

Memories of St George's

The transition from working church to performance venue (1970s/80s)

1973 – 1977

Personal recollections of John Funnell, A Founder Trustee of St George's Music Trust

In 1973, on his return to Bristol after working in London, John was asked by Joan Hawkins (John's mother-in-law at the time) to join the board of the Bristol Arts Centre (King Square – now The Cube) and run the music side of the venue. Radio producer Ian Carson introduced himself and asked if his musicians from the Academy of the BBC (formerly BBC Training Orchestra) might use the venue to play chamber music. As the theatre itself didn't have the right acoustic, they used the gallery, which seated an audience of just 30 people. A fortuitous conversation in the gallery with the orchestra's conductor Norman Del Mar, who agreed with John that the space wasn't ideal for this type of use, plus an introduction by Ian Carson to BBC Radio 3 Regional Director Philip Moore, led to John searching for a more spacious venue for the musicians.

John heard that St George's Brandon Hill (as it was then known) would most likely close when Canon Percy Gay died; he'd been vicar there for 45 years at that stage. As a cellist, Percy liked the idea of the building being used for music. John, together with Jack and Roy Mickleburgh (musical instrument business established in the late 19th century), confirmed that the acoustic was almost perfect for chamber music. Later, in October 1976, the Academy of the BBC rehearsed at St George's with BBC Radio 3's recording engineers and Philip Moore, to test the acoustic – and they agreed with the Mickleburghs.

Canon Percy Gay died in 1975, and in 1976 John met Blanche Long, an accomplished pianist (trained at the Guildhall School of Music), who supported the idea of transforming the building into a concert venue. From his Clifton College days John knew Harry Edwards, who had known Percy well during his time as Headmaster of Queen Elizabeth Hospital School, and thus a respected member of the community, and viewed as vital for giving credibility to their plans. In December of that year, the first public concert took place at St George's.

St George's Music Trust was set up as a charity in May 1977 with Harry as chair, and John and Blanche as the other founder-trustees. In the same year the Church Commissioners commenced the process for making the church redundant. Also at this stage, George Ferguson of Ferguson Mann Architects was brought on board to look at the feasibility of transforming St George's into a concert venue.

1979 – 1988

Personal recollections of Robin Hicks, BBC Head of Network Radio (SW) from 1979

The Founder Chair of St George's Music Trust, Harry Edwards, invited Robin to join the board in 1979 and Robin served as a trustee from 1979 to 1988 (after which he became Chief Executive of the Royal Agricultural Society in London).

Broadcasting lunchtime concerts from St George's was initially rather primitive, but, they were nevertheless an innovation as it was the only place in the UK which was broadcasting lunchtime concerts at the time. The programme control room was an outside broadcasting (OB) van on Charlotte Street which had to be cleverly anchored to make it level and safe from rolling down the hill...! Apart from anything, it was expensive to stage the concerts, not to say dangerous!

Robin realised immediately that for things to improve, he had to indulge in some nifty diplomacy with the BBC for St George's to benefit from the relationship, which was essential in the building's evolution into the fine chamber music venue that it is today.

A key thing that Robin arranged early on was a visit by the BBC's Chief Acoustic Engineer, David Strip, to assess the feasibility of 'Auntie' spending significant money on the building. It had already been used by the BBC Training Orchestra (Academy of the BBC), and David declared it to be perfect for chamber music recording.

Working closely with George Ferguson and Peggy Rickaby at Ferguson Mann Architects (working then as architects for the newly established St George's Music Trust) Robin applied for various faculty orders from the Church Commissioners, whose offices were also on Great George Street. These were for:

- A new stage, requiring the removal of the elaborate but restrictive 'Florentine' marble sanctuary including the lectern, altar, pulpit and communion rails, to make space for the stage so as to broaden the scope of the music that could be performed. The architects numbered and catalogued all the marble pieces which were then stowed beneath the stage.
- New lighting – including a central chandelier and downlighters over the stage
- BBC control room inserted high up into the back of the church for live broadcasts and recordings
- Double glazing to improve sound insulation

Where did the funding come from?

