



RESTORATION OF FORDE ABBEY'S UNIQUE ORGAN COMPLETE IN TIME FOR CHRISTMAS

A ten year programme of repair and restoration to the unique chamber organ in the Chapel at Forde Abbey, near Chard in Somerset, has been completed, and new information has just been uncovered about its history.

Organ restorer and builder Andrew Fearn of father and son team T.W. Organ Builders from Honiton have been undertaking painstaking work on the organ since 1995. The 18th century organ is the only known example of the work of Samuel Gillespie, an instrument maker in London between 1769 and 1774. It is also remarkable because of its highly decorative Cuban mahogany case, built in the flamboyant 'Strawberry Hill Gothic' style which was briefly popular in the mid 18th century, full of carvings and finials and inlaid with parquetry. Smaller chamber organs such as this one were designed for domestic settings and the design of their cases has always followed prevailing fashion - it reflected the fine, up to date tastes of its owner.

It is thought that the radical philosopher Jeremy Bentham played the organ when he leased the Abbey from the last of the Gwyns in 1815, at which point it was apparently housed in the Saloon. In fact, it was researches for this article which brought to light the fact that it had been included as part of the contents of the Saloon in the great sale of 1846. It was quite common for such an instrument to act as a conversation piece in a reception room like the Saloon. Alice Kennard, a member of the owning family at Forde Abbey who uncovered the information says, "The Sale Catalogue describes it as 'an excellent and fine-toned finger organ, by S. Gillespie, with 10 stops' and it apparently sold for 28 pounds and 10 shillings (£28/10/0), a quite considerable sum of money. We can only assume that this is the same organ and that the Bristol merchant, Mr Miles, who bought the house and lands from the estate at the same time, bought it to remain in the house and he moved it to the Chapel. We have Mr Miles to thank for the fact that it is still here at Forde Abbey."

Restoration of the organ was done 'in situ', and began in 1995 with cleaning and treatment for woodworm. This was followed by work on the keyboard, soundboard and mechanical action, which had suffered from damp after a flood in the Chapel.

Since then, extensive restoration and repair work has been done on the casework and pipes. Missing decoration has been replaced and damage repaired, and the bleaching caused by the

strong light from Thomas Chard's wonderful East window has been treated and colour blended. The original gilding on the dummy pipes in the case had deteriorated badly, and they have now been regilded with new gold leaf. The organ's unusual wooden pipes are still in place, though some of the smaller ones have been replaced at some point with metal.

The organ is played at services in the Chapel, and every year at Forde Abbey's candle-lit Christmas Service of Nine Lessons and Carols. This year it will be resplendent in its newly restored finery, as well as in very good voice.

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For Editors:

For more information on this event please contact Hannah Galvin on 01460 220231 or at hannah@fordeabbey.co.uk

Forde Abbey

Gardens Open daily throughout the year 10.00 am - 4.30pm

House Open 12 noon – 4pm Tues-Fri, Sun & Bank Hols, 1st April – end Oct

Until the 17th December there is free entry to the gardens, gift shop and tearoom