

# The Organ in St Mary's Parish Church Saffron Walden



## The early years

There was apparently an organ in St Mary's as early as 1451. From the churchwardens' accounts we learn that J. Tracey of Thaxted was paid for 'trying the organs' and Friar John Taylor for 'playing on the organs at the feast of the relics'. Other payments mentioned were for keys to the organ; 'putting up organs', and for 'mending holes in the wall for the organ beam'. In 1468, the Clerk Organist of Long Melford was paid for his labour, and during the rebuilding of the church between 1485 & 1520, we read of a Thos. Holden who gave 'the new organs'. Changes brought about by the Reformation are reflected in the inventory of 1552 which mentions the selling of the organ pipes and case. Later accounts from 1623 to 1754 contain only one musical entry, for 1733, when three locks, keys and caps to the singing pews were bought.

In 1820, J.T.Frye was appointed Organist at the age of eight, and held the post for 64 years. (On his death a window near the north chapel was dedicated to his memory. It shows four Temple musicians named in the books of Chronicles, and a line from Psalm 67: 'Let the people praise thee, O God.')

During this period there was often other instrumental accompaniment, and accounts from 1822 mention repairs to a double bass. The instrumentalists wore wigs and that of the clarinettist, J.Horsley, can be seen in the museum. Mr Horsley came from Quendon on Sundays to play in the choir band.



The present organ can be traced back to 1824 when a finger organ built by J.Vincent at a cost of £800 was placed over a gallery in the west end of the nave 'where the choir sat'. The organist's salary was then £25, and J.Vincent was paid £15 for tuning. From 1829 however, the organist did his own tuning. The specification of the Great Organ included 14 stops, and that of the Swell Organ a further five, with about 15 large pedal pipes. The instrument was moved in the 1850s to a position near the north porch and, as part of the 1860 restorations, was moved again to the north chapel.

In 1885, T.C. Lewis & Co. of Brixton built what was in effect a new organ,

positioned in the south chapel. Parts of the previous organ were incorporated including the bellows, and a number of stencilled pipes from the front of the case. These pipes were placed at the back when a new case was provided, designed by J.F. Bentley, the architect of Westminster Cathedral. The task of raising sufficient funds for the work had taken ten years, and when at last the new organ was complete - at a cost of £1147 - there was still £150 owing. It took another two years before the whole cost was paid. The dedication of the organ, which took place in November 1885, was reported at some length in the local press. At 2pm the church bells rang out to summon a congregation of over a thousand people, as well as twenty-seven clergymen in the chancel. Before the start of the service, the veteran former Organist, Mr J.T Frye, played Handel's Occasional Overture. The choir was augmented by several members of Cambridge college choirs, and the service lasted for an hour and a half. At the close, the Organist Mr J.Thomson played part of Mendelssohn's Sonata no 3. An 'overflowing congregation' then assembled to hear the organist of St. Peter's, Eaton Square give a recital. It was reported that 'loud were the praises. . . of the tone of the instrument, and the execution of the performer.' There was a large congregation at Choral Evensong that same day, after which Mr. Thomson played a further selection of music, ending with 'God save the Queen'. The newspaper report stated the 'Such a day has not been seen before in Saffron Walden Parish Church. 'It is worth noting that all this took place on a Tuesday, and that Holy Communion had been celebrated at 8am, followed by Matins at 11.30am at which 'a goodly number' of parishioners were present.

In 1886, the organ pipes were decorated, the cost being donated as 'a labour of love'. On completion, the work was described in the Parish magazine as follows: 'the design, whilst elaborate, is very chaste and the general effect is very rich'.

Meanwhile the outstanding debt to Lewis & Co. was still being paid off in instalments with money raised from recitals. By August 1887, there was still a debt of £55 to be paid, and the organ builders were obliged to threaten to charge interest if the money was not paid in full by the end of the year. Two further recitals raised just over £6 and the remainder was paid by the Vicar. The parish magazine of January 1888, was finally able to report that the debt had been cleared.