The stage – funded by Bristol and West Building Society:

Robin persuaded the Bristol and West Building Society to organise a fundraising dinner, hosted by the then Bristol West MP, William Waldegrave. Robin recalls, 'They enjoyed the evening BUT really didn't want to continue using their own boardroom for more of these events. What sort of money was I looking for? For some reason I made it up that we needed £16,000 for a stage (c.£45,000 today). Pause - and then a chap shook my hand

and said, “You have the money – we will sponsor the stage for the new St George’s!”. (The stage there today came later.)



The Chandelier – funded, designed, manufactured and installed by Rolls Royce:

Robin met a Director of Rolls Royce on a management training course and, remembering they employed apprentices, asked if they could make a quality central chandelier – the one still in place today. It was innovatively fitted with an electric motor so it could be brought to ground level and the bulbs could easily be changed.

Funded by the BBC:

Control Room – For £92,000 (c.£266,000 today) the BBC funded the building of a control room, which was situated behind the upper gallery for the producer and engineers to have the best view of the performers.

New lighting – Just before the church was officially handed over to the Music Trust, all of the beautiful lamps and lampshades were removed and replaced with plastic equivalents. So, there was an expedition to local lighting shops to purchase more appropriate replacements. BBC Radio 3 producers requested more lighting for the performers so Robin was also able to fund a set of stage downlighters.

Double-glazing – John Prescott Thomas, then the BBC’s Head of Broadcasting South & West, arranged for the windows to be double-glazed to improve the sound-proofing of the hall.

Lunchtime Concert Sponsorship:

Robin secured sponsorship for the lunchtime concerts from the John Player Special brand of Imperial Tobacco, which was the first ever commercially sponsored concert series on BBC Radio 3.

Steinway Piano:

An in-house Steinway Grand was needed for lunchtime broadcasts so as to avoid the large expense of having to hire one in every time. Robin turned to the Countess of Harewood (née Marion Stein) for help – the Countess was a concert pianist, co-founder of the Leeds Piano Festival in 1961, and appointed CBE for her services to music in 2008. She was able to use her influence to persuade the BBC and the Arts Council to pay 50% each towards the cost of St George’s first Steinway.

1985 - 1990

Personal recollections of Jane Krish, First full-time employee of St George's Music Trust



Trustees at that time (left to right): Robin Hicks (BBC), John Funnell (founder trustee), Harry Edwards (chair, founder trustee), Blanche Long (founder trustee), Dr Bert Bentley (Imperial Tobacco), David Norton (accountant)

Other key organisations and people at that time:

Ferguson Mann Architects: George Ferguson, Peggy Rickaby, Roland Harmer

Builders: Henry Willcock & Co

Church Commissioners based in Great George Street

How did I come to be appointed?

While working at the Bristol Music Shop (1982 to 1985 and now a Costa Café) on College Green, between careers (previously as a secretary in London, and then teaching for five years at Backwell School), I'd met Blanche Long. Blanche occasionally asked to use the back room of the music shop for lunches after non-broadcast lunchtime concerts, and we gradually became good friends. After some time, I asked if she could let me know if/when she ever heard of a job in the arts. A year or so later, she beckoned to me at the end of a lunchtime concert and said, 'It's time for you to come and work at St George's.'

After a seven year struggle, the church was finally declared redundant by the House of Lords (April 1984) and I started in July 1985 as the trustees realised they needed a full-

time 'everything' person. In retrospect, none of us had the least idea what the job entailed, but as it turned out that suited me fine. I discovered I loved being in control of my own time (in contrast to a teaching timetable) and learning on a vertical curve... Had anyone known, my job description would have included: liaising and pro-actively working with trustees (being formally Trust Secretary), Church Commissioners, architects, various levels of BBC staff, structural engineers, acoustics experts, builders, performers, accountants, volunteers/Friends of St George's Music Trust, Park Street Traders' Association, other Bristol arts organisations, sponsors. Doing (in no particular order): PR, marketing, budgeting, planning, creating systems, fundraising, producing brochures and programmes, proof-reading, managing staff (once there were some), front of house management, liaising with schools, working with Bath Festival and occasionally cleaning lavatories! Apart from the latter, *everything* was new to me...

