

The History of the Organ in St. Aidan's Cathedral

History of the Instrument:

From research on this topic it would seem that the first organ was installed in the Cathedral by Messers John White and Son of York Street, Dublin. He was a pupil of French organ builder Aristide Cavallé-Coll, “whose work was a catalyst for the emergence of the 19th century French symphonic school of organ composition.”¹

In February 1894 a new three manual Telford organ was installed by Messers Telford & Telford of 109 St. Stephen's Green Dublin, 50 years after the Cathedral was built.² The then administrator stated that it looked stunning and was a big improvement on what was there previously.



Figure 1: The Telford Organ, courtesy of Mr Ibar Carty from the Creane Collection

¹ <http://www.fuaimlaoi.com/index.php/about/the-organ>

² http://search.findmypast.co.uk/search/irish-newspapers?date=1894-02-06&date_offsetdate=1894-02-06&page=8

The People Newspaper gave a substantial report on this installation in its publication on Wednesday February 7th 1894. According to The People Newspaper, the organ was installed in the west gallery and stood at a proud 23 feet wide, 26 feet high, had three manuals, 40 stops and 1,986 pipes.³ The project of providing a new organ was initiated in June 1893 by the Cathedral Administrator and the Most Rev. Dr. Browne, the then Bishop of Ferns. Canon Furlong was noted as saying that it was with laudable pride that the church in which he worships “possesses an instrument ranking as one of the largest in this country and not surpassed by many”.⁴ The People Newspaper also reported that the new organ is placed 6th/7th on a list of best Irish organs. It was also at this time that the staircase to the organ gallery was altered to make access easier.

It also describes the organ as being most beautiful in tone and quality of sound with particular mention being given to the Vox Humana and Clarinet stops. It further notes that a 32 foot pedal tone is possible by combining the Quint 10 ½ and 16 foot pedals.

On the 4th February 1894 there were great celebrations to mark the installation of the new organ with formal blessings. A morning and evening service was held with splendid music provided by the Cathedral Choir, soloists and the then organist Mr. Augustine. Fitzgerald. The Cathedral was packed to capacity for these services and attended by many clergy, local people and even Protestants. Everyone spoke with great affection for the new organ and it was said that the Cathedral was now complete, fifty years after being built.

However, sometime between 1936 and 1945, a major decision was taken to modify the organ by splitting it in two. This was done so as the spectacular west facing stained glass window, the rose window, could be seen for all its glory by everyone in the Cathedral. This also meant, however, that the organ gallery could now accommodate a large choir even if it wasn't going to be correctly stepped out for one. It was discovered from parish records that in 1986 plans were drawn up by Sheridan Tierney & Associates Architects, Enniscorthy & Blackrock, for remodelling of the gallery to better suit a choir. It was commissioned by then administrator, Rev. Fr. Eustace, and came in at £4,620. For whatever reason these plans never came to fruition.

³ The People Newspaper, Feb. 1894

⁴ The People Newspaper, Feb. 1894



Figure 2: The organ today



Figure 3: The organ galley today

The major disadvantage was that it was to create a litany of problems with the organ itself; after all it was never designed to be split in two. Henry Willis & Sons Ltd of 34 Marlborough Grove, Old Kent Road, London and also of Main Street, Donnybrook, Dublin were responsible with the maintenance of the organ at this time. In April 1958 an organ tuning contract was signed between the then Administrator, Rev. Joseph Ransom and Willis & Sons Ltd. It stated that they would carry out two visits per year costing 14 guineas. In February 1958 they carried out a report on the organ stating that dust and grit were having an adverse effect on the speech and pipes of the organ and the action and that there was an infestation of woodworm. The cleaning and overhaul of the organ began in October 1966 with all pipes being removed, cleaned and repaired in their Dublin premises. This cost £1,204:16:8

The original Telford organ was designed for a large space. Now the pipes had to be remodelled and reshaped to fit into spaces they were never designed to fit, which meant attempting to produce a sound from a cramped space. The legacy of this proved to be a poor one with the organ going into decay and the Cathedral losing the splendid sound of the original Telford organ.

