

This is the fifteenth of an occasional series of articles by David Stone about incidents in the history of Swanton Morley and its church

THE THREE ORGANS THAT HAVE BEEN IN ALL SAINTS' CHURCH

Introduction

By the end of the fifteenth century most parish churches possessed a small organ, and there is no reason to doubt that All Saints' had one. However these were small portable instruments, which had little function other than to assist the priest and congregation in the performance of plainsong. At the Reformation many parishes tended towards Calvinistic reform and many organs were removed from parish churches. In 1644 an act of Parliament required the removal of organs from churches and many congregations, including ours, reacted by erecting galleries at the west end of the church. These galleries housed a 'choir' of musicians, a tradition which lasted for some two hundred years or more. Provision of a shelf in the gallery for the flutes is mentioned in our churchwarden's accounts during the 18th century.

The first organ

Then, in the second half of the nineteenth century and often in the face of stubborn resistance from the congregation, many 'choirs' were eventually replaced by harmoniums or small organs and the galleries demolished. This was part of the major re-arrangement and refurbishing which took place in so many churches at this time. All that we know about the instrument at Swanton Morley is that in the churchwardens accounts for Easter 1885 are the following two items.

Collection by Miss Lombe for organ	£29-4s-6d
American Organ, carriage	£39-6s-6d

The second organ

However, by June 1902 we read in the Parish Magazine that:

"The Rector and Mrs Hunter are also anxious that the year should not pass away without an attempt being made to place an organ in the Church to take the place of the present instrument, which is too feeble for the requirements of so large a building. We think that a "Positive" organ might be obtained powerful enough for about £150, and we shall indeed be grateful for any contribution towards this particular object." (A positive organ is a fixed one as opposed to a movable instrument.)

By November the church had been refurbished to conform to the Victorian idea of what a church should be, and the Parish magazine reported:

"We feel sure all must be struck by the additional dignity imparted to the chancel and Altar by the new Choir Seats, the slight alteration made in the levels of the floors and steps leading to the Altar; the rich hangings behind and at the sides of the Holy Table, and the beautifully designed and executed re-table, upon which now stand the Cross, Vases and Altar-lights, and many will echo the words of one of our parishioners, 'It looks more like a church now.' When all these improvements are paid for, our next endeavour must be to provide a suitable organ for the Church, which we know is desired by so many."

There then followed a fund-raising campaign and the Parish Magazine for February 1908 reported:

“An order has been placed with Messrs. Norman & Beard of Norwich for the erection *in the Chancel* of an Organ and we hope to have the instrument in its place during the next three weeks. We have been most fortunate in securing a first rate instrument, suitable for our church, which has been in use for some nine months in another church, while a larger one was being built, and in consequence Messrs Norman & Beard are able to erect it in our church for the sum of £140 – some £40 less than it originally cost at the works.”

The organ in question was a small “Norvic” model which had one keyboard and no pedals, and had been installed temporarily in Northorpe church while their larger instrument was being built.

The inauguration of the new organ took place on Thursday, 27 February 1908 and the Parish Magazine for March 1908 reported that, “A short service was followed by an organ recital given by Dr Bates, organist of Norwich Cathedral, and an old friend of the rector’s.” The programme for the recital was included in this edition, and we can see that there were vocals by both Miss Sheepshanks and by Mrs Bates. A full list of subscribers was contained in the April edition. Norman & Beard tuned the organ in 1911, and added the pedals at a cost of £23 in 1917.

In 1929 further reorganisation took place; a new altar was installed and the old altar put in the south aisle. At the same time, the organ was moved to the nave.

The third organ

When the church of St Michael-at-Plea in Norwich became redundant in the 1960s, the opportunity was taken to acquire its Norman and Beard organ, which had been built in 1887, at a cost of £300. The old “Norvic” organ was removed from All Saints and passed on to St Edmundsbury Cathedral, to aid worship there during the major restoration of the cathedral organ. The St Michael-at-Plea organ was dismantled and re-installed by Hill, Norman and Beard in its current position in All Saints in 1970, with only a few minor alterations including its new, unique livery. It is a fine two manual organ whose historic value was recently recognised by the award of a Historic Organs Certificate by the British Institute of Organ Studies. However, age had taken its toll and the organ was in serious need of attention. But now, as most of you will know, it has recently been fully restored to its original condition by Holmes and Swift of Fakenham at a cost of over £22,000, a sum which has now been almost completely raised within the parish, without any grant assistance.