In 1985, St George's was a building you could go to for hour-long concerts but not work in, as there was nowhere safe, clean or suitable, so John Funnell kindly offered the Trust office space for me for about 18 months, at his stockbroking business in Portland Square. During that time I commuted, mostly on foot, as and when necessary.

State of the Building 1985/6



In the mid-1980s, there was no access from the church either down to the crypt or up to the gallery. You could access the gallery via outside steps at the Charlotte Street end of the building and go into the crypt only from a door facing the garden on the Park Street side. In the bays of the dark, dank crypt, there were a few lightbulbs revealing old, damp and filthy sofas, likely to have been left from when it had been a WWII air raid shelter. If the building was to offer more than hour-long lunchtime concerts, then a priority had to be more lavatories as the only existing one was for the Vicar, at the cupola end of the building on the right as you face the reredos.

The sanctuary area, with its marble altar, communion rails, pulpit, and lectern, was small, so it could only comfortably accommodate up to perhaps 6 performers, depending on the instrument combination. Piano recitals involved hiring in a piano, a ramp and hefty men to get it in and out. There were pews upstairs and down which were narrow and uncomfortable but perfectly fine for an hour-long service or lunchtime concert. Another important consideration was the inflexibility of the space as the pews were fixed. In the gallery, the organ up on the right as you faced the altar wasn't in good shape, so it took

up a lot of space for little purpose. In addition, the reredos needed some major repairs. The Trust needed some serious cash.