The Irish Organ Company (established 1956), based in Belfast and Dublin, was given the task of carrying out more work on the organ in the early 1980's. The previous organist, Ms Mary Baker, remembers the entire organ being lifted down from the organ gallery with ropes and been sent to the Irish Organ Company in Belfast for remodelling and refurbishment. In January 1981 they reported that the organ was in a very poor condition due to its pneumatic system which was at the end of its life. It also stated the organ requires to be rebuilt using new modern electric type action. They completed their work in March 1983 at a total cost of £22,450. In March 1982 the new two manual console was installed in front of the altar, see figures 4 & 5 below. It cost £2,750 and 2/3 of the organ was playable from here.



Figure 4: Two Manual Console

Figure 5 shows the manuals and stops of this console. When compared with figure 9 below, which shows the manuals and stop of the organ on the gallery, it can be seen that the console is smaller in its availability of stops but is sufficient for its needs at the present time.



Figure 5: Two Manual Console

Pipes were placed underground connecting this console with the pipes on the organ gallery. This provides ease of playing for when soloists/cantors are singing at the ambo for mass and other services. Obviously since the sound is actually coming from the gallery, there is a time delay between when the organist presses a key on one of the manuals on the console and the message travels up to the gallery and then the sound comes back down. It is for this reason that some organists dislike playing the console. It makes it particularly difficult when playing music which is very fast.

Perhaps another reason for doing this was due to the size and length of the Cathedral. This is supported by the fact that back in 1994 when the Cathedral was redecorated to its original manner as pre Vatican Council II, the then administrator, organist and choir master toyed with the idea of installing an organ in one of the transepts. This idea was also being investigated as the organ was falling into disrepair. Having a console near the top of the church also helped provide organ accompaniment for choirs singing behind the altar as it is extremely difficult for an organist, playing on the organ gallery, to accompany a choir singing from behind the altar due to the time delay. For the organist it is akin to being pulled in two.

Originally the Telford organ was mechanical in action. It was subsequently changed to an electro-pneumatic action sometime in the 1960's.



Figure 9: Electro-Pneumatic Action Organ in the Cathedral

The Organists House:

From information gathered from the late Paddy Murphy's wife, who was a previous organist, it was discovered that originally organists of the parish were given a house to live in. It was commonly known as "the organist's house". It was located on Convent Road and the name on the house was "Rosemount". Originally it was the residence of a former Bishop of Ferns. It is only known for certain that both Sir Henry Grattan Flood and Mr Paddy Murphy, (both RIP) lived in it. She described the house as being small, dreary and damp. However it was conveniently located for the Cathedral so that the organist was always close at hand for services and masses. The house was of course provided rent free by the parish which was in turn part-payment for the organist. Back in those days the organist would play at all the weekend masses, the boys and girls confraternity during weekday evenings and sometimes at weekday masses, unlike today where the demand for organ music has decreased with the rise in popularity of folk groups and soloist providing their own accompaniment in the form of guitar/piano.

Documenting the Problems of the Organ:

Over the years the organists that have been assigned to the Cathedral have had to endure a litany of problems with this wonderful instrument. In 1989 the then organist, Ms Antionette Baker, began a log book for organists to enter problems they encountered when they played the instrument.

This book is full of comments from many organists over the years and it is still in use today. One comment that stands out is from a visiting organist in June 1998. It reads: “Enjoyed playing in this beautiful church for a wedding of a close friend. Such a pity the organ is in an advanced stage of decay”.

Over the years different people have been responsible for repairing the organ and attempting to keep the instrument in a playable manner. The most recent is Mr Stephen Adams, an accomplished organist and organ builder from Tullow, Co Carlow. His predecessor, Mr Alfie Taylor, reported in 1998 that the organ was in need of major work. In 2001, the year Stephen Adams began looking after the organ, it was discovered that the blower, which powers air through the pipes so they sound, was facing in the wrong direction. Once he repositioned it, instantly major improvements occurred and many previous recurring problems now disappeared. Another potential problem was discovered in October 2010. Each year when Stephen Adams carried out his annual tuning/check-up of the instrument he would get an electric shock. When this was investigated by himself and the Cathedral’s electrician, it was discovered that the “wiring was lethal”. The electrician stated that the blower was incorrectly earthed thus resulting in hundreds of volts of electricity travelling through the organ system. But despite this the organ was still safe to play. The problem was rectified immediately.

