THE ORGAN OF ST MARY’S CHURCH, HAVERFORDWEST

St Mary’s Church, at the top of the High Street in Haverfordwest, is home to many important historic items including thirteenth century stone carvings, Tudor wood carvings, Victorian stained glass windows and an historic peal of eight bells. In addition there is a remarkable church organ which we believe is the oldest pipe organ in Wales still in use. It is amazing to think that this organ, built in 1737 when Bach and Handel were still alive, has been played for thousands of services- civic events, weddings, memorial services, the funerals of rich and poor including many of those remembered in the memorials lining the walls of the church, as well as weekly parish worship when it must have accompanied the singing of tens of thousands of hymns and psalms. In addition, generations of music lovers have enjoyed the recitals which have been a regular feature of music at St Mary’s Church.

The story of the organ begins with the minutes of the Haverfordwest Common Council meeting held on 8 November 1736 which record, “Wheras Mr Mayor has been pleased to acquaint us this day that he has received a letter from his father Sir John Philipps wherin he makes a present of as much timber (to be cut out of Picton wood) as may be sufficient for erecting an organ loft and gallery in the parish church of St Mary in this Town and County. It is therefore ordered that the thanks of the Corporation in general and this house in particular to be given to Sir John for his kind benefaction and Mr Mayor is desired to take care of the same accordingly.”

A public appeal was made to raise the sum of £600. A notebook of Revd John Phillips (Vicar of Llanstadwell) records the donations made by county’s gentry, town alderman and leading citizens. The list is headed by the three sons of Sir John Philipps of Picton Castle (who died in January 1737, before the organ was installed); Sir Erasmus and John Philipps each gave 40 guineas, and Bulkeley gave ten guineas. John Philipps gave an additional five guineas specifically towards the cost of the French Horn stop. Over 150 donations were received realising a total of £600-18-00. (The list also identifies 11 potential donors whose donations were never received). An inscription which was placed on the gallery still exists and can be seen in the vicar’s vestry. “This gallery and organ were erected by subscription in the year 1737. John Philipps, Esq., Mayor. Rowland Philipps Esq., Church Warden”

For many years it was believed that the gallery and organ were commissioned from two eminent London organ builders, John Harris and John Byfield, who had built an organ for St Mary Redcliffe, Bristol, for the church of St Mary, Shrewsbury, and for many churches in the City of London. Recently an advertisement was found in the London Daily Post and General Advertiser of 31 August 1736 announcing that Mr Abraham Jordan of Bridge Row, London, organ builder, had been contracted to build an organ “for the great Church in Haverfordwest, South Wales”. Abraham Jordan junior (c1695-1756), a very important organ builder, built two other instruments in Wales, at St Asaph Cathedral and St Mary, Newtown. Harris, Byfield and Jordan had been partners in the organ building business; Charles Burney, writing in 1789, declared that “they had nearly the whole business of the kingdom to themselves.” There is no doubt that the “Good Sir John” Philipps, shortly before his death, had persuaded these prestigious builders to make the organ.
The organ was built on a new gallery constructed of wood supplied from the Picton estate, and located in the customary position at the west end of the nave. It had two manuals, the upper one (great) had eleven stops, the lower (swell and choir) had three stops for the swell organ and five for the choir. There were also pedals, but no pedal pipes. The original case, which can now be seen in the North Aisle of the church, is typical of the period in consisting of three semi-circular towers and two two-tiered flats of gilded pipes. A crown on the centre tower and bishops’ mitres on the other two towers are regarded as symbols of temporal and spiritual power. Winged cherub heads placed at the base of the middle tower are in a similar style to those of an organ made by Harris and Byfield for the London City church of St. Bartholomew-by-the-Exchange in 1731.

The Town records state that in 1739 the organist of St Mary's was paid a salary of £16 a year "as long as he should behave himself well", and that certain seats in the organ gallery and other parts of the church were let by the Mayor, the proceeds from which were used to pay the organist's salary.

In January 1747 the Corporation minutes recorded that the organist, Mr Matthew Philipps, should have his annual salary raised from £16 to £20 to compensate for cleaning the organ “which hath been much out of order”. Matthew Phillips was the organist of Magdalen College, Oxford for a short time in 1734 before moving to Pembrokeshire where he was probably employed at St David’s Cathedral. In 1743 he married Mary Hughes of Haverfordwest at St Mary’s Church.

