

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidioeg St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

St Davids Cathedral Organ

The original cathedral organ of St Davids was designed by Henry Willis (1883) whose designs include the cathedrals of Hereford and Truro – and the Albert Hall. Whilst the Victorians were largely responsible for the massive growth in popularity and variety of organs the organ itself has a history of over 1000 years. Early organs had the power to drive the air, to make the sound, driven by water and even steam or small choir boys pumping the bellows. Organs were being designed to entertain the masses – those who could not afford to listen to an orchestra so this meant that more organs were being designed on a more 'domestic' scale to suit chapels and community halls – where despite their smaller size they could create a great sound. This is reflected in the great many pieces of music that were being written for the organ in the C19th.

In St Davids Cathedral the air is supplied by electric fans (rather than mechanical) which fill the bellows – replacing the need for small choir boys pumping! Pressing a key on the keyboard allows air to rush to the pipe and the 'stops' allow air into the pipes to make the sound. The pipes act as recorders and – the longer the pipe the lower the notes and slender pipes provide the quieter notes equating to strings in the orchestra. By the 1960's there were serious problems with the original organ as the tumultuous sound produced by the organ, plus the pressure of air passing through the pipes, meant that the decision (to preserve the fabric of the cathedral!) was to rip out the old organ and replace it! Pipes that could not be used in the re-design were stored away and forgotten.



It was Bishop Wyn (then the Dean) who set in motion the project to rebuild and restore the original organ – and to replace some of the original pipework that had been removed. A Heritage Lottery Grant provided half of the funds necessary to allow for a virtually brand-new case (more of the original is visible on the east side), constructed of limed-oak in order to blend as well as possible with the original screen.

The organ was completed in time for the Millennium, with 3000 pipes altogether – in addition to the visible pipes there are also pipes concealed in the stairwell to the organ and massive pipes lie horizontally above the columns of the nave. The magnificent Rood was designed to 'sit' in the curve created by the arrangement of the original pipework, so the pipes formed a bowl to frame it from below but the newly rebuilt organ required the Rood to be rehung to complement the completed organ. It was said that there is a stop on the organ that was labelled –

“Not to be used in the presence of the Queen”

– as the pipe is directly behind her chair!

Every cathedral organ has to be designed to work with the architecture and space of the building and in the case of St Davids many agree that it produces a wonderful sound, enjoyed by many that have the pleasure of listening to the vast range of music the organ can give voice to.