Quality of Sound and the Future:

As it stands today the organ itself is only a fair instrument and does not live up to the standard of a Cathedral of this size. Neither does it compare with organs in Cathedrals in surrounding dioceses. Some of the stops are out of tune and problems are still occurring, many of which can now only be maintained and not remedied. The Quint 10 ½ pedal stop no longer works, the reed stops are constantly going out of tune almost immediately after being tuned, the Choir manual stops are all out of tune and cannot be tuned any better and one stop is also missing. On the Swell manual the Lieblich 8 foot stop has to be constantly left in the on position when the organ is turned on so as to avoid other complications. The swell pedal

only partly works in that it can only be used as fully open or fully closed and not gradually opened or closed. Some of the notes for the pedal stops do not sound and are so called “dumb notes” and this is also the case when using some stops on the swell manual. When Stephen Adams was consulted for his opinion of the current condition of the organ he stated that it is ok but some of the problems which are occurring can only be maintained and not fixed. He indicated that he is anxious to find a long-term solution to the instrument. He also stated that the tone of the organ is not adequate but that it cannot be improved. The organ is also not tuned to concert pitch and neither can it be.

In 2001, Stephen Adams refurbished the organ at a cost of €29,000, doing the best possible job he could, given the modifications made to the instrument over previous years. He ensured that the organ would be as trouble free as possible for at least ten more years and sound as melodic as possible. Professor Gerard Gillen, Professor Emeritus in Music at the National University of Ireland and Titular Organist of St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral Dublin, stated that “it wasn’t a great organ”, and the sound was “very harsh” with the tone of some stops not sounding very good. However, he strongly acknowledged the great work that Stephen Adams had done on the instrument stating that he had done as much as he could have given its condition.

It is now 13 years since Stephen Adams completed his work on the organ. It was for that reason and taking the above issues into account, along with many discussions on this, that the parish decided it would begin fundraising for either a new organ or to carry out more work on the existing organ. The hope is to have a new organ in place by 2017 or to at least have begun work on the present instrument. The parish is currently carrying out a number of fundraising events to raise money for this fund. Each year the parish produces its own Christmas cards with all proceeds going to the organ fund. They also hold an annual Christmas concert featuring local artists. Some parishioners have also made individual donations. Since beginning fundraising back in 2012, the parish have raised just over €20,000. The parish are actively planning for the future and hope to soon have a most splendid sounding organ in the Cathedral which will compare with the quality of sound of organs in other Cathedrals.

Organists Past and Present:

It has been difficult to compile a correct list of all organists of the Cathedral from the time an organist was first required up to the present day due to a lack of records being maintained in the past and preserved for the future. Based on information gathered from local sources and a book, the following is a list of past organists of the Cathedral and their associated dates (where possible).

1. A Presentation Sister
1. Mr. Augustine Fitzgerald
2. Mr. Joseph Sullivan
3. Signor Revelli
4. Mr. Patrick Gerathy
5. The Murdock's (2 sisters)
6. Sir W.H. Grattan Flood: Organist, Choirmaster, Composer (1895 – 1928)
7. Ms. Kathleen Flood (daughter of Sir W.H. Grattan Flood): Organist and Choirmaster (1928 – 1957)
8. Mr. Paddy Murphy: Organist and Choirmaster (1957 - 1984)
9. Ms. Antionette Baker: Organist (1984 - 1989)
10. Ms. Mary Baker: Organist (1989 - 2007)
11. Ms. Ann Ringwood: Part-time Organist
12. Mr. Adrian Doyle: Organist (2007 - Present)⁵

⁵ *Enniscorthy 1846-1946: Souvenir of Consecration and Centenary of St. Aidan's Cathedral*