

St Mary of the Isle, Douglas



Gt: 8,8,8,8,4,4,2 Sw: 8,8,8,4,3,8,8 Ped: 16,8.

The Catholic Church of St Mary of the Isle in Douglas is one of the Island's most striking buildings, and its impressively lofty interior results in, arguably, the best acoustics to be found anywhere. Prominent in its spacious west gallery is the pipe organ, restored in 2006 by Peter Jones. The instrument has been in its present home for almost 100 years, but its story holds some surprises and still a few secrets which have yet to be resolved.

Tradition has it that it came originally from the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, and that its builders were the well-known firm of Gray and Davison. The discovery of an address label, glued to the inside of one of the casework panels, seemed to confirm this. (These address labels are sometimes found inside old organs, and date from the time when the instrument would have been packed for removal, and its case parts bundled together with directions pasted on



organ was brought from St Francis Xavier's College in Liverpool and erected in this church by Gray and Davison, Organ Builders, London and Liverpool. R.Johnson and A.Powell put up this organ. During the time we were here, there was an election of members of the House of Keys. 14.11.13.'

St Francis Xavier's College (founded in the 1840s as one of the first Catholic boy's secondary schools) still exists, but moved from its original buildings in the 1960s. The old school buildings are now used by Liverpool Hope University. The original school hall (the Great Hall) where the organ would have been sited has been divided by a floor to form an upper and lower storey. However, research by Brother James, one of the music staff at the present school, revealed a reference, in the school magazine for 1884, to discussions to raise £1,000.00, to endow a suitable memorial to the

the top of the pile, for the benefit of the carriers). In this instance, the message reads: 'Rev.A.Kennedy, Douglas, Isle of Man, via Liverpool. From Browne and Son, Organ Builders, 49 Camden Street – Factory, Grantham Place, Dublin.'

A list of clergy, on a board inside the church, shows that a Rev Kennedy was present at St Mary's during the 1870s, which suggests that the organ was second-hand at that time, and must therefore be rather older than anyone had previously thought. However, as the cleaning and repairing work progressed, and more of the instrument was dismantled, a second message appeared, in a part of the mechanism which would only see the light of day on those rare occasions when a thorough renovation or removal was in progress. Written in pencil by one of the organ builders who assembled the organ at St Mary's it reads: 'November, 1913 This

late Father James Harris, S J, who had died the previous year. Fr Harris was the 'Prefect of Studies' at the College, and it was initially suggested that money be raised to endow scholarships in his name. One year later, the same magazine carries an account of alterations and improvements to part of the school buildings, including a 'new' organ, 'The Harris Memorial Organ' to be erected on a gallery at the front of the hall. The stop list of the organ is given, showing this to be basically the same as the organ in St Mary's, today.

It is understandable that we think of our own time as more significant than the past, and lose an appreciation of how much life has altered in over 100 years. The school magazine for 1885 makes mention of the concerns of the day, some of which we would now find surprising. For example, under the heading of 'School Notices' it is

reported, 'The dinners for the poorest of the poor children attending the school have been re-commenced. The children seem poorer than ever, and therefore more hungry. So far, because subscriptions in money and kind have not been as plentiful as last year, we have been able to give dinners to 100 children on three days of the week only, but the children's pinched looks tell a tale of want that would excite compassion in any heart, and we hope for an abundant supply, so that we may double or even treble the numbers of dinners at present being given.' Such days are now long gone, but it is interesting to think that the organ in St Mary's, like most of our Island instruments, was standing and being played in those far-off days. Such an instrument is a direct link to the past, and forms a valuable part of our heritage.

The organ remained at the school for some 24 years, being taken out in 1909, but a number of questions remain unanswered. The reasons that led to its removal after so short a period are presently unknown. (Perhaps it was too small?). Nor is there any explanation for the delay of 3 or 4 years in placing it in St Mary's. It seems safe to assume, however, that Gray and Davison, whilst they may or may not have built it, altered the instrument, giving it 2 additional stops and a new console when they moved it to the Island in 1913. The reference in the 1885 school magazine states that the new organ was 'purchased' but not from which builder. This is unusual, in that it suggests the instrument already existed, rather than the usual form of wording at that time, which would have been that an organ was 'being built by' such and such an organ





(which shares the gallery with the organ) was sitting on chairs resting on the 2 soundboards of a previous organ. Possibly this is what happened to the instrument from Dublin, when, in 1913, the 'new' organ from St Francis Xavier was altered and fitted into the casework of the older instrument.

After its installation, the organ received basic tuning and maintenance, with the now defunct firm of Rushworth and Dreaper carrying out some limited remedial work, and fitting a new blower in 1970. By 2005, the instrument, though still working, was choked with dust and dirt, and its pipework was in a rather sorry state, after at least 120 years service. The church authorities took the decision to commission a complete cleaning and overhaul. Every one of the 778 pipes was removed and individually cleaned and

builder, to the designs of whichever prominent local musician was acting as consultant. This doubt leaves open the possibility that the instrument was second hand in 1885, and might therefore be older than 122 years.

The address label inside the case panel is also a mystery, though this may be explained by a recollection of Peter Jones, who remembers being surprised to discover, some 20 years or more ago, that the choir

repaired, whilst the mechanism has also been cleaned and renovated. Following this, many weeks were spent in the church, balancing the speech and volume of each pipe to fit its position within the overall sound of the organ, and the acoustics of the building. The result is an instrument which has one of the finest sounds of any on the Island, capable of leading the congregational singing and worthy of the church's dedicated choir.