By the close of 1900, it was found that the bellows taken from the old organ were worn beyond repair and had to be renewed. This time Lewis & Co. were promptly paid by donations from parishioners. In January 1905, the organist of Westminster Abbey, Sir Frederick Bridge came to give a recital to an audience of about five hundred people.

In February 1910, it was discovered that snow had got in under the lead of the roof of the south chapel and had dripped into the organ. This resulted in costly

repairs and the discovery that the general condition of the organ was such that it required rebuilding. It had been twenty-six years since the last major rebuild, and an estimated £500 was now required for urgent work. Lord Howard de Walden offered to double this sum, on condition that the work was done thoroughly and was not a patch-up. An Organ Fund committee set about attracting subscribers.

## An extensive rebuild

By August 1911 over £970 had been raised and a specification for the rebuilding was submitted to Norman and Beard, organ builders in Norwich. The old organ contained 29 speaking stops, none more than 56 notes, two stops on the choir organ having only 44 notes. These old pipes were to be revoiced and used again.

The new organ was to contain 42 speaking stops of 58 notes each, except the pedal organ which would remain the same with 30 notes. There would be 6 couplers instead of 5, and several composition pistons and pedals. One stop on the pedal organ and three stops on the Great were to be on heavy wind pressure. The action was to be pneumatic throughout. The console was to be detached and of a design influenced by the eccentric organ-builder, Robert Hope-Jones, who worked for Norman & Beard before emigrating to America. It had two buttons for every stop — push one for on, and the other for off — and was placed in the north chapel. With the increased size of the instrument it was necessary to have mechanical blowing and the builders proposed a gas engine and rotary blowers. These were to be contained in a brick chamber built against the south wall of the churchyard. It was also decided to move the front of the original organ back again. The estimated cost of all this work was £1137.

The work began at the end of September 1911 and lasted six months. When the old organ was dismantled, the state of it caused the builders to express surprise

that anyone playing on it could produce pleasant sounds. The vicar noted in the parish magazine that 'it redounds greatly to the credit of our organist that there are people in the congregation who say they cannot see or hear anything the matter with the organ.'



*The Norman & Beard console in Aylsham Parish Church, Norfolk which is very similar.*

While the organ was being rebuilt, the choir and congregation were obliged to sing all the services unaccompanied and the Vicar feared that 'the silence of the organ is rather a trial to the congregation'. He congratulated the choir and choirmaster on successfully coping with 'the ordeal' but wrote that: 'It requires some boldness on the part of the congregation to let out their voices without an organ'.

The new organ was meanwhile being built in Norwich, and the project's professional adviser paid a visit to the Norman and Beard factory to see how the work was progressing. He expressed his satisfaction with the quality of the workmanship which was fortunate because back in the churchyard, costs had gone up. This was because the proposed blowing chamber was now to adjoin the church wall and had to be built using stone and flint in keeping with the church.

On the Saturday of Passion week 30th March 1912, the new organ was inaugurated and the size of the congregation which assembled for the Dedication Service took everyone by surprise. The church was filled to capacity with over a thousand seated and at least four hundred standing. After the service, Sir Frederick Bridge of Westminster Abbey gave a recital.

In October of that same year, the organist of York Minster, T. Tertius Noble gave a recital and expressed himself 'well pleased with the refinement of the tone of the instrument.' One member of the audience was, however, less impressed with the distinguished recitalist's choice of repertoire as he was heard to remark afterwards: 'I wish he had played The Lost Chord.' When reporting this in the parish magazine the Vicar remarked somewhat tartly: 'When you have a master to perform, you expect him to teach, and you ought to be willing to learn.' Dr. Noble, when previously organist of Ely Cathedral, had been a frequent visitor to Saffron Walden, giving recitals and even helping out with choir practice. His Evening Canticles are still sung by the present choir.

In 1952 the organ console was moved onto the rood screen. By 1971, the pneumatic action had come to the end of its life, so the organ was rebuilt by Hill, Norman and Beard. A new console was provided and the action was electrified. The sound of the organ changed quite dramatically due to the addition of some much brighter stops. A new section was installed onto the screen to aid congregational singing and the new horizontal fanfare Trompeta Real was placed above the south screen and is one of very few in this country to continue down to the pedal organ at 16 foot pitch.