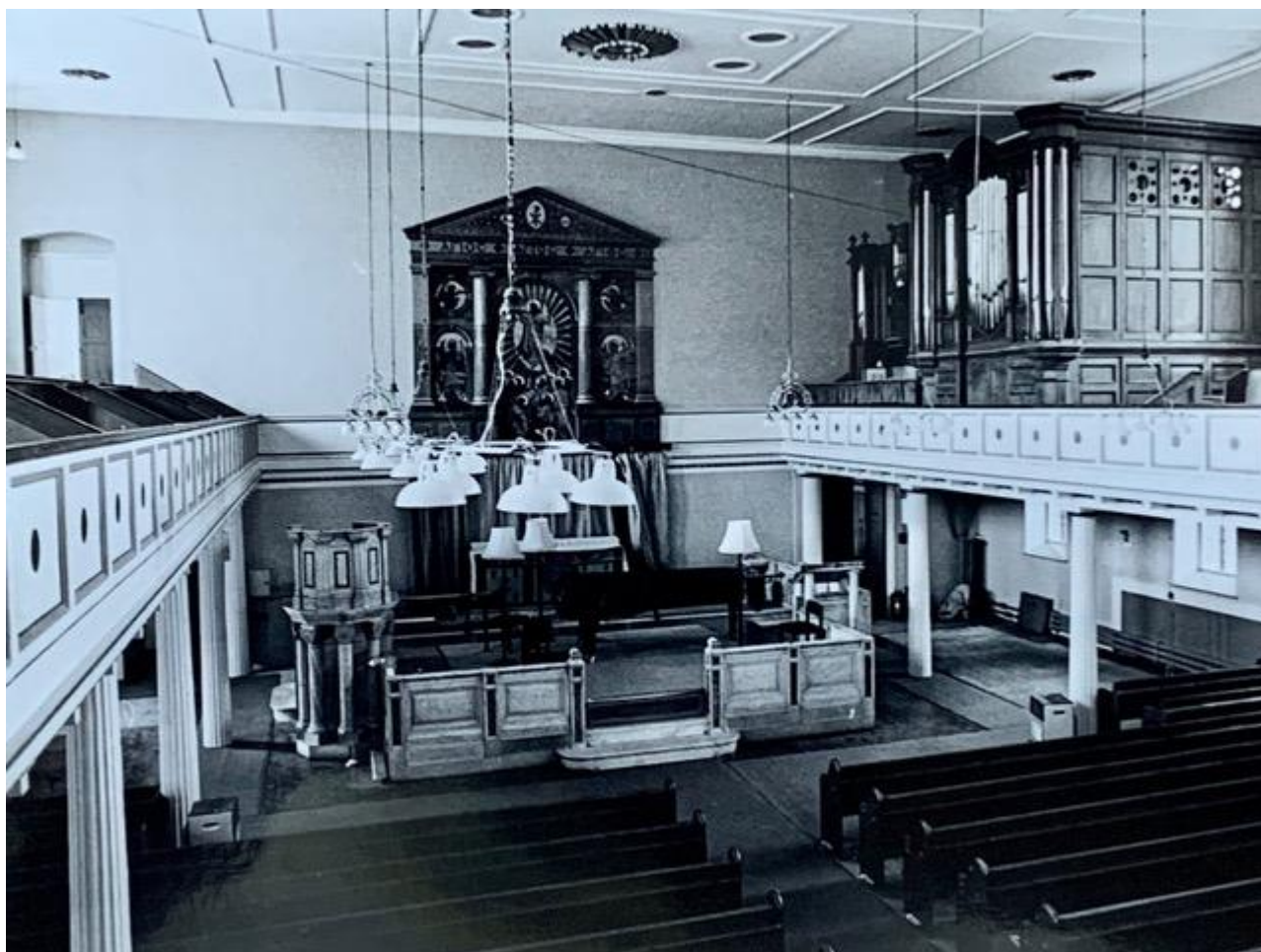


Photo credit:
George Ferguson

Fundraising

To convert this superb Waterloo church into a functioning chamber concert venue was essential to continue the work of the visionary board of trustees who had recognised its potential.

Until this point I had never done fundraising but the trustees, in particular Harry, Blanche and Robin, were particularly well connected with the 'great and the good' in Bristol and beyond. Harry's circle of acquaintance was vast, especially via the Old Cliftonians, of which he was Secretary. George Ferguson and his Ferguson Mann Architects colleagues had already spent considerable time and money, well before I came along, preparing the way and considering the feasibility of making the conversion required to turn St George's into a world-class music venue. (Fortuitously, George and I already knew each other as I had rented a room at his then home in Windsor Terrace whilst doing my PGCE at Bristol University, 1973/74.)

I can't remember how, but Blanche knew Sally, Duchess of Westminster, whom she'd persuaded to become a St George's Patron, and she graciously turned out for various fundraisers which did impress people.

Sponsorship (John Player Special brand of Imperial Tobacco) had already been arranged for the lunchtime concerts, broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. Thanks to a business dinner, Robin was able to raise the required cash to create a stage from the Bristol & West Building Society, and Rolls Royce agreed to sponsor the central chandelier to be made by their apprentices. SWEB (South West Electricity Board as it was) funded new external lighting to enhance its night-time appearance.

We set up the Foundation Members scheme, promoted with a very smart (and expensive) colour brochure (my first)*, and invited people to sign up for £175, which seemed quite a lot at the time (I also signed up.) The BBC invested heavily in the building to provide a recording studio inside the building rather than depending on a precariously parked outside broadcasting van, and they also double glazed the windows to reduce the sound of traffic and ambulances.

To raise funds and profile, we organised special St George's Day events, including a concert with John Lill (another St George's Patron) who agreed to play for no fee as his contribution. Actor Patricia Routledge came for no fee on other occasions, and people were generally fired up to help the new organisation on its way. One weekend we invited the public to come and buy books and bric-à-brac and enjoy some relaxed busking in the garden. We all dutifully donned our St George's T-shirts made for the occasion!

As more events took place, more businesses wanted to support the Trust and for instance, accountancy firm Neville Russell sponsored the Alborni Quartet with the sum matched by ABSA (Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts), to play Beethoven's late quartets, one concert a month over six months. Bristol City Council paid £3,000 for cushions for the pews which was quite a coup and the first public money the Trust ever received.