The organist would have provided music for hymns or psalms and concluding voluntaries. In 1796 Mrs Morgan described the “very good organ…the organist is an excellent performer” and in 1810 Fenton wrote, “At the west end of the nave there is a handsome gallery furnished with a noble organ.”

In 1861, under the leadership of the vicar, Revd JHA Philipps of Picton Castle, a major restoration of the church and its environs was carried out. This included the repair and enlargement of the organ by the firm of John Banfield of Birmingham. A third manual was added which attracted this contemporary report; “The swell, which is entirely new, has a most charming effect, the cornopeon and hautboy in that part of the instrument telling out with remarkable brilliancy and sweetness. The original diapasons were always admired for their purity of tone but now, when allied to the magnificent pedal organ, produced effects which cannot be surpassed. There is not the slightest hardness or wavering sympathy in any part of the instrument, but the whole of the various combinations of stops, either taken together or separately, are so accurately balanced, and so well voiced, that there is nothing left to be desired. The stops in the choir organ are of a fine character, particularly the cremona and clarabella: the tones of the former are melting but clear, and even whilst those of the latter have quite a distinct character of roundness and geniality which we have never heard equalled. The effect of these two stops when accompanied by the soft murmurings of the diapasons in the swell, is, to the sensitive ear, exceedingly beautiful”.

The twenty eight stops, (thirteen of which were new), four couplers, two octaves of pedal pipes and a total of over 1,300 pipes made it one of the finest and largest instruments in
Wales. The cost was met by voluntary contributions but *The Welshman* reported that Revd Philipps had personally met the cost of adding a trumpet stop, “so that it is now without exception the finest and best organ in the Principality.” The preacher at the service held to mark its restoration was the Bishop Thirlwall of St Davids, and the church choir, reinforced by several members of Mr Harvey’s Vocal Class, numbered about eighteen voices. “Of the selection of music we cannot speak too highly we were particularly struck by the very excellent performance of Boyce’s *Te Deum* and *Jubilate* in A, and Kent’s Anthem “Blessed be Thou” which were rendered with such accuracy and taste as would do honour to a choir of far greater pretensions. We must also not forget to mention that the organist, Mr W. L. Harding, although totally unaccustomed to an instrument of such magnitude, managed the disposition of the stops and developed the several beauties of his instrument in such a manner as to call forth the expression of cordial approval by the musical portion of the congregation”. As a result of his successful renovation Mr Banfield received an order to build an organ for the town’s Wesleyan Chapel.

In 1883 the thirty boys and twenty men of the church choir were provided with surplices. Strongly influenced by the growing popularity of cathedral choirs and the wish to increase the place of choral music in parish worship, the church council then decided to install new choir stalls in the chancel and to invest in a more powerful organ. So a century and a half after the instrument was built, it was moved from the west gallery to its present position at the north-east end in the chancel. A large number of the pipes from the old organ were incorporated in the major renovation and expansion of the organ which was carried out by the firm of William Hill at a cost of £535. Fortunately the richly carved and decorated case of the 1737 organ was retained, and can still be seen facing the north aisle. A new console and case featuring highly decorated, ornate gold leaf pipes was installed alongside the sanctuary with total number of pipes increased to 1,825.

In 1888, following several years as organist at St Martin’s Church, local businessman Dr Frederick Greenish became organist and choir master. He remained in the post until 1909. A large choir of men and boys provided choral services under a succession of organists until the mid 20th century. Sydney Herbert Anstey was organist and choir master from 1912. Born in 1891 at Poole, he trained at the Royal Normal College and Academy for the Blind, Upper Norwood, gained the Associate diploma of the Royal College of Organists and won the Lafontaine prize in 1910. In 1919 he left to become organist at the Basingstoke parish Church.

Throughout the 20th century maintenance and minor repairs to the organ continued but in 1983 general deterioration forced a decision to carry out a major renovation of the instrument. This was undertaken by Percy Daniel & Co. of Clevedon. A new console and pedal board were provided and the manual, pedal, coupling and draw-stop actions were electrified. The total cost of £25,000 was raised by donations, fund raising efforts and many concerts and recitals. The first recital on the newly restored organ was given by Jane Watts, a Cardigan born internationally acclaimed organist.

