

THE ORGAN IN READING MINSTER OF ST MARY THE VIRGIN

The Organ was built by 'Father' Willis for the 1862 Exhibition. The Solo Organ and two hydraulic blowing engines were added around 1876. This was during the period that he built the Reading Town Hall Organ the restoration of which has recently taken place.

The organ continued in use for 50 years until just before the Great War. The mechanism was by then practically worn out and funds were being collected for a rebuild. This war naturally put an end to the scheme, and nothing was done until 1926.

Willis' estimate at that time was over £3,000 and the maximum sum available was only £1,600. For this amount another firm undertook to rebuild and modernise the organ. The result was not a happy one and gave rise to unending troubles.

Many of these were caused by the tubular-pneumatic action being placed on high pressure wind. The organ literally blew itself to pieces under the strain.

The Verger at St Mary's at the time was one Percy Dyke who had worked for an organ building firm before he came to Reading, and I recall him spending more time during the services inside the organ rendering first aid than he spent verging! He was invaluable.

In 1934 Henry Willis III was called in to survey and report on the condition of the instrument, and in late 1935 it finally gave up the ghost.

By the efforts of the Rector and Vicar, Canon A G Parham (later to become Bishop of Reading), and Dr E O Daughtry, the organist, £5,000 was raised, and the work of rebuilding was put in hand at the beginning of 1936 and finished in October of the same year. This is the instrument we have today.

In retrospect, certain alterations then made have proved not to be entirely successful. The wind pressure of the big reed stops was lowered from 16 to 13 inches which considerably decreased their effectiveness. The Solo Tuba was enclosed and the whole Solo Organ is in a swell box in the roof and is only heard through the triangular opening above the North side of the Chancel.

As the pedal pipes, in the main, are just behind the arch by the North Door, the building of St Anne's Altar with its attendant screen further restricted the egress of sound to the Nave.

The rest of the enlarged instrument is also very cramped. In fact we often refer to it as 'The Organ in St Mary's Vestry'! (There are 2,886 pipes.)

Nevertheless it is still a very fine example of Father Willis' work. The softer stops in particular are all quite superb but, bearing in mind that it is almost 70 years since its last restoration, it is not surprising that it is again in need of further major attention.

I understand that an enormous sum is now needed for a complete rebuild, and although it seems a daunting task to raise this amount in these times, it would be a disaster if this historic instrument was to become completely unplayable.

It is at present being cared for by the firm of Robin Rance and Co of Chesham, who are doing a very good job of keeping it going.

H Gordon Hands

Acknowledgement is due for the early history of the organ prior to 1926 to the writings of the late Cecil Clutton, Esq.