

The Durham Hymns

A World War One commemorative project from the Northern Regional Brass Band Trust in partnership with Durham County Council.

[The opening scene is a view of the interior of Durham Cathedral from the back of the nave looking towards the Rose Window. In the foreground, the pews are filled with audience members. In the mid-distance a brass band is seated in the cross, with a mass choir stood behind on a raked stage. The music begins.]

Prelude on George Butterworth

[Looking from the side of the stage, we see the conductor, arms flaying energetically, surrounded by members of the brass band. In quick succession we then see close ups of individual players: a fugal horn, a tuba, a trombone. The sequence continues in this fashion, cutting back and forth between close ups and full long shots from the back of the nave, until the music stops and the screen fades to black with the sound of audience clapping.]

Memoir of Sergeant George Thompson

[Looking from the side of the nave, we see a man in a dark suit stood at a raised lectern at the front edge of the stage, with the band and choir behind. He is reading from the Memoir of Sergeant George Thompson. The cathedral is hushed in silence. The scene cuts in close to the actor's face seen in profile as he reads. Throughout the remainder of the reading, the camera cuts between close up, mid-range and long-distance shots, until the actor finishes reading and sits down. The screen fades out to black in rapt silence.]

Narrators words: 'Sleep tight, my bonnie lass, Gracie. Two years old tomorrow. Just for a bit pastime, I will try and write a few things which I can remember while I was away with the 7th Battalion Durham Light Infantry in France. I am not much of a writer on such a subject, but I will do my best to let you know what we went through. To start with, all countries have had war one time or another. But this Great War which started in 1914 till 1918 was the worst in history. And I hope there will never be another. Over a million lives were lost.

On 17th April 1915 we started off for France. Before we left Gateshead, I asked for a few hours leave to visit my father and mother at Sunderland to say goodbye and returned to my duties as promised. So, we started off and a lot of people from Sunderland came to see us off. We entrained at Gateshead and some game we had to get our horses into the trucks. Our Commanding Officer came to see us away. Next time we saw him was in France.

We had to go to a place called Zillbecke; this was an awful place for shelling. I remember one night when we were going up with rations to this place a battalion was going up to the trenches when the Germans started to shell. Shells burst among them. It was awful to see them- heads and arms and legs lying all over the place. What a terrible sight. I was the first wagon to get unloaded when a shell burst just beside me, and a lump of shell dropped just beside my foot and sunk into the ground. I dug it up and my father still has it for a souvenir.

I shall never forget the rough rides I have had going up the lines with rations. The shell holes I have seen - you could have put a pair of horses and a wagon in easily. I have many time wondered how those poor horses stood it so long. I have seen them standing up to their knees with mud for days. The CO used to come and have a look round our horse lines every morning. 'There is one thing I would like to say, Sergeant Thomson, and that is you have got a fine set of horses.'

Aye, it was the worst war in history. So, I hope from now there will be peace for good."

The Soldier's Hymn

[The scene opens with a view from the rear of the nave, with the sound of the band playing softly and a soloist singing, stood front and center of the choir. Our viewpoint then cuts to mid-range shot from the side of the nave, before switching to a close up of the soloist's face as he is singing. The scene continues, cutting between long, mid-distance and close up shots of the choir and band until the music ends and the screen fades out to black in rapt silence.]

I am your father and I keep you safe,
though I have been to War, saddled a horse
to ride through liquid mud, through fire and gas.
A miracle you're here, my bonny lass.
So, as you sleep, I sit to write it down:
Sergeant George Thompson, Crow Street, Sunderland.

What I have seen, I hope you never see.
Where I have been, I pray you never go-
along the long hard road of History,
where children of the slain cannot be born.
A miracle you're here, my bonny lass;
my only gain from four bleak years of loss.

I hope from now
I hope from now
I hope from now

I hope from now there will be peace for good.

A broken rosary of refugees
torn from the hand of home; a vanishing.
Young men, already dead, brought to their knees
as though in prayer- but all prayer uttered there
lost in the metal air. No requiem mass.
I am your father and I lived through this.
A miracle you're here, my bonny lass.

I write it down: a generation's end -
betrayal of the future by the past -
in fields of wire and blood where no birds sang
and I came galloping from Sunderland
believing what was told by government.
A miracle you're here, my bonny lass.

I hope from now
I hope from now
I hope from now
I hope from now there will be peace for good.