## A major overhaul

In 1996-7, a major overhaul of the action was undertaken by David Wells of Liverpool in two phases. The reservoirs, key actions and pedal chests were restored or renewed, and the pneumatic pedal actions electrified. This work was completed in September 1996 and celebrated with a recital by Dr Martin Neary, Organist and Master of the Choristers of Westminster Abbey.

Phase 2 saw a new solid-state switching and piston combination system, new slider and console drawstop solenoids, the replacement of the Orchestral Oboe, and the addition of a fourth manual, the keys having been the solo manual from the Hill, Norman and Beard console in St John's College Chapel in Cambridge. Completion in 1997 was marked with a recital by Prof. Ian Tracey, Organist of Liverpool Anglican Cathedral. In 1998, three digital stops were added to the pedal section: an Open Wood 16, Contra Bombarde 32 and a Bassoon 16.

The instrument now has four manuals, with five keyboard divisions (Solo, Swell, Great, Bombarde, and Choir, which is in fact a Positive.) It is now very much easier for the player, with the five divisions reallocated among four rather than three manuals.

## Organists of St Mary's, Saffron Walden

1820-84	J.T.Frye	1942-50	Hugh Sanders
1884	W.Beavan	1950-53	Louis Jeeves
1884-90	J.Thomson	1953-59	Donald Burrows
1890-91	F.Dewberry	1959-85	John Dyer
1891-93	A.Tayler	1985-2010	Andrew Malcolm
1893-8	Agatha Payne	2010-	Oliver King FRCO
1898-1942	Dr.Herbert Mahon		

*Information in this booklet has been drawn from a variety of sources provided by Saffron Walden Town Library. Other helpful sources have been Dr Kenneth Dixon's History and Guide to St.Mary's, Saffron Walden (compiled and edited by Hamish Walker) which was published in aid of the Church Restoration Appeal Fund 2000, and Gordon Smith's accompanying leaflet on the organ.*

# Organ Specification

## Pedal

Harmonic Bass	32
Open Diapason	16
Open Wood	16
Violone	16
Bourdon	16
Echo Bourdon	16
Principal	8
Octave	8
Bass Flute	8
Gemshorn	4
Mixture	IV
Contra Bombarde	32
Trombone	16
Bassoon	16
Trompeta Magna	16

## Great

Double Diapason	16
Principal	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Dulciana	8
Principal	4
Hohl Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Mixture	III

## Bombarde

Open Diapason	8
Grand Choeur	IV-VI
Tromba	8
Octave	

## Swell

Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Rohr Flute	8
Viola da Gamba	8
Voix Céleste	8
Geigen Principal	4
Wald Flute	4
Super Octave	2
Quint Mixture	III
Double Trumpet	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	
Octave	
Sub Octave	

## Choir

Chimney Flute	8
Spitz Principal	4
Gemshorn	2
Larigot	1 1/3
Quartane	II

## Solo

Stopped Diapason	8
Echo Salicional	8
Stopped Flute	4
Nazard	2 2/3
Block Flute	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Orchestral Oboe	8
Clarinet	8
Trompeta Réal	8
Tremulant	
Octave	
Sub Octave	

4 pistons Choir, 8 Great, 8 Swell, 8 Solo

16 divisional channels

8 general pistons on 64 channels

Pistons for Solo to Pedal, Swell to Pedal, Great to Pedal, Choir to Pedal and Swell to Great;

8 toe pistons Swell, 8 Pedal

Gt-Pd, Sw-Pd, Contra Bombarde and full organ toe pistons;

Bombarde is playable from Great keys unless transferred.

Console is on Rood Screen, facing South.

Choir organ on rood screen behind console (not visible from church)

1824 John Vincent  
1885 T.C. Lewis  
1911 Norman and Beard  
1971 Hill, Norman and Beard  
1996 David Wells  
2007 Peter De Vile

