

IFFLEY CHURCH ORGAN

Church organs have always aroused contrary emotions. For some churchgoers they are an essential part of worship, for others distractions at best, idolatrous abominations at worst. Musicians are equally divided, some seeing the organ as the 'king of instruments', others as a mechanical contraption with – save for the works of J.S. Bach – a second-rate repertoire, by turns sentimental and bombastic. The imminent refurbishment of the organ in Iffley church prompts some reflections on the instrument itself and on its place in our worship.

Most village churches did not have organs until the 19th century. Before then singing was usually led by a village band, often placed in a west gallery. This was the case at Iffley church, where a gallery 'for singers only' was installed in 1738. Under the influence of the Oxford Movement such bands went out of fashion, to be replaced by the ideal of the surpliced choir with organ accompaniment. So, when the church was restored in 1843-5 a small organ by William Pilcher of Pimlico was placed on the west gallery and inward-facing choir stalls in the chancel. But this arrangement was not to the taste of Thomas Acton Warburton, who became vicar in 1853. He was responsible in 1856 for restoring the Romanesque west window, filling it with stained glass in memory of his brother, who died on a burning steamer en route for the West Indies. When first installed this could not be properly seen because of the organ, but finally in 1875 – following much opposition from within the parish – Warburton managed to remove the gallery and organ, thus opening up the full vista of the church to those entering through the west door.

The question then arose of finding a replacement for the organ. Fortunately a donation from a parishioner, Major Ind of Court Place, made it possible to commission an instrument from one of the best organ-builders of the time, William Hill. He formed part of an 'apostolic succession' of English organ builders which stretched back to the Swiss-born émigré John Snetzler, a legendary name among organ aficionados, in the 18th century, his firm being responsible for building organs in four cathedrals as well as at Westminster Abbey and at three Cambridge colleges (King's, St John's and Trinity). By the standards of these behemoths the Iffley organ is small, but every organist I have heard play it has remarked on its beauty of tone and – for an instrument with only two manuals and thirteen stops – its versatility. Given a careful choice of stops it is possible to play on it most of the repertoire, from William Byrd to Olivier Messiaen via the stupendous masterpieces of Bach – without grave disservice to the composers' intentions: something which is alas not true of many parish church organs. Equally important, the instrument has survived largely intact, with its mechanical ('tracker') action and the addition of only one stop, the mixture - the loud one that organists pull out for the last verses of hymns and sometimes for closing voluntaries.

Iffley is fortunate to have to have an organ of this quality and to have maintained it in its pristine condition. But there was a price to pay. Most Victorian organs were placed somewhere at the east end of a church, close to the choir in the chancel and often blocking a transept or chapel. The long, narrow plan of Iffley church and the lack of any side chapels made this impossible, so a position towards the west of the church was unavoidable. As a result organists have always had to lead the congregational singing from behind: no bad thing in itself perhaps, but posing insurmountable problems of co-ordination with a choir in the conventional position in the chancel. This is why those who come to our choral evensongs and carol services cannot see the choir, which groups itself at the west end of the church in the seating installed during the last major restoration in 1995. Yet, just as one should not judge a book by its cover, the most important thing about a choir is surely not its appearance but the quality of the music it makes, and as long as this remains high there is, I think, no real cause for complaint.

A more serious criticism relates to the siting and appearance of the organ itself. Opinions will differ about the aesthetic quality of the wooden case. Speaking personally, I do not find it offensive, and the fact that the pipework is raised up above ground level means that it does not unduly interrupt the beautiful view from the west to the east end of the church. But for those who value architectural purity it certainly detracts from the clean lines of the nave, and – even worse perhaps – it blocks

the south door: for many years the main entrance to the church. Ever since I began playing at Iffley there have been discussions about replacing it by either a digital instrument or a new pipe organ on a reinstated west gallery, but all have foundered, partly on the grounds of cost, partly because of the undoubted musical quality of the instrument we already have.

By 2006 that instrument was showing its age. Tonally it was still in excellent condition, and no stops needed to be added or removed, but there were several recurrent mechanical problems which had increased over the years and which needed fairly urgent attention. In September 2006 a refurbishment was carried out over a period of several weeks. The result is that the organ sounds much as it did before, but is now, for the first time for many years, in first-class mechanical condition. It has successfully underpinned the musical side of worship in Iffley for 130 years, and should now be able to do the same for future generations.

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