

The Story of the Parish of St Lawrence Church Organs and the Alton Organ Society

The History of the Organs

The Bryceson Organ of 1830

The earliest record of an organ at St Lawrence is in 1829. At a vestry meeting on 27 February 1829, 'It was resolved that a barrel organ be erected in the church. Provided that the cost of the organ and every expense incurred by its erection be paid for by subscription'. The organ was subsequently purchased from the builders Bryceson. It stood in a gallery at the west end of the church and had the following specifications:



Open Diapason 8'
Stopped Diapason 8'
Clarabel Flute 8' was possibly a 4' stop
Principal 4'
Twelfth 2B'
Fifteenth 2'

The Speechly Organ of 1866

In 1866 the Vicar and Churchwardens inaugurated a vast plan of restoration which included the purchase of a new organ. Meanwhile, the Bryceson organ was moved to the Town Hall where the parishioners worshipped for almost a year whilst the church underwent restoration. The 'New Organ' by Henry Speechly and Sons of the Camden Organ Factory possessed 33 speaking stops, 1,960 pipes, three manuals and pedals.

It was built at a cost of £850, with much of the money provided by Mr Montague Burnett and his family. It was opened on 3 October 1868. At this time the church was establishing a musical tradition, under the direction of the then organist, Mr Newman. A choir consisting of eight trebles, three altos (boys), four tenors and four basses was formed. This organ was probably the largest in any southern Parish church at that time. In 1893 the organ was restored by Speechly and Sons at a cost of £850. Dr W G Alcock, assistant Organist at Westminster Abbey, reopened the organ on 11 December 1895.

Twentieth Century Refurbishments

Speechly and Sons undertook two further overhauls in 1907 and 1939. By 1965 the action was not functioning adequately and another thorough overhaul was desperately needed. Following tender action, Wood, Wordsworth & Co of Leeds was invited to undertake the rebuilding work. The specification was prepared by the firm in close consultation with Cyril Diplock, the organist at the time. The overriding consideration was that there should be no major alteration to the existing tonal characteristics of the Speechly organ, as these were what made this organ such a wonderful instrument – popular with so many distinguished national and international visiting organists.

Martin Cross Restoration of 1993

By 1993 the electric action had become unreliable so Martin Cross of Essex was entrusted with the latest restoration, which cost £45,000. Again, no tonal changes were made as part of this scheme. As a result the Church of St Lawrence can again be proud that its organ has retained its tradition position as one of the

finest parish church instruments in the South. The organ has 57 speaking stops, 12 couplers, two tremulants and a total of 2,722 pipes. The console has 71 stop-knobs and 38 thumb pistons. These days the organ is tuned and maintained by Harrison & Harrison.



Current and past organists

1866	HD Newman
1882-1913	James Everitt B Mus (Dunelm) MSM
1914-52	Norris Thrower ARCO
-1958	Norman Pearson
1959-60	Ivan King
1960	HWD Hocking ARCM
1960-61	LWT Arkell LRAM ARCO
1961-2006	Cyril Diplock LTCL (Org Perf)
1992	Gerald Marlow (Acting organist during Cyril's Sabbatical)
2006-15	Tony Willman (Dir of Music 2005-)
2015	Will Nisbet (<i>playing the 1993 organ above</i>)