of Music

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Katy Cunliffe, Canon Precentor

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Helene Utting, Chair of the FOCC

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Sarah-Jane Powell, Chief Operating Officer and Safeguarding Lead

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“I love the music, the people, the opportunities, the building and the songs.”

Cathedral Chorister, 2026