Building refurbishment during my time

The first two bays of the crypt at the Great George Street end were cleared and the floor level lowered to give vital head room. We were then able to provide lavatories for audience and a green room and loos for performers. Before that could happen, work was required to find out about the foundations (if there were any) under the church, drainage and so on. Much preparation work was done to enable levelling, damp proofing and so on (and taming the Brandon Hill rock), organised by a technical team of structural engineers, quantity surveyors et al brought together by Ferguson Mann and BBC acoustics experts. The vision included the possibility of a busy café bar and restaurant in the crypt, similar to the arrangement at St John's Smith Square in London, which sadly proved impossible. St John's is 100 years older and the depth of the crypt beneath the church level much greater. At St George's, the depth proved inadequate to exclude noise. Eventually one staircase was floated up to the gallery from the Great George Street end and another down into the crypt. It wasn't ideal, as people had to cross the stage to access the loos.

Around the time I joined, there was a flurry of excitement. Harvey's of Bristol (sherry importers) were keen to sponsor the move to Bristol of the Bournemouth Sinfonietta and St George's was set to be its home. Sadly however, for reasons beyond St George's, Harvey's or the Sinfonietta's control, this never came to pass.



After about 18 months, a space was made safe and sound under the cupola for me to have an office, where I sat in glorious isolation. To remain sane, I went for a daily morning coffee at Bristol Guild simply to see other people. This was in the days of the marvellous Ken Stradling, the long-standing face of that emporium, who chaired the Park Street Traders' Association. He turned out to be a marvellous ally of St George's and really helped spread the word.

With the prospect of evening concerts, both organised by the Trust and outside organisations staging their own events, it was time to start some serious PR and marketing.

PR & Marketing

When I started, St George's was viewed as that funny place up the hill that no-one knew about. I made it my business to meet and get to know others working in the arts including: (the then) Colston Hall run by Bristol City Council, Bristol Old Vic, Arnolfini, Watershed, and South West Arts Marketing which came under the Arts Council umbrella. Reasoning that there had to be a way to cut effort in our inevitably under-staffed organisations, we started Bristol Arts Marketing (BAM), and began investing in group delivery of leaflets which seemed a giant leap forward. Gradually, gradually, audience numbers began to grow.

Starting from zero, I bought myself a book on how to write press releases, read books on business management, signed up to a brilliant Creative Management Skills course run for charities by IBM (1988) for virtually no money, and a weekend Arts Marketing course offered by Leicester Polytechnic (1989). Talking to local colleagues was also a huge help.

I made links with local radio and TV (BBC and HTV, which was part of ITV), local magazines and newspapers (pre-internet, of course everything was on paper). Once the new stage and extra loos were available, we could offer the building for hire, ie for events lasting longer than an hour. This enabled existing local organisations such as the Bristol Bach Choir and many other choirs, the Bristol Suzuki Group, and schools state and private, to perform. Around the same time the Brandon Hill Chamber Orchestra was formed, initially to stage performances at St George's. The Bath Festival wanted to spread its wings and St George's was chosen for an esoteric BBC2 live broadcast (producer Tony Staveacre) featuring the music of Greek composer Xenakis. The Bath Festival also staged the first jazz concerts at St George's under the direction of Nod Knowles – Harry was horrified but I reassured him all would be well and that he didn't need to attend! One group that came brought an enormous PA system, which of course they hadn't known they wouldn't need in St George's special acoustic, a message we often had to relay to non-classical performers. As more and more concerts took place, we had to completely change the calendar-cum-brochure to accommodate lunchtimes and evenings, and the BBC World Service staged occasional short series of Sunday afternoon concerts for at least two years during my time.

