

Why we have a Willis pipe organ

This beautifully restored organ is here today thanks to a series of accidents – and to some key individuals.



From St George's to St Giles

Our Willis pipe organ spent its first eighty years at St George's, Edinburgh. Then in 1962 the church closed because of dry rot – and up to 500 organ pipes were stolen.

Meanwhile St Giles in Stony Stratford lost its organ on Boxing Day 1964, just before it was due to be restored by organ builders Starmar Shaw.



Our organ under wraps at St George's, Edinburgh in 1962 ...

Thrift of some of the organ pipes. Report in The Scotsman, October 4, 1962.

500 ORGAN PIPES STOLEN

Damage to valuable church instrument

Lead thieves have seriously damaged the valuable organ in St George's Church, Edinburgh. About 500 pipes – some of them 16 ft. long – have been stolen from the organ, which is regarded as one of the finest in Edinburgh, and the damage is estimated at several hundred pounds.

The Rev. Dr William C. Bigwood, minister of the linked charge of St Andrew's and St George's, said: "The fact that this should have been done at all leaves me aghast."

"This may make churches want to consider the extent of the insurance of their organs, which are covered mainly against fire. It might be a good thing to warn congregations, in these days when theft and its seem to be profitable for thieves."

NEW VALUE £25,000

The three-manual Willis organ was installed about 1881 and identified in 1936. Its value now today would be about £25,000.

Police are investigating the theft, which was discovered when organ experts went to find if it would be possible to move it to St Andrew's Church. At first, everything appeared in order, but when they examined the rear of the swell organ they discovered that about 500 lead and tin pipes had been removed. It is thought the pipes were broken up before being loaded on to a vehicle.

St George's is no longer used as a place of worship and the organ was last played over a year ago, when the congregation moved into the church hall for services. Dry rot and structural faults in the building had made it unsafe, and it was discovered that £300,000 would be required to save it.

... when some pipes were stolen.



The old organ was destroyed in 1964...

... despite the best efforts of the fire brigade.

In 1965 Starmar Shaw bought the Willis organ and stored it in a barn in Northamptonshire. Father Hutchings and Derek Savage heard about it and encouraged the Parish to buy it in 1967 for £6,000.



Father Hutchings brought the Willis to Stony Stratford ...



... and Derek Savage first played the console in the north gallery

A new organ for a new Parish

While the organ was being installed, St Giles merged with St Mary's into the new Parish of St Mary and St Giles. The organ was celebrated at the flower festival in 1969.

For many years Bill and Nessie Bainbridge led fundraising for maintenance and for the move of the console in 1989 from the north gallery to its current position. This was done by Henry Willis IV and Parish volunteers.

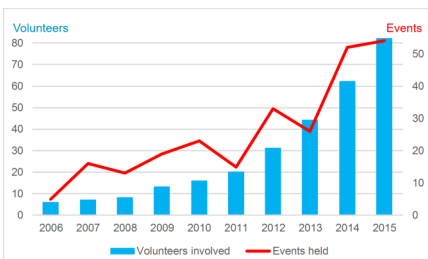


Volunteers in 1969

Lose it or restore it

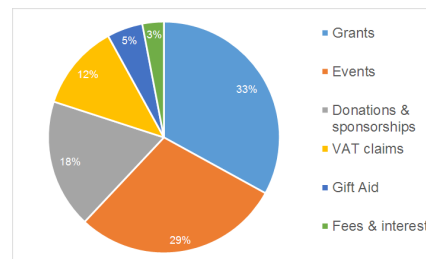
In 2004, a condition report made clear that the organ had to be fully overhauled or abandoned. The volunteer Pipe Organ Restoration Action Group (PORAG) was formed in 2006 by Anna Page and David Scrutton and by 2011 had raised funds to renovate the console.

Fundraising continued and in 2014 a major Heritage Lottery Fund grant gave fresh impetus to the project. Numbers of events and volunteers rose rapidly and the group became known as Music for All @ SMSG.



A decade of growing interest in our Willis pipe organ ...

In total, just over a quarter of a million pounds will have been raised for the organ restoration project, through over 300 events, bid-writing, donations and pipe sponsorships, VAT claims, Gift Aid, fees and interest.



... and a decade of successful fundraising for its restoration