

The Pipe Organs of Lichfield Cathedral: A Very Brief History

Records of the earliest organs at Lichfield Cathedral are extremely sketchy. We know that there was an organ in the cathedral in 1482, although no further reference to an instrument has been found between that date and 1634. In 1639 Robert Dallam was engaged to construct a new instrument of 12 stops, but this was lost during the destructive Parliamentary siege of Lichfield during the Civil war. In 1667 an organ was provided through the donations of 'honourable and most pious' women, and at some stage a further, smaller instrument was provided for the Lady Chapel. We cannot know with any certainty whether any vestiges of this instrument are present in the chamber organ which, after service at Hamstall Ridware and then the Bishop's Chapel, was given to Lichfield City Museum, who in turn gave it to the Cathedral on permanent loan. It currently resides in the south transept of the building.

In 1740, the Warwick-based German organ builder Thomas Schwarbrick provided Lichfield with a new or fully restored main organ, which survived until 1789, when Samuel Green was engaged to provide a new instrument to sit upon the restored stone screen. The instrument can be seen in contemporary engravings, together with the glazing that separated the Quire from the Nave. However, when Gilbert Scott began his great restoration of the cathedral, he insisted that the stone screen be removed in order to open up the length of the building. A new organ and situation was required, and the cathedral was fortunate to have a fantastically generous donor in Josiah Spode, a great-grandson of the potter. Spode also paid for the Green organ to be installed at Armitage Parish Church, where it survives relatively unchanged.

The new organ, the foundation of the current instrument, has been called Holdich's *magnum opus*, not only because of its size but also its ambition. Most notable was the decision to include an independent pedal chorus, much of which still survives today. (This comparatively groundbreaking decision did not meet with universal approval: the Organist, Samuel Spofforth, is reported to have told Holdich that whilst he might put the pedals there, he would never use them!) Despite the successes of design and innovation, the organ was poorly sited in the east part of the north transept, and as a result garnered little praise. In 1884, Messrs William Hill & Son rebuilt the organ using tubular pneumatic action, adding a Solo division, replacing much of Holdich's pipework and moving the console into the North Quire Aisle, thereby improving the siting of the player, if not the instrument itself. This incarnation of the instrument was completed in 1884, yet although its qualities were appreciated, the situation of the instrument continued to be a real problem. Finally, under the guidance of Sir George Martin and Oldrid Scott, the present solution was adopted: an organ chamber was constructed over the north quire aisle, the windows removed, and the organ re-built again to fit the chamber (which still boasts a flying buttress!). The work was completed in 1908, and was acclaimed as a great success.

The instrument was then left largely unaltered until 1974, when age necessitated an overhaul. Under the direction of Richard Greening, Hill, Norman and Beard undertook a conservative rebuild, with the two aims of rendering the instrument reliable once more and of broadening the instrument's tonal palette, without compromising the instrument's original character. Some minor

work was undertaken in 1988, but by the middle of the next decade, major work was becoming inevitable once more. The work was awarded to Harrison and Harrison, who restored the organ to something very like its 1908 condition, as well as adding a new division of stops situated in the Nave, and other new stops to enlarge the organ's tonal palette still further (notably some new string stops and an enclosed Solo reed). After much debate, the organ was left at its original Old Philharmonic pitch, meaning that it sounds very sharp against modern-day concert pitch. At the time of the rebuild, Andrew Lumsden wrote in the inaugural commemorative booklet that, although the use of the organ would therefore continue to be limited, 'the unique "Lichfield" sound, with its gutsy "Black Country" reeds, will remain intact. Also ... with such a dead acoustic in the building, having an organ tuned sharp helps to project the sound around the building'. The most recent alteration was undertaken by Lumsden's successor, Philip Scriven, who had the Choir Viole Sourdine tuned sharp, giving the organ a set of Celestes on three of its six departments.

The last word should go to Richard Greening, whose history of the organs of Lichfield Cathedral continues to be the first point of reference for anyone interested in discovering more about this aspect of the cathedral's musical heritage. 'The organ of Lichfield Cathedral is not the most famous in the country, except perhaps among a few discerning musicians; but...it is one of the most delightful of English organs to play and to hear'.

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