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JOHN THOMAS FRYE organist 1820 – 1884

Many people will remember Cyril Coe, who served as assistant organist at St Mary's from 1947 until 2006, as recorded on a plaque above the entrance to the organ loft. Could anyone beat Cyril's service of 59 years?

The answer is Yes. The most easterly stained glass window in the North aisle is dedicated to the memory of John Thomas Frye, who was organist of St Mary's for 64 years from 1820 to 1884. According to Ken Dixon's history of the church, Frye became organist of the church at the age of 8, after an open audition. His tender age is borne out by the nineteenth-century census returns for Saffron Walden, which suggest a date of birth in 1811 or 1812.

Frye was clearly a musical prodigy, but his application for the post of church organist would very likely have been helped by his family connections with the church and town. Frye's father was Thomas Frye, a schoolmaster (possibly master of the Grammar School), who was also Treasurer of the Borough of Saffron Walden from 1836 to 1850, and a churchwarden at St Mary's for many years, including around the time of his son's appointment. John Thomas Frye himself was not only the church organist. He described himself in later censuses as a professor of music, and would no doubt have had pupils who brought him in a regular income. When his father retired as Borough Treasurer in 1850, he took on this post which he held until his death in 1887. He married the daughter of the Revd Nicholas Bull, vicar of the parish for 40 years from 1804 to 1844 (also commemorated in a monumental inscription on the north wall). The Fryes, father and son, come across very much as pillars of the Established Church.

The inscription at the foot of the stained glass window reads as follows: "In memory of John Thomas Frye, organist of this church from 1820 to 1884, this window was presented by his relatives and friends AD 1888. Let the people praise thee, O God; yea, let all the people praise thee." The main lights of the window are occupied by figures playing various musical instruments, named as Chenaniah, Heman, Jeduthun, and Asaph. These obscure biblical characters all had musical connections from the time of King David. Chenaniah is mentioned twice in 1 Chronicles 15 as master of the song under David. In the same chapter Heman and Asaph are mentioned as players of the cymbals. Heman and Jeduthun were appointed by David as singers and players of instruments in 1 Chronicles 16. These two along with Asaph are mentioned as musicians in 2 Chronicles 5, and all three are credited with the authorship of some of the Psalms.

John Thomas Frye would, I am sure, have been delighted to see that the musical tradition at St Mary's continues to this day with the choir thriving under the leadership of the present Director of Music, Ollie King.

John Read