Back in 1976 I upped sticks from Wimbledon with my family and came to live in the wilds of Herefordshire in Pencombe Hall. The Hall was somewhat battered and forlorn, but nevertheless it was my intention to turn it into a Music Centre where people would come for holidays and weekends to join with others in music-making and study. The Gods must have been playing a weird version of Happy Families when they brought together Geoff Warren (the straight, logical-thinking and clever businessman), Alex Crumpler (maker and player of every musical instrument known to man) and me. We met at England’s Gate near Hereford, and several pints later had mapped out our plans for the Border Marches Early Music Forum. “Bumf”’s inaugural meeting was at Pencombe Hall, so that was enough to make me chairman! I don’t remember how many were there, but I called on my friendship with the Editor of Early Music Magazine who came down especially from London and added a certain aura to the occasion. Anyway, we had enough people to sing madrigals on the terrace with the huge climbing hydrangea as our backdrop and a most spectacular view.

We soon realised our main problem was attracting enough enthusiasts willing to travel fairly long distances. For this reason, most of the now-familiar workshops and concerts were centred around Hereford and Leominster. However, it was not long before we began to branch out and operate further afield in Ludlow, Ledbury, Kington, Weobley, Croft Castle, Dinmore Manor and Brecon. We even had a weekend course at Malvern College, studying and performing the Monteverdi Vespers with a strange assortment of ancient instruments as accompaniment. We also supported a wonderfully authentic medieval and renaissance dance team called Passamezzo. They made their own highly decorative and bejewelled dresses and looked gorgeous.

After about 5 years, support and enthusiasm began to wane. It was probably for reasons connected to our financial position, and the fact that Alan was up to his eyes trying to keep two shops going at the same time. In addition, Geoff and I were offered jobs that we could not refuse. I remember one devastating Committee Meeting in the Chequers pub in Leominster when only four of us turned up – mercifully, including one Hannah Davies. I was feeling in a most depressed state, thinking that our beautiful dream of spreading the word and inspiring others to participate in the glories of early music had dwindled to mere ‘Pie in the Sky’. “Is it worth going on?” I said, totally deflated by the situation. “Well, I’m game,” said Hannah. Believe it or not, that was the turning point. We did indeed go on, largely thanks to Hannah’s dogged persistence, irrepressible enthusiasm and superb administrative abilities. Happily enough, the original triumvirate was able to repay Hannah when she was faced with a crisis within the Forum. Geoff, Alan and I dropped everything and arrived to help fight a potential takeover bid – and won!!

Although I have lived away from Herefordshire since those days, I have been able to watch and admire how BMEMF has grown in stature, in membership, and in obvious devotion to the cause of early music.

Donald Grayston Burgess