

# The History of the 3 manual Willis Pipe Organ in St Mary & St Giles Church

**'Father' Henry Willis** (Willis I in a four-generation family of organ builders) was highly innovative in terms of both build technology and musical sound. This Willis pipe organ was built in 1882 at the height of his most productive and creative period. Over the next 50 years the pipe organ was enlarged twice by the Willis family, with further innovations developed by both Willis II and Willis III, including pneumatic and electro-pneumatic action.

The 'evolution chart' demonstrates visually the development of the organ by the Willis family, becoming larger, more complex and musically versatile over the years. Over 900 of the pipes are original Willis I; over 500 are Willis II; and over 250 are Willis III or replacements. The increase in variety of different pipes added considerably to the scope of the instrument both for accompanying choral singing and recitals.

In **1882** the original instrument was constructed by Henry Willis I for St George's Parish Church, Charlotte Square, Edinburgh, as a two manual<sup>1</sup> (Great; Swell with Pedal) 21 stop<sup>2</sup> instrument. It was mechanical (tracker) action and was placed in one of the alcoves beside the communion table. Church organs were new for Scotland and took a while to catch on particularly in the Kirk and other non-conformist churches, there is very little about the organ installation in the Kirk Session Records as it was probably handled by the choir committee and may have been as a result of a bequest to the Kirk though no record has been found to support this idea. St George's already had a very good choir tradition and a large and affluent congregation (some very influential) and a piano or harmonium would have been inadequate for accompanying the congregational singing (the church could seat 1600 people).

The first organist was Charles Bradley, appointed in October 1882. At the time the church already had a resident choirmaster, Carl Hamilton. However the two men did not get on very well and in 1885 they were both dismissed and Henry Hartley was appointed organist and choirmaster. He played occasional recitals on the Willis for the Edinburgh Bach Society.

In **1896** the organ was enlarged by Willis II to three manual (Great; Swell; Choir with Pedal), with 28 stops, divided in alcoves on either side of the communion table in St George's. The mechanism was changed to pneumatic action and the Console<sup>3</sup> was placed behind the central pulpit between the two sections. The ability to split the organ was successfully pioneered by Willis I at St Paul's Cathedral in 1872. The Willis I pipework was largely retained, with a couple of stops revoiced<sup>4</sup> and several new stops added. Three stops of the Swell pipes were moved to the new Choir section. It was referred to in the Kirk session records as 'the new organ' though in fact it was enlarged from the smaller Father Willis instrument, with the original soundboards enlarged.

In **1911** Henry Hartley died, he had been organist at St George's church for 26 years. H. Whalley was appointed organist and choirmaster in 1912.

In **1914** some minor refurbishment works were carried out but no alterations were made to the pipework. During the war years Mr Whalley was eventually called up to serve in the armed forces in 1917. In the Kirk Session records it is recorded that two honorary organists were appointed on short term contracts to cover his absence - R. F. McEwen, Esq and J. A. Fuller-Maitland, Esq. During his time at St George's Robert Finnie McEwen arranged and dedicated an anthem to the choir of St George's 'Hark how th'adoring hosts above' (for choir and organ, to the tune of London New).

In **1925** some cleaning work was carried out costing £62 - this was commissioned via Willis and carried out by Arthur Essex Ingram of Edinburgh (son of organbuilder Eustace Ingram of London). His son Arthur Dudley was later to bring the organ to Stony Stratford.

In **1932** the instrument was enlarged further by Willis III, with 4 additional stops and action added preparing for the addition of a further 4 stops. The compass of the manual stops (Great, Swell, Choir) was extended from 56 notes to 61 notes. The action was changed to electro-pneumatic, with a new electric Console installed.

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<sup>1</sup> A manual section of the organ is operated from a keyboard, while the pedal is operated by the organist's feet on the pedal board. Each manual keyboard may contain several ranks of pipes.

<sup>2</sup> A stop is a rank of pipes of a particular type of pipe, operated by a stop knob at the console to bring it into play. In this instrument the compass of the stops was 56 notes; this was extended in 1932 to 61 notes.

<sup>3</sup> The Console consists of the keyboards and pedal board and is where the organist sits to play the instrument.

<sup>4</sup> Revoicing pipes means adjusting the tone and sound to something a bit different from what it was previously. This is usually done to rebalance the overall sound depending on what additional stops have been added and the position of the pipes within the organ chamber.

In 1946 Mr Whalley died and Samuel Webster was appointed organist and choirmaster (with Mr Sunter standing in until Samuel's appointment). He resigned in 1955 and William Bowie of the Royal High School was appointed and served as the last organist and choirmaster at St George's.

In the 1950s Willis valued the organ at £12,000 (for insurance purposes, St George's were not planning to sell it at that time).

In October 1962 some of the Swell pipes were stolen while the organ was still in Edinburgh, prior to its removal as part of renovations there. St George's church had fallen into disrepair with dry rot and the congregation was unable to afford the repairs, so the building, which belongs to the Borough of Edinburgh, was later renovated and converted into West Records House. The congregation merged with St Andrew's Church in George Street, to become St Andrews and St George's Church. At the time they investigated rebuilding the St Andrew's organ (which needed some work anyway) to accommodate some of the Willis organ, however it was concluded that this would be unworkable and the Willis was too large for St Andrews church.

[John Page, who later tuned and maintained the organ from 1994-2004, noted that when tuning the swell he had noticed that one 'side'<sup>5</sup> of the swell went out of tune more readily than the other, due to a slight difference in the thickness of the pipe metal. This suggests that only half of each metal rank of pipes was stolen. When the pipes were cleaned during the 2014-2015 restoration by FH Browne & Sons, the organbuilders could tell which pipes were new and which were the original Willis pipes, though Palmers Pipes had done a very good job of integrating the new pipes into each stop.]

In 1964 a fire on Boxing Day in St Giles, Stony Stratford destroyed the old 2 manual church organ, which was about to be restored by Starmer-Shaw. At the emergency PCC meeting on 1 January 1965 it was reported that Starmer-Shaw knew of an organ which could be suitable - this was because some months before Dr Ingram had inspected the Willis organ in the closed St George's church and had expressed an interest in buying it. However the PCC was not able to commit to purchase the organ at that stage as the potential merger of the two parishes of Stony Stratford was already being discussed and at one point in 1966 there was a real chance that St Giles would be closed, however eventually it was decided to restore the bigger church and close the smaller St Mary's church.

The organ was purchased in January 1965 for £350 by Starmer-Shaw of Northamptonshire and stored in a barn in Little Horwood near Milton Keynes for 2 years (the Kirk session records show that the organ had to be removed from St George's church by the end of January 1965). Within a couple of months of its purchase the PCC minutes record that Fr Hutchings and Derek Savage the organist went to see the organ in storage and were convinced it would be suitable. According to Cyril Brown (Churchwarden at St Giles at the time) the deposit for the instrument was apparently paid personally by the Vicar of St Giles Church, Fr Cecil G. Hutchings, who understood the importance of music in worship (though this is not recorded in the PCC minutes). Other organ builders sent brochures to Fr Hutchings when they heard of the fire, and he was able to use the information in these to make a strong case for choosing the Willis organ, as a new organ would have cost more than £20,000 and he wasn't prepared to install an electronic organ.

Starmer-Shaw was owned at the time by Dr Ingram of Earls Barton, who was a member of the Ingram family of organ builders of Scotland, which how he came to know of the availability of the instrument (it wasn't the first organ which Dr Ingram brought from Edinburgh to be installed locally, as in 1962 Starmer-Shaw installed a 50 year old 2 manual Harrison & Harrison instrument in St Mary's Haversham, which came from Holy Trinity in Edinburgh). Although trained as an organ builder, Dr Ingram "didn't do any organ-building himself, but left it all to his employee Pat Malone, who used to say that he was trained at Willis' factory" (Canon Hilary Davidson, 2012). Starmer Shaw asked Palmers Pipes to replace the missing Swell pipes once he had a firm order for the instrument.

In 1967 the SMSG Parochial Church Council (PCC) decided to purchase and installed the Willis Pipe Organ in St Mary & St Giles Church, for a cost of £6,000.

St Giles was restored in 1967-1968 and became St Mary & St Giles Church (SMSG for short) as the two parishes of Stony Stratford merged. It was re-dedicated on Palm Sunday 1968. At that stage the organ was already being stored in the church (from 1967) and was being installed but was not yet playable for the re-dedication service when Fr Cavell-Northam became the new vicar of the combined parish. The installation of the organ was completed in 1969.

We have a lay person's general memories of the installation by long-time local resident, James Odell. The installation was celebrated in 1969 with four recitals in the Festival of Flowers and a recital by the organist and choristers of Christ Church, Northampton in 1970.

On comparing the 1932 specification with the 1967 specification it has become apparent that one of the Swell Stops - the Waldhorn stop, also playable from the Pedal - which Willis III said he had been added to the organ

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<sup>5</sup> Each rank of Swell pipes in this organ is arranged in 'sides' on the soundboard, the C side and the C# side. On the C side is C, D, E, F#, G#, A#, C etc, while the C# side has C#, D#, F, G, A, B and C# etc. The soundboard is the wind chest action which provides air to the individual pipes when the keys on the console are operated.

in 1932 was also not replaced after the theft at St Georges in 1962. If this stop was in the organ, it was not placed inside the Swell box as this was not enlarged to accommodate it and the soundboard for the Waldhorn has not survived. The organ action was not altered when it was installed in St Mary & St Giles church.

The Console was originally positioned in the North gallery to allow the organist to hear the instrument, however this made it impossible to get the back panel off the console to reach the action and the cold north wall caused problems for the console electrics, which included the 1932 cloth bound cables.

The SMSG PCC minutes show that there was an outstanding bill for the organ in 1970 of £1,000. The records show that £750 was paid in December 1970, leaving £250 outstanding. There is no subsequent mention showing this was paid off, though there is also nothing to indicate that Starmer-Shaw chased the debt, so it was probably settled without coming to the PCC meeting as Starmer-Shaw continued to tune the organ (even though the PCC minutes in September 1970 recorded that Derek Savage would investigate other options for tuning as the PCC was 'far from satisfied with Starmer-Shaw'). Starmer-Shaw eventually lost the tuning contract in 1984. The organ was tuned for a while by a 'Bletchley man' - this may have been Kenneth Breedon whose name was mentioned in the PCC minutes from this time. It became apparent that the console against the north wall was not working well and Henry Willis IV provided a report recommending that the console be moved to the choir gallery. A fundraising group was formed (led by Mr and Mrs Bainbridge).

In **1989** Willis IV repositioned the console in the West gallery between the two halves of the instrument, where it currently stands, the parish had raised more than £3,000 to strengthen the choir gallery and overhaul the console when it was moved, though it still retained most of the 1932 wiring. Since that time, the PCC funded routine repairs (from the funds generated by local people who wanted to keep the organ playing), engaging local organ builders to tune and maintain the organ.

In **1993** John Page, an organ builder and parishioner was given the tuning contract and did various maintenance jobs to keep the organ playable from 1995-2001, details of which can be found in a separate document.

On 14 September 2003 Derek Savage died of stomach cancer, he had been organist at the church since December 1955. The new organist appointed was Donald Mackenzie.

In **2004** the tuning contract was given to Richard Pawlyn. Later that year the PCC invited Ian Bell, an independent organ advisor, to undertake a Condition Survey, to understand the restoration work required.

The PCC continued to have the organ tuned and maintained, but its condition deteriorated with age, as it became increasingly unreliable in action and the tone had dulled over time due to a build-up of grime on the pipework.

Therefore in **2006** the PCC decided that the time had come to identify funding sources for a complete and thorough overhaul, since piecemeal repairs would in the long run be more costly and provide a less satisfactory result.

The PCC supported the development of a volunteer Pipe Organ Restoration Action Group (PORAG for short) in the context of 'Music at St Mary and St Giles' ('Music at SMSG' for short) with a dual remit to raise awareness of the organ and raise funds for its restoration. The support for these events, and the public funds raised as a result are testimony to the interest in, and support for, the organ in the local area.

As a result of volunteer fundraising effort, the PCC was able to commission the complete overhaul and restoration of the console and replacement of the electrics with new modern electrics, as a pre-requisite of restoration of the pipework and pipe action. This work was carried out during **2011**, by F Browne & Sons Ltd of Kent.

In February **2014** the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded a grant of £82,700 to the 'Willis Pipe Organ Restoration and Reach-out Project' (2014-2017). This funds the education and outreach activities of the project and enabled the commissioning of the work on the organ. The project started in April 2014; the organ restoration started in late May 2014 and was completed in mid December 2015 by FH Browne & Sons Ltd. It first played for a service on 22 November 2015 which happened to be the patron Saint of Music St Cecilia Day with the new pipes fitted in middle of December, just in time for Christmas 2015. 4 months of settling in followed before the Inaugural Concerts on 24 April 2016 (choral), 30 April 2016 (organ solo) and 2 July 2016 (orchestral). A variety of other concerts and the Organ Festival in September 2016 followed. The organ is being used in concerts to celebrate Milton Keynes' 50<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2017, including the #MK50 Community Gala Concert on 28 January 2017. Part of the project involved researching the history of the instrument and its use both in Edinburgh and in Stony Stratford, with the results of the research used in the Education and Learning resources strand of the project and displayed at the Community Music programme events 'Music for all @ SMSG'.

As part of the restoration, the specification intended by Willis III was completed (the addition of Tierce, Nazard and Piccolo on the Choir, 12 Viol pipes in the Pedal section and replacement of the stolen Waldhorn). New casework was designed for the organ. Neither the missing pipes nor the casework were included in the Heritage Lottery grant, so fundraising (including a pipe sponsorship scheme) continues to fund this and ongoing maintenance of the instrument.