

## A History of the Organs of St Michael's Mount Dinham

### Former Organs

When St Michael's, Mount Dinham, was consecrated in 1868, by Rt Revd John Medley, Bishop of Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, it contained a fine 3-manual, 22-stop organ built by Hill & Son. This instrument, maintained by the Plymouth firm of Hele & Co, served the church well for nearly a century, but in 1967 a water incursion into the organ chamber caused serious damage to the works. At the time the cost of repair was too much for the congregation and the organ was lost, though some pipes were reused in an organ rebuild at Ottery St Mary a couple of years later.

In the spirit of the times a 4-manual Compton electronic organ was purchased in 1968. This had a massive 84 stops but apparently only 2 nave speakers. Opinions were divided. Some accounts saying it produced some lovely sounds, others more dismissive. However, as we know, electronic devices rapidly age and become uneconomic to repair. When this instrument failed in the early 1990s, it could not be mended.

As a stop-gap measure (his own phrase), the then organist Charles Argall kindly lent his 3-manual 35-stop Wyvern electronic to the church. With St Michael's generous acoustic, skillful playing and a row of speakers lodged on the edge of the organ chamber, it has performed well for over 20 years, only sounding mushy in fanfares and full organ. But it too is reaching the end of its useful life and occasionally unreliable.

### New Pipes for St Mike's.

After several years of searching, in 2010 we found a pipe organ about to become redundant which seemed to be ideal in sound, size and heritage for the needs of St Michael's.

This organ was built in 1867, for the Victorian church of St Jude's in the centre of Birmingham for £300. The 3-manual instrument was extended to 29 stops in 1908 by the well-regarded firm of Bishop, and again to 35 stops in 1952 by W.J.Bird. This second re-build was overseen by Mr Lawrence Briggs ARCO, long-time organist at St Jude's and grandfather of International Concert Organist, David Briggs.

Note also the longevity of a pipe organ compared with the 20-25 year lifespan of an electronic one.

Sadly, by 1971, the redevelopment of the centre of Birmingham meant that St Jude's, which had been a thriving Anglo-Catholic church with a strong musical tradition, no longer had a viable Parish around it. The building was subsequently demolished and replaced by a multi-storey car park.

However, the organ was saved, put into storage, and around 1983 rebuilt by Deane of Taunton, with the addition of some fine solo stops, in the chapel of Clayesmore School in Dorset. This further rebuild gave the organ its current 5 divisions and 46 speaking stops over its 3 manuals and pedals, with some 2500 pipes ranging in size from the height of a double-decker bus to just a few inches.

After nearly 30 years' service there, the school reordered its chapel for more space and purchased a large electronic organ. So the St Jude's/Clayesmore organ again needed a new home. Thanks to generous funding from HLF, Viridor and Allchurches Trust, along with money raised by members and friends, we at St Michael's had this great opportunity to rebuild this fine historic instrument here in an active, high-Anglican church, exactly the same age as the St Jude's organ, where we hope it will be used for generations to come. As well as leading the congregation and accompanying the thriving SATB choir, it will be available for organ teaching and practice, and encourage wider use of our beautiful church for concerts and recitals.

## Organ Pipes and People.

As well as the technical details about this organ, which can be traced in the National Pipe Organ Register on-line database (see <http://npor.emma.cam.ac.uk/NPORView.html?RI=R01218> and History link), we also know about some of the people who played or sang with the organ at St Jude's Church, Birmingham.

For some 40 years, until the church was closed in 1971, the organist at St Jude's was Lawrence Briggs, renowned for his liturgical improvisations accompanying its High Church services. He supervised the organ rebuild of 1952 and demonstrated its colours with a short recital at the Rededication Service. This service was taken by the controversial Bishop of Birmingham, Ernest Barnes, despite St Jude's being a stronghold of the Anglo-Catholic practices which went against his rationalist views.

In the 1950s and 60s, St Jude's had an eclectic congregation with people coming from 20 miles or more for the distinctive liturgy and the quality of its music - rather like St Michael's today.

The Briggs family formed the core of a thriving choir at St Jude's, and a 6 year old David Briggs was first inspired to play the organ sitting beside his grandfather, though sometimes slipping out with his father to go train-spotting at New Street Station during the Sermons.

David Briggs went on to be an Organ Scholar at King's College Cambridge and Cathedral Organist at Truro and then Gloucester. He is now a freelance organ recitalist and composer based in Toronto, with a passion for improvisation and accompanying silent movies.

David is thrilled to learn that the very pipes which he first played on will to have new life at St Michael's, Mount Dinham, here in Exeter. We are delighted that David was able to come and give the Inaugural Organ Recital here on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2013, when the organ had been installed.

Another family with a long association with St Jude's describes a thriving church life, including annual Parish Summer Camps, usually to Wales, active membership of the Church Union, and, with Birmingham's theatres nearby, holding services for members of the Actors' Church Union, particularly during the Pantomime season - oh yes they did!

Another remembers the glorious settings of the Mass they sang, "Rheinberger, Darke in E, and, of course, Palestrina's Missa Christi Aeterna Munera during Lent". She asks "where did all that music go?" I was glad to reply that it is alive and well at St Michael's Mount Dinham.

On Easter Monday 1971, many former parishioners returned to St Jude's for the final service there. Redevelopment and the move to the suburbs had resulted in there being less than a hundred people left living in the Parish. It was reabsorbed into St Michael's in the Bull Ring just 125 years after it had been created to serve the growing population of central Birmingham during Victorian industrialisation.

A church is the gathering of God's people, not just a building, but it must have been so sad and poignant to see a much loved place of prayer and pilgrimage demolished and replaced by a multi-storey car park. We need to make our buildings thriving places for church and community.

As the St Jude's organ moves on from Clayesmore, all are delighted to know that it has found a new home at St Michael's, where it will help nourish fresh generations with the glorious music and splendid liturgy that is so precious.

See also our website <http://www.stmichaelsmountdinham.org.uk> or blog <http://stmichaelsmountdinham.wordpress.com>