[Memoir of Sergeant Charles Herbert Moss](#)

[The scene opens with a man in a dark suit who is reading from the lectern. The choir and the brass band can be seen behind him. A subtle green glow of light lights up the Cathedral in the area of the cross and pillars in the nave. The viewpoint then cuts to a close up of the man in the suit as he speaks passionately and in a way where you just have to listen, he finishes and you can once again see the still, presumably emotionally silent audience, choir and brass band and the screen fades to a black background.]

People have heard a lot about Hell, but no-one has come back from there to tell us what it really is like. I know that I was very near to it as the red light from the star shell and explosions fell on the hollow... while the cries of despair from the wounded mingled with the Devil's tattoo of the rifle and the machine-gun fire.

We had miners in our Company. Their intrepid and sporting spirit never deserted them in or out of the trenches. What a great pity it is impossible to estimate how much the country owes to the miners for the ultimate victory and the good-hearted manner of it. All the world ought to know how many miners there were in the regiments that broke through the German Front at Contalmaison and Fricourt and repulsed the enemy counter-attacks at Martinpuich, Butt de Warlencourt and Flers. It was their contempt of danger and death that won them through.

Bear Me Up

[The band starts to play, the conductor's arms flaying once more and the male voices of the choir start to sing. The female voices join in and they complement each other beautifully, it's a strong sound. There are close ups of singers and musicians and the rose window occasionally comes into the shot. The music and singing stops and the screen fades to black.]

The mine was dark, but darker is the trench.
No light to guide, and all around War's stench.
Beside me now, the lads from my hometown.
Boys, bear me up, the hour when I'm brought down.

I'll bear you up, should you slip in the slime;
each watch for each, as we vowed in the mine.
Relentless sorrow shrouds the way ahead.
No families waiting at this strange pit-head.

Boys, bear me up, the hour when I'm brought down.
We'll sing together back in Durham Town.
We laboured hard, miners and soldiers all.
I'll bear you up if you should stumble, fall.

In no-man's land, the promise of a land
made fit for heroes steadies now my hand
to find the wounded crying for a friend
and bear them up until the tunnel's end.

The last letter of Sergeant Joseph Furness

[The scene opens with a close up view of a lady in profile standing at the lectern. She starts to speak. The view interchanges between the choir, band and rose window before returning to the lady. The brass players can be seen taking a drink of water. The lady reads on through to the end of the narration, then the screen fades out to black.]

To my Dear Wife,

I don't want you to receive this letter but, in case you do receive it, you will know that it is the last letter I shall ever write to anyone on this earth, because it will only be posted in the event of my death.

I am awfully sorry to have to leave you like this, Dearie, buried away in a foreign land. I am also sorry to be the means of causing you pain. The only request I have to make under

the circumstances is that you don't grieve too much about me. And my last wish is that you marry again if you find anyone you think worthy of taking my place. You are still quite young and it would be a shame to spoil your life simply for a memory. I am not asking you to forget me wholly but just enough to enable you to take a grip on life and to enjoy it as you deserve to do.

If Jack or Barney get safely back they will let you know where I am buried and how I died but there is one thing you may rest easy in the knowledge that I died as bravely as any of them with my face to the foe. For I am not at all afraid to die if my turn has come.

Dad will see to affairs for you because I wrote to him before I came away telling him exactly how affairs stood.

You might kiss the bairns good-bye for me and say good-bye to Mother, Dad and other relations of ours.

With a fond good-bye to you, Dearie.

From your ever loving husband, hoping that we shall meet in the world to come.

Joe

Kiss the Bairns

[with the audience, band and choir now tinted with a glow of pink light, the choir, all dressed in black, start to sing. Once again, the footage changes from close ups of the singers to wider shots of the audience and stage. The lighting of the Cathedral walls changes to blue.]

If you are reading this,
know that I'm writing it
in case I die
to tell you to live well
and happily.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns goodbye.

If you are grieving me,
always believe in me,
in case I die-
your future should be love,

not memory.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns goodbye.

If you are weeping now
forgive this sorrow's cause
in case I die,
but bless these words of love
till you too die.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns goodbye.
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns
Kiss the bairns goodbye.

[The scene opens with the choir bathed in purple light, singing softly. This wide view of the cathedral then cuts to a close up shot of the choir. A voice over is explaining the origins of the project.]

“The Durham Hymns is a collaboration between the Northern Regional Brass Band Trust and Durham County Council.

