

The Lost Organs of Llanthony Abbey

The Abbey Church of Our Ladye and Saint David at Llanthony Tertia now lies in ruins; a metaphor, perhaps, for the state of the Anglican Church in this age. Having constructed the monastery buildings it was unfortunate that Fr Ignatius was unable to complete the church itself. However, it was fitted-out with all that was necessary for the fullest ceremonial that Ignatius could devise or imagine.

In all that has been written about the abbey and its services, by Ignatius or others, several references are made to the organ. For example, in 'Llanthony Teachings' of 1890 Ignatius writes about the daily life of the abbey, '...Prime is solemnly sung daily with the great organ at 5...'. Another mention of it is made by Peter Anson in, 'Building up the Waste Places' p. 119, 'The mighty organ stood in the centre of the gallery, beneath which was a screen. The door in the middle was trellised...' and in 'Father Ignatius of Llanthony' (1931) p.43, Donald Attwater describes the interior of the church writing, 'The great organ, on which Father Ignatius so loved to perform, was also in this gallery, above the returned stalls.'

More often than not any mention of the organ is made in conjunction with some liturgical action taking place below in the church itself. 'The mighty organ', 'a great swell from the organ' and other such emotive descriptions give an impression of a great, grand organ indeed. But what of it? With the church in ruins, where is it now?

This article will attempt to trace the history and design of the organs at Llanthony Tertia and in doing so perhaps draw forth some nugget of information that someone may have to help us trace their eventual fate which is, at present, unknown.

I have now made mention of the *organs* at the abbey and this is indeed correct. In 1869 when Ignatius and his monks came to live at the monastery the buildings were not yet complete. By 1871 they were habitable and a chapel was created where the community could worship