In 2016 the need to carry out repairs to organ led the Church Council to start fund raising again. This appeal, for £25,000, is ongoing, but as a result of the generosity of donors, work
is now underway on preparing this important musical instrument for the next fifty years of its long life.

The present organist and custodian of the instrument is Peter Allen. In response to my request for a comment he said;

“The organ at St. Mary’s is simply unique. It has been the town orchestra for close to three centuries and is the only machine in the County which is still doing what it was created to do. For this reason, playing this organ is an experience in time. One can play on a haunting flute stop on the original 1737 rank of pipes and hear the instrument as it sounded 300 years ago, or one can conjure up a thrilling wave of French sound reminiscent of Notre Dame Cathedral.

“The story of St. Mary’s organ is one of Civic pride and continuity. Donations toward its upkeep and enhancement have been made over the centuries and continue to be made an example being John Philipps, who donated the French Horn pipes 279 years ago. He is remembered and his legacy is heard every time the organ is played.

“There is room in the pedal section of the organ for a rank of Reed pipes. This would give the instrument an even greater sound of grandeur. The cost of this would be in the region of £5,000. If anyone would like to donate the cost of this addition in memory of their family or loved one, please contact St. Mary’s. This living memorial, like John Philipps’ French Horn pipes, will be heard on each occasion the organ plays, presumably for the next three hundred years!”

FOOTNOTE

One of the unsung heroes of the organ’s history must be Peter Jones,(1838-1919) a veteran of the Crimean War who for many years was the organ blower at St Mary’s Church. His obituary in the Telegraph of 1919 reported that he was a man of fine physique, and in his young days enlisted in the Scots Fusilier Guards. After about twelve months' service he was drafted to the Crimea, and had his left leg blown off by a shell at the battle of Sebastopol. He possessed the British medal (with clasp) and Turkish medal. During 60 years he had borne the discomfort and inconvenience of an artificial limb with praiseworthy patience. A quiet unassuming man, he was never known to speak unkindly of anyone. At his funeral in St Mary’s burial ground in Portfield he was accorded military honours, the firing party being supplied by the King’s Own Yorkshire Light Infantry. Three volleys were fired over the grave, and the bugler sounded the "Last Post."

FOOTNOTE

On the last day of October 1761, a significant burial took place in St Mary’s Church. Sir John Pryce, 5th Baronet of Newtown Hall, died in the town where he was planning to marry his fourth wife, a
local lady, Mary Harries. "my most dear and most entirely beloved intended wife Margaret Harries of the parish of St Martin in the said Town and County of Haverfordwest."

He was an extreme eccentric. He was so distraught after the death of his first two wives that did not bury them, but kept their coffins either side of his bed. He wrote to the Rev William Felton, who was on his deathbed, asking him to get in touch with his two dead wives in Heaven and to give them kind messages. His third wife, whom he married in 1741 was not prepared to accept the bedroom state of affairs, insisting that the corpses should be buried. She died in 1748. At some stage Sir John moved to live in Haverfordwest.

He was a devotee of church organs. In 1731 he bought an organ from Abraham Jordan for Newtown Church but in 1741 he moved it to Buckland Church. In his will, made in 1760, he left the organ to the Bishop, Dean and Chapter of St Davids Cathedral. He described it fully; it consisted of a double row of ivory and ebony keys, 1004 pipes, 18 stops, some of which were rare, curious and uncommon, ornamented in the front with three towers of gilt pipes, reclining angels with trumpets in their hands, and a cherubim’s head and wings, a step ladder for gaining access into the organ, a seat, a box of music, and tools to tune the organ. He bequeathed unto his worthy friend, Mr Matthew Phillips, the present organist at the cathedral, the sum of ten guineas for playing the organ at his burial service at the cathedral.

Sir John’s desire to be buried at St David’s was not fulfilled as he was buried on 31 October 1761 in the nave in St Mary’s. The organist at his funeral is not recorded. The cathedral officials attempted for a few years to obtain the organ but by 1765, in frustration, they renounced their right to the instrument.

PAT BARKER 2017 for article in PEMBROKESHIRE LIFE