

And groping for an appropriate styling, they settled on: Fairport Convention. The Kinks, the Crouch End Festival Chorus, Fairport Convention. What is it about this peaceful neighbourhood in North London that sparks music history?

Choirs were an enduring feature of Muswell Hill's cultural landscape during the early part of the 20th century (more of which later), but 1958 marked a turning-point. That year, Ruth Andrewes founded the Finchley Children's Music Group to give the first amateur performance of Benjamin Britten's *Noye's Fludde*; their first performance was at Southwark Cathedral, and in April 1959 they gave two further performances at All Saints' Church in East Finchley (still used today as a recording venue by Hyperion). The FCMG embedded into the consciousness of north London children the spiritual value of high-level music-making. Peter Maxwell Davies, Malcolm Williamson and Elizabeth Maconchy, many others too, wrote new pieces for the group. Like swimming, throw children in at the deep end and they float.

In '58, the Davies brothers – who would have been a suitable age for the FCMG – were instead finding their creative feet at the Clissold Arms. Rejecting early band names like The Bo-Weevils, The Ramrods and The Ravens, they eventually settled on The Kinks because it best symbolised their “kinky” mode of dress: a kind of camp highwayman chic. “In those days the Clissold Arms was a rough-and-ready boozey,” Davies recalls. “The neighbours complained about the noise at home, and our parents sent us to the pub to rehearse. Then we played a couple of shows there. I recently heard some tapes of an early rehearsal. We weren't called The Kinks then, but we did a ska version of “Never on a Sunday” and we were surprisingly soulful.

“I loved blues singers like Howlin' Wolf, Big Bill Broonzy and Bo Diddley. But when *You Really Got Me* went to Number 1 in 1964 eyebrows were raised because I didn't sing in an American accent. The generation before us, Cliff Richard is an example, sang transatlantic. But they were singing covers of American songs. I didn't know I was going to be a songwriter



From the music scene of a genteel corner of North London came The Kinks



The Finchley Children's Music Group: singers of Benjamin Britten and Peter Maxwell Davies

when I wrote “You Really Got Me”. I assumed it was a fluke. So I thought – I'll sing it the way I am. I'm a London person. That's my voice.”

David Temple – music director of the Crouch End Festival Chorus – also believes in natural vocal enunciation: perhaps that's why he instinctively bonds with Davies. “The choir was formed in 1984 to perform at the Crouch End Festival,” Temple tells me. “The time was absolutely right for a new choir. Crouch End was emerging as a happening area, and there were three or four local choirs that were essentially dying. We ‘rescued’ their best singers and auditioned for new blood. The turning-point for us was in 1994, when we were invited to give the 50th anniversary performance of Tippett's *A Child of Our Time* at the Barbican. Then people realised how dedicated and serious we were.

“Auditioning someone for the choir, I always put the emphasis on beautiful, rather than trained, quasi-operatic voices. I respect the trained voice enormously, but it's not how ‘normal’ people sing. I want the choir to be versatile and to sing with imagination.” Which is why they can sing Tippett, Fauré's Requiem – and Ray Davies? “That's our trademark.” Are there singers who “graduate” from the Finchley Children's Music Group to the Festival Chorus? “Absolutely – we encompass the telegram to the Twitter generation.”

Retaining his authentic London sound was a priority for Davies as the choir found their

way into his world. “I believe in singing the way you speak,” he explains. “My singing voice is less ‘cockles and mussels’ than, for instance, Ian Dury's, but I was determined to get the vowel sounds right. Choirs have a tendency to sound American when they sing pop music, or fall back into scooby-dooing. Temple knows the

strength of every voice in his choir: he knew how to re-voice chords to help get the sound I wanted.”

It's the hoariest cliché going, but London really is a collective of villages.

This genteel area of north London – with Highgate Woods to the south, Alexandra

Palace towering above – is slightly removed from city hardcore busyness, but retains an urban drive. “The Village Green Preservation Society”, The Kinks' 1968 masterpiece, is a Dylan Thomas-like memory space about a more innocent age: in essence, a rock album about the joys of strawberry jam, Sherlock Holmes and glancing through old family photo albums – an album that threw a quizzical glance towards the Swinging Sixties while swinging with the best of them. The archetypal village about which Davies writes surely has origins in Muswell Hill. Hear how this very English choir weaves against rockist backbeats and flashy electric guitar solos as they revisit The Green on “The Kinks Choral Collection”. Listen to decades of north London rock and classical music history shake hands. 🎧

My singing voice is less ‘cockles and mussels’ than, for instance, Ian Dury's