

## Report for the June 2016 meeting of the Malvern Civic Society

On Friday 10<sup>th</sup> June a Vice-President of the Society Dr John Harcup OBE gave a superb, illustrated talk about the composer, Edward Elgar, entitled "Edward Elgar in Malvern and on the road to fame." The talk had musical accompaniment and we even heard the only audible recording of Elgar's voice. Born in Lower Broadheath near Worcester in 1857, Elgar spent about 13 years of his life living and working in and around Malvern. After living much of his life "with two chips on his shoulder" - he was a Catholic and was born the son of a tradesperson - he gradually became very successful. He once said to a friend, "I've got a tune that'll knock 'em flat!" and this music became his famous 'Land of Hope and Glory'. John pointed out that Elgar's compositions are all different and that listeners are carried along by sheer exuberance.

After Elgar's birth the family went to live above the shop in Worcester, where he was surrounded from an early age by musical instruments and scores. His mother described him as nervous, sensitive and kind. From 1879 to 1894 he became bandmaster to Worcestershire County Lunatic Asylum in Powick, which was quite a prestigious role. Doctors were enlightened even then about the beneficial effect of music on patients. The grounds were extensive and had wonderful views of the Malverns, the major source of inspiration for his musical compositions. Elgar taught the piano and violin, in fact he taught music to Caroline Alice Roberts, who became his wife. In 1886 they got engaged but he could not afford an engagement ring at the time so wrote her music instead as a present, which became the famous 'Salut d'Amour'. He sold the song for just four guineas but if he had kept the copyright, he would have been very rich.

Although they spent time living in London, hoping that it would bring him fame, this turned out not to be the case and he did not write so many outstanding compositions there, but, instead, felt homesick for Worcestershire. Their only child, a daughter named Carice was the only good thing that came out of their time in London. Back in Worcestershire, they lived in and around Malvern, including The Lees, and in Malvern Wells and Malvern Link. Elgar walked the hills for inspiration and when they lived at Birchwood Lodge, surrounded by trees, he said, "The trees are singing my music, have I sung theirs?" Scene 1 of his music 'Caractacus' took place on the Malvern Hills. Elgar taught music at Eilerslie School in Malvern, at The Wells House School and at The Mount School, which is now part of Malvern St James. The headmistress, Rosa Burley, was a robust woman who spent a lot of time with him cycling around Worcestershire. She recalled how he seemed distracted as they rode, and that he was composing music in those moments, without the need to write it down.

Elgar's Enigma Variations were attributed to friends including Troyte Griffith, an architect whose studio was in the Priory Gatehouse (Variation no. 7), to George Sinclair, organist at Hereford Cathedral (no.11) and possibly to his friend Lady Mary Lygon of Madresfield Court (no. 13). When he composed 'The Dream of Gerontius', he said "This is the best of me". In 1904 he got the Freedom of the City of Worcester and was also knighted. From 1904 to 1907 he was the first Professor of Music at Birmingham University.

Elgar enjoyed a good sense of humour and gave himself plenty of free time in which he played cricket and golf as well as going cycling. He also used to fly kites with his friends on the Malverns.

When Caroline Alice married Elgar, she was disinherited by her parents, who were of a higher social standing than Elgar's family. In the early days she had to sell all her jewellery to keep them going and used to rule out manually his music manuscript as they could not afford to purchase any. Even though his music ultimately brought him fame and this put him in a better financial position he was never reconciled with his in-laws. Caroline Alice died in 1920 and in 1934 Elgar died from cancer; he was buried in St Wulstan's churchyard at Little Malvern alongside his wife, where their daughter was also subsequently buried. After he had written the Cello Concerto he said to a friend, "If you are walking on the hills and you hear music, don't be afraid, it's only me."

Chairman Clive Hooper gave the vote of thanks for this splendid talk. On Civic Society matters he urged everyone to participate in Civic Week (Saturday 25 June - Saturday 2 July). The Railway sub-group is looking for a leader and coordinator for the fundraising project which aims to replace the original clocktower at Great Malvern station. Anyone interested should contact Peter Clement.