The hymns themselves were initially conceived of, as a commemorative event to mark the actions of the Durham Light Infantry in the Battle of the Somme.”

[Alison Lister, Producer](#)

[The scene changes to Alison Lister talking outside in daylight, with the stone wall of building behind. We then cut back to a montage of footage from the performance in the cathedral. Alison’s voice continues over the top.]

“As we started researching, we realised there was a wealth of material, including the stories of people who lived in County Durham at the time; people of all ages, of all walks of life; and that they should also form an integral part of this commemorative event.”

[Charlie Hardwick, Narrator](#)

[The scene shifts to actor Charlie Hardwick, seen in close up in the chapel at Ushaw College talking about how she became involved in the project. We then see the choir

rehearsing in the chapel, before the scene cuts back to Charlie. Her voice is heard throughout the scene.]

“I was approached to see if I’d be interested in reading at this event. I said, “what’s the event?”

There’s going to be brass bands, a huge choir, Durham Cathedral, Carol Ann Duffy, our terrific Poet Laurette has curated the word and has had access to archive materials; to letters and documents other people haven’t seen. And I was asked if I’d like to be involved.

Yes please!”

[We cut back to the scene of the choir rehearsing in the chapel, with the voice of Alison Lister, unseen, explaining the role of poet Carol Ann Duffy in the creation of The Durham Hymns.]

“We sent Carol Ann Duffy a mass of material, which was drawn from memoirs, from family histories, from letters; all authentic stories from people in County Durham. She wrote the lyrics using this material as the basis.

All of the histories, all of the stories are incredibly moving; but she wove it together really beautifully. That’s the heart of the hymns – the real people of County Durham.”

[The scene remains with the choir in rehearsal, but with the voice over shifting to composer Orlando Gough, who picks up the story from Alison Lister.]

“These were all very particular personal histories and what Carol Ann did so well I think, is that none of them are sentimental. But a lot of them were uplifting in a strange way.”

Orlando Gough, Composer

[The scene cuts to Orlando Gough talking outdoors with a treeline backdrop, before returning to footage of the choir rehearsal in the chapel at Ushaw.]

“So, you weren’t just thinking about people dying, which is what often happens when one thinks about war. You were thinking about what they were actually doing in the war and how amazing that was. How brave and selfless. This is the word that kept coming to me that I found really moving.”

[The scene changes to the rehearsal in Durham Cathedral. In the foreground we see the backs of Orlando Gough and conductor Alan Fernie, who are facing the band and choir. We then cut to a scene of composer Jessica Curry, talking and laughing with four brass players off to the side of the stage area. The voice heard over the top is that of Alison Lister.]

“We approached two different composers: Orlando Gough and Jessica Curry and asked them to write the music to the lyrics Carol Ann had provided. They worked together incredibly well.”

[The scene remains on the rehearsal in Durham Cathedral, with the voice over changing to that of Orlando Gough. We see in close up a montage of brass players and members of the choir singing.]

“This is my kind of dream project, because of the choir and brass band aspect. I really enjoy delving into the past. It’s an interesting negotiation you’re doing all of the time when writing a choral piece; it is between the integrity of the lyrics and the integrity of the music.”

[The scene continues with the montage of close ups of the band and choir in rehearsal at the cathedral. The voice over shifts back to Alison Lister.]

“There are two groups of people involved in this: What we came to call the Centenary Brass Band, which is a brass band made up of members of the Durham Miners Association Brass Band, Bearpark & Esh Brass Band and some members of Reg Vardy Band. There’s also the Centenary Choir, which is largely made up of amateur singers. Along with them we invited Voices of Hope, which is a small chamber choir led by Simon Fiddler.”

[The scene continues seamlessly, with the voice over changing to that of choir director, Simon Fiddler.]

“Voices of Hope is a semi-professional group of singers, whereas the Centenary Choir, as they’re called in this project, is drawn from all over the community; people who might not have done any singing before. So it was challenging, but a great deal of fun and satisfying to work with that kind of singer. Because ultimately this project is about this region. And the singers involved in the project really owned the music. It was their music, written for them and this region. I think people are very proud to be involved. It’s meant a great deal to them.”

Simon Fiddler, Choir Director

[We cut to Simon Fiddler talking to camera in an interior room. A large wooden door can be seen behind him.]

“Both composers have written fantastic music. It’s powerful in different ways, but you need that contrast to get the most of each style.”

