

S S Wesley - Four Cathedrals & a Parish Church.

The East-most window in the South Aisle at St Michael's Church depicts King David the Psalmist playing an instrument of eleven(?) strings. Below is the dedication:- To the Glory of God and in memory of Samuel Sebastian Wesley, Born Aug 14, 1810 Died Apr 19, 1876. SS Wesley (composer, not steam ship) is a name revered by church musicians across the English-singing world.

You can read all about his colourful and itinerant career as one of the most talented organists of his time on Wikipedia and elsewhere, but here are a few highlights and points of local interest.

His grandfather was the great hymn-writer Charles Wesley, one of the founders of Methodism. His father, Samuel Wesley, a renowned composer of the Georgian period, had an unconventional, though some might say biblical, marriage, fathering children by his wife Charlotte and their young domestic servant Sarah Suter. The latter's first son was Samuel Sebastian, named after his famous father and the even more famous J S Bach – so no pressure.

Gaining his musical education as a treble in the Chapel Royal, Samuel Sebastian became a church organist in London, including at St Giles Camberwell. This church was destroyed by fire in 1841. For George Gilbert Scott's glorious new Victorian Gothic church consecrated in 1844, Wesley designed a fine 3-manual organ, which is played to this day.

He obtained his first Cathedral appointment at Hereford in 1832. Here he married the Dean's sister, the delightfully named Mary Ann Merryweather, against the family's wishes, but they seem to have had a fulfilled life together with 6 children, only straying to go fishing when he should have been playing for Services!

One Easter at Hereford his choir comprised the boys and one man, so he wrote his wonderful Anthem “Blessed be the God & Father” for these reduced resources.

In 1835 they moved to Exeter Cathedral, where he worked to improve both choir & organ. Here he wrote the Anthem “Wash me thoroughly” in the chromatic style. Eventually he fell out with the clergy, as he often did, and left for the prestigious Leeds Parish Church in 1841, where he probably had his most competent choir.

On a fishing trip, he fell over a stile and broke his leg. While recuperating he composed the SSATTB Anthem “Cast me not away” setting verses from Psalm 51 climaxing with “That the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice”!

In 1849 he took the well-paid post at Winchester Cathedral. At the Great Exhibition of 1851, he admired Henry Willis' Organ, particularly its novel radiating pedalboard, and had it installed at Winchester in 1854. While there he wrote “Ascribe unto the Lord”, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace”, and his little gem “Lead me Lord”, part of a larger piece.

Amid more clergy tension he moved to his final position at Gloucester Cathedral in 1865. After a gap of 30 years he could again perform and conduct for the Three Choirs Festival. That he also conducted the first English performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion outside London would have pleased his father.

So if you see Hereford, Exeter, Winchester, Gloucester on the TV quiz "Only Connect", you'll know the connection. Likewise Cornwall, Harewood, Hereford & Aurelia, the 4 of his many hymn tunes now in New English Hymnal.

Although he died in Gloucester, his coffin was brought by Brunel's GWR to Exeter so that he could be buried next to his infant daughter, Mary, who had died in 1840. Their tombstone is near the Catacombs in the St Bartholomew Cemetery just across the valley from the then recently built St Michael's.



Richard Barnes – 19/3/2019, corrected 2021

