

St. Mary's Church, Saffron Walden Assistant Organist

Background Information

St. Mary the Virgin, Saffron Walden is the principal church in a team spanning Saffron Walden and eleven villages. The Team Rector is based at St Mary's; in the team, there are also three vicars, an associate priest, two curates and a reader, and five retired clergy offer help with services. Each church looks after its own music requirements but the churches come together from time to time for joint services.

WORSHIP

The Choirs

There is a strong choral tradition at St. Mary's and a great range of musical talent within the congregation, both instrumentalists and singers. We have a large, thriving, and accomplished robed adult choir with 46 members, many of whom are also involved in many other aspects of church life. The junior choir, also robed, currently has 15 members. They use the RSCM Ribbon Tests to achieve seniority and experience; members are paid for attendance at Friday practices and Sunday services, and for singing at wedding services. The choir is affiliated to the Royal School of Church Music. A number of past members have gone on to a professional music career.

The choirs and organ, and occasionally a solo instrument, normally lead the worship at the Sunday 10.00 am Holy Communion. The music is a mixture of traditional and modern hymns and sung settings (both congregational and choir only); a communion motet is also sung at this service. Choral Evensong takes place once a month and at major festivals. The Advent and Christmas carol services are high points for the choirs, and the adult choir also sings at occasional weekday Choral Eucharists (eg on Ash Wednesday, Corpus Christi, and Ascension Day). The combined choirs perform a major choral work as a devotional offering on Good Friday (in 2011, Duruflé Requiem). In addition, St Mary's is the civic church of Saffron Walden, and, as such, plays host to a small number of civic services throughout the year.

Monthly Family Services are more informal with the worship led by a small singing group and keyboard or grand piano; at present, the Assistant Organist plays no part in the music of the Family Service, although his or her interest and/or input would be welcomed in the future.

Choir practice is on a Friday night, starting with the Junior Choir at 6pm and continuing with joint and then adult rehearsals until 9.00 pm. Members arrive at 9.30am on Sundays for a warm-up before the morning service and an hour before evening services. Rehearsals for the major events (eg the carol services and the devotional offering) are scheduled separately.

In addition to St. Mary's commitments, the whole choir is occasionally invited to sing evensong or a concert at a village church in the Team Ministry. It makes one or two visits a year to cathedrals or other places of worship to sing the Eucharist and/or Evensong and occasionally a concert; these have, albeit rarely, taken the form of a week-end away. In May 2011, the choirs led a high-profile fundraising event 'Come and Sing Messiah' with great success, and plans are under way for another 'Come and Sing' concert in October 2012. In May 2012 both choirs travel to Hamburg to sing with a German Choir.

A Choral Scholarship scheme was established in 2011 to encourage local teenagers to sing at St Mary's - at present there are seven choral scholars and there are plans for the choral scholars to form their own choir in due course. It is intended that a 'pre-junior choir aimed at 6 – 8 years olds will commence from April 2012.

The choirs take a break during August.

The organ

The organ has four manuals with five divisions including an en-chamade Trompeta Real plus a substantial pedal department including a Trompeta Magna 16 and digital 32 foot reed. It is the largest in the diocese and can cover virtually every genre of music. It was rebuilt in the early 1970s by Hill, Norman, and Beard and restored with new solid-state action fourteen years ago by David Wells of Liverpool. The organ is maintained by Peter De Vile, professional organ builder and tuner, who is a member of the choir.

St. Mary's Music Association

The St. Mary's Music Association provides practical, administrative, and financial support to the Director of Music. It also provides a bursary for young musicians and has assisted several organ scholars in recent years. The SMMA holds its own concerts and social events, and funds raised from these are used to buy choir music and provide other support to the Director.

OTHER MUSICAL ACTIVITIES

Several adults and juniors are also involved in instrumental groups. The Brass Group, currently conducted by the Director of Music, has 17 members; there is a good mix of ages in the band and, for some members, it is their only contact with St Mary's. It plays at the Christmas carol service and occasionally at other festivals, and other performing opportunities have included the united march of witness on Good Friday in the Market Square, carols with the choir at Tesco's, and church fairs and concerts, both in St. Mary's and elsewhere. In the past, there have also been woodwind and string groups based on St. Mary's, but currently neither meets regularly.

Each summer there is a series of lunchtime concerts and organ recitals with recitalists including church members, young musicians from local schools, young emerging professionals, students from the Royal College of Music, and prominent visiting organists.

A number of recordings of music at St. Mary's have been made over the years

GENERAL

Saffron Walden is a market town in the north-west corner of Essex with between 15,000 and 16,000 inhabitants. The town is the focal point for day-to-day shopping and commerce for the surrounding villages. It has a strong Quaker heritage and, although the town has expanded in recent years, it still retains its charm, and its medieval buildings are often featured in magazine articles. Further expansion is likely as a result of possible enlargement of Stansted Airport and government housing policy.

Travel links: There are good mainline rail links from Audley End (four miles) to London Liverpool Street in the South and to the North via Cambridge. London is one hour away. Despite Stansted airport being less than thirty minutes drive away, there is little or no disturbance from aircraft noise. Journey time to Cambridge by road is half an hour outside rush-hour times.

Education: There are four state junior schools in the town. The comprehensive Saffron Walden County High School enjoys a very good reputation. In addition there are two independent schools, Dame Bradbury's (primary), and the Friends School (primary and secondary). A significant number of children also attend the secondary comprehensive, Newport Free Grammar, some four miles from the town in the village of Newport; this school also has a good reputation.

Cultural and Sporting interests are catered for by a large number of active societies and clubs in the town.

December 2011