[We see a close up of sheet music, followed quickly by an extreme close up on a cornet being played, with only the lips of the player visible. We then cut to Orlando Gough talking in the open air, with the tree line seen previously behind him.]

“I’m immensely impressed by the standard of brass bands. But there’s also something about the fact they’ve survived the termination of the mining industry and thrive. They’ve done that through some very intelligent adaptation.”

[The scene cuts back to a short montage of close up shots of various different brass instruments being played. Simon Fiddler is talking over the top.]

“I think the involvement of brass band, rather than orchestra is particularly effective because of the meaning of brass bands to this region.”

[We move to the evening of the premiere in Durham Cathedral and see audience members filing into the nave and taking their seats. We cut to members of the brass band and choirs standing in the wings, all dressed in black. One woman is seen showing another something on her mobile phone as a man walks past them holding a trombone. The voice heard talking over the top of the scene is that of Charlie Hardwick. The scene unfolds to the choir doing a final rehearsal with Simon Fiddler, who is facing the camera arms in motion. The scene ends with Charlie Hardwick talking to camera, before it fades out to black.]

“I think it’s going to be phenomenal. I think it’s going to be overwhelming. I think it’s going to be passionate. I think it’s going to be hopefully humbling and people will go away with not only a sense of what happened, but with an absolute determination to not let those people die in vain; with a passion to change the future.”

[The scene fades in with a wide shot of the cathedral interior, the stage area bathed in purple light and the audience sat in the nave in the foreground. This is the opening of The Soldiers Hymn. The angle shifts to a mid-distance shot from the side of the nave. The light over the stage has faded from purple to red.

Alison Lister’s voice is heard speaking over the top of the scene.]

“The premiere performance at Durham Cathedral was incredibly moving. It was an electrifying evening. The atmosphere was so intense and concentrated. And the audience was enraptured.”

[The scene cuts to a close up of the soloist in half profile, singing, followed by a montage of views of the full band and choir seen from different angles, with Alan Fernie standing out as he conducts. The voice over changes to that of Simon Fiddler talking.]

“The Cathedral was absolutely packed. It was very beautiful and a very moving experience. I think the choir was absolutely wonderful. They really rose to the occasion.

All of that hard work, they fed into a performance that was really super and, honest! I think that is what was so moving; the honesty and pride that those singers took in singing those words and representing their area.”

[The scene continues to unfold with close up shots of brass players and faces picked out from the audience. The scene ends with a three-quarter close up of actor Charlie Hardwick, delivering her narration. Orlando Gough provides the voice over throughout this scene.]

“In Durham the past is everywhere in the buildings and surroundings. But it’s more than that, I think. It’s about being aware of where you come from and what was going on then – what people were up to. How in this case, people gave their lives for something that is still effecting us. So that for me is incredibly important; that people should be aware of all that, and not just think they live entirely in the present.”

[We continue with the performance of The Soldiers Hymn, with a montage of shots showing the choir singing, close ups on brass players and the faces of the audience sat in the nave. The voice over is that of Charlie Hardwick.]

“Things in two generations can be completely lost. And I don’t think we should lose what happened. I don’t know what lessons we’ve learned, but if we can keep what happened alive, perhaps one day it will be the war to end all wars.”

[The montage of shots continues seamlessly as Simon Fiddler’s voice provides a summing up of the project and its legacy.]

“It’s a particularly poignant moment to hear a message of hope. I think that’s the most important thing people can take away from this music. Yes, confront the horror and awfulness of war; the devastating impact on friends and family. But most importantly, it’s that message of hope that permeates the whole thing.”

[The end credits roll up the screen over a wide shot of the cathedral seen from the back of the nave.]

End credits:

Composers: Jessica Curry, Orlando Gough

Lyrics: Carol Ann Duffy

Conductor: Alan Fernie

Choir Director: Simon Fiddler

Narrators: Charlie Hardwick, Phil Corbitt

Performers: The Centenary Choir & Centenary Brass Band with Voices of Hope

Soloists: Hannah Reynolds, David Mollineux, Bonnie Shaw, Euan Williamson

Prelude for George Butterworth composed by Jonathan Bates

Production for the Northern Regional Brass Band Trust: Alison Lister

Production for Durham County Council: Colin Robson

Stage Management: Chris Slater

Technical Management: Reed Ingram

Video Documentation: Alan Fentiman

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