Concert Planning

John Wright, a music agent, worked with Blanche Long and liaised with BBC Radio 3 producers in planning the lunchtime concerts. Blanche was fully responsible for engaging artists for the non-broadcast concerts. With an eye to keeping costs down, performers came via the Countess of Munster Trust, the music colleges, and specialist regional schools such as Wells. The first children's workshops, which I initiated and facilitated, took place with the Alberni Quartet, alongside the quartet's two series of one Friday evening a month over six months, performing Haydn's quartets and all Beethoven's late quartets. Primary school workshops, which we organised in the mornings of these fine concerts, involved about 60 children sitting cross-legged on the stage floor in raptures while the musicians talked about and played their instruments. They adored it.

Other emerging needs included writing programme notes and producing said programmes. Christopher Francis, my (now) husband, wrote many of the notes for these early concerts.

Staffing

Looking after the building with increasing numbers of concerts but no-one there to assist, ended by making me ill (ophthalmic shingles), after which I was 'allowed' to have a much-needed part-time assistant, Sibylle Riesen, with whom I'm still in touch and who carried on the good work after I left in 1990.

Setting up Systems

We put together a form for organisations wishing to hire the building, with legal input possibly through Veale Wasbrough (now VVV) as Derek Bellew, their Senior Partner, succeeded Harry as Chair of Trustees.

St George's original lunchtime concert box office was at Chapter and Verse, an outstanding independent bookshop on Park Street virtually opposite the entrance to Charlotte Street. The manager was Jon Donovan, whose brilliant assistant Linda

Pattenden made our life very easy. We ordered the tickets from a specialist company and initially there was one price and no reserved seating. As time went by, we divided up the space into different price categories, but had to resist seat numbering to keep things manageable. It was my dream that one day there would be a box office in the building, but that didn't happen on my watch. Before that, when it was possible for more people to work in the building, additional staff were taken on, including Ruth Bolgar, who came to manage and oversee ticket sales in the space on the first floor outside my cupola office. We also had a fundraising volunteer, Ros, who researched grant-giving trusts we could apply to.

The 1980s were the early days of the PC and my exceptional, (now) stepson Seb Francis, created a box office system on my primitive Amstrad, which I took to the office. He was 14 at the time! (*See cuttings from local press at the end of this narrative.*)

Hosting lunchtime concert performers was either courtesy of the BBC after broadcast events – proper lunch with wine – or courtesy of Blanche, often at her flat in Redland.

Friends of St George's

When I arrived there was already a group of willing Friends, run as a separate charity, with the sole purpose of fundraising for the Trust. They staged various events and regularly helped with mail outs. Envelopes were all written by hand, stuffed and stamped with good grace, over coffee and biscuits, usually chez Blanche whose Redland flat was always a lovely place to visit. They organised an evening of Victoriana with singing, playing and everyone appropriately dressed up which was great fun.

One of my most treasured moments

One day, when I'd been at St G's three or four years (c.1988/89), someone from the Colston Hall rang to ask if Alfred Brendel could come and use the Steinway for a solo rehearsal as he was performing one of Brahms' piano concertos that evening and naturally I said, 'Of course!'. Sitting at the back of the auditorium on my own as he played, I immediately realised what a privilege it was to be there. We hardly exchanged words but with his gracious manner I knew how very grateful he was.

Leaving

In early 1990, I was approached by Wildscreen, the international wildlife and environment film festival, to work for them. I really didn't want to leave St George's as I felt I belonged there (and a part of my soul remains). This kind of opportunity didn't come along very often. It required exactly the same type of skills but on a completely different scale and in a completely different field, involving TV, film, conservation and nature about which I was then embarrassingly ignorant (slightly less so now). I was about to embark on another very steep learning curve...

Afterword: music and me

Although never trained in music, I didn't join St George's completely ignorant! My paternal grandfather was born in Łódź in Poland, coming to the UK via Germany and the US in the early 20th century. Serge Krish, as he called himself, was a professional pianist and conductor with his own septet and trio: the Serge Krish Septet and the Modern Trio. In the earliest BBC days (early 1920s), they recorded his trio at Savoy Hill. In the 1930s, he founded the New Metropolitan Symphony Orchestra in London, which aimed to make music accessible to all. My mother played the piano by ear. The youngest of three siblings,

it turned out I am the only musical one. Because my brother and sister had given up on lessons, somehow I didn't get the opportunity to learn. The music I listened to was mainly on record and radio, but it was part of normal life. We went to occasional concerts and I was in the choir at both prep and grammar schools but, sadly, never learned to sight read.

Whilst teaching at Backwell School, I sang in the choir and the Head of Music there encouraged me to have my voice trained, so I had lessons (still no proper sight reading). I sang solos in various masses and G&S productions, relying on my 97% accurate aural memory. A group of us regularly went to the Colston Hall, mainly to hear the Bournemouth Orchestra every fortnight between September and Easter. The late David Harrison, the Evening Post's music critic, often invited me to operas at the Hippodrome mainly performed by the Welsh National Opera, and I discovered I loved it.

At the Bristol Music Shop I bought a clarinet and reached Grade 5 in just 18 months – but without the theory! In addition, I learned a lot about orchestral instruments and composers as we also sold sheet music. My fellow shop assistant, Don Trend, who was very musically informed and a good violinist, was my unintentional tutor. When I could I went to St George's lunchtime concerts and to the Wills Building for concerts given by guest artists and students. During this time I sang in a small choir conducted by Eric Wetherell and subsequently by Bob Latham, and sometimes sang solos with them.

Computer whizz kid

Chifton Digest Jan. 1989

Sebastian Francis, a pupil at Bristol Grammar School, has written a special computer programme for St George's Music Trust to cope with the increasingly complex job of administering ticket sales.

Spread out over two weeks, it took Sebastian a working day, to compose the programme. Programming is something he really enjoys and he uses the word processing facility on his own computer to do his homework.

At 14, he is already a veteran programmer, his interest in computers having started when he was 7 years old.

As well as compiling software, he also likes building hardware and his interest and skills in electronics have helped him design interfaces and robots.

He explained why he wanted to help St George's by saying, "I wanted to help a good cause and found the news discs which the Trust gave me extremely useful!"



Sebastian Francis, Box Office programme designer

Sebastian's a hit with floppy disc

HELP with running the St. George's Brandon Hill box office in Bristol has come from an unexpected source.

Sebastian Francis, a pupil at Bristol Grammar School, has written a special computer programme for St. George's Music Trust to cope with the increasingly complex job of administering ticket sales.

It took Sebastian, 14, just one working day, spread out over two weeks, to compose the programme.

"I wanted to help a good cause and found



Sebastian Francis

the new floppy discs the trust gave me extremely useful," says Sebastian, who does all his homework on a word processor, and builds his own hardware as well.

Pen

*Western Daily
Jan 28 1989*

Evening post Jan 26 1989

SEBASTIAN Francis, 14, has discovered that designing special computer programmes can be just the ticket.

And his interest in programming has turned out to be music in the ears of St George's Music Trust in Bristol.

Sebastian, who attends Bristol Grammar School, has written a special computer programme for St George's to help cope with the increasingly complex job of administering ticket sales.

Sebastian first became interested in computers when he was seven. As well as compiling software, he also likes building hardware and his interest and skills in electronics have helped him design interfaces and robots.



□ Bath Theatre Royal's new post-panto season opens next week with one of the most highly praised plays of the sixties.

To Kill a Mockingbird won a Pulitzer Prize for writer Harper Lee and the film version gained an Oscar. The book is now on many examination lists.

The story features children growing up in the Deep South of America during the Depression when racial tension was high.

White lawyer Atticus Finch, played by Alan Dobie, risks his career by defending a black man wrongly accused. Hildegard Neil plays Jean Louise.

This will be Dobie's 150th stage play since he left Bristol Old Vic Theatre School.

■ Pianist William Howard, who is building up a considerable reputation for his promotion of Czech music and Schubert in particular, appears at Prema, Uley, near Dursley on Saturday. His programme will include works by Chopin, Ravel, Faure, Piers Hellawell and Colin Matier.