

# Priory Church St. Peter

## History of the Organs

By Tom McKeand, with additions by Hugh Garrod

The first recorded organ at the Priory was built in approximately 1780 on the West gallery (now gone) at about the same time as the gallery. This was replaced in about 1840 by another small organ on the West gallery. This was a small organ “of surprising power for its appearance and beautiful tone and was so exquisitely played by Mr. Gresham that persons have been attracted from London to hear it.” (*Historical & Topographical Notices of Dunstable* by J.D. Parry, *Gentlemen’s Magazine* Vol. 24 (1845) p479). One of the many changes to the church made during the Victorian age was the demolition of the gallery and the moving of the organ to the current North aisle position. This move was effected in 1892 by Nicholson organ builders for £291-5-0. The money for this was raised by subscription over several years. This organ was powered by manual blowers.

This organ remained for many years until 1912 when it was decided the instrument was outdated. The meeting to discuss the future of the old organ was held in the national School, now the Church hall. The old organ was so broken down that the organist had to make do with a piano. Two builders were approached, J.J Binns (Leeds) and Norman & Beard (London and Norwich), the contract was awarded to Norman & Beard. Some pipes from the 1840 instrument were used in the 1913 instrument. The rest of it was used in the building of a new organ at St. Thomas, Hove (This church has since become a Coptic Orthodox Church and the organ removed), this generated another £150 for the organ fund. Many fund raising events were held in the eighteen months before the dedication, including a Garden Fete at Tower House, hosted by Councillor JT Dale. Many local people joined a subscription list. Millionaire Andrew Carnegie also contributed £365 to the fund. The Norman and Beard organ cost £1000 and further money for installation and tuning.

On October 7<sup>th</sup> 1913, a man called at the house of Edgar Franklin, the churchwarden, in Church Street, He asked for the keys to the church as he wished to see inside. Mr. Franklin replied that the church was open as Harold Deacon, the organist, was inside practising on the new organ. The man went to the church but could not get inside, as Mr Deacon had locked himself inside. A little later Mr. Deacon reported, in great agitation, to Mr. Franklin that the visitor had climbed down a ladder into the engine chamber of the organ and was attempting to sabotage the machinery. The police were summoned and the man was eventually committed to the Tree Counties Asylum, in Arlesey.

The work was completed on time for it to be dedicated by Frederick Chase, Bishop of Ely, on the afternoon of Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> October, the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the church. The Mayor and the Council, ministers from other Dunstable churches and clergy from neighbouring parishes were invited. The church was full and beautifully decorated with flowers. The church was full again next day when the Rector, Canon WWC Baker, conducted the Communion service. The following Sunday was harvest Festival. In 1926 when electricity came to Dunstable the gas engine was replaced by an electric blower. Little work was carried out on the organ for many years.

At some stage in the instrument’s history between its construction in 1913 and 1983 the Choir orchestral oboe (8) was substituted for a Nasat ( $2\frac{2}{3}$ ).

By 1983 the instrument was regularly breaking down or failing in some aspect. There were several choices on offer; to raise the amount needed for a complete rebuild, to have the organ rebuilt as a smaller instrument or to have it replaced with an electronic organ. Fortunately voting was in favour of a complete rebuild with additions, 4 organ builders were asked for quotes: Bowen Organs (Northampton), Brian H. Bunting (Epping), Peter Wood (Thaxted) and Keith S. Bance (Harrow). The Brian Bunting quote was accepted and in mid 1984 work began. During the rebuild a part of the organ was usable for services. The main results of this rebuild were the addition of a detached console on the South side of the quire and the change to electric action. Other work included the transposition from French Diapason pitch to the standard A=440Hz, a second-hand 'Discus' electric blower was also fitted to replace the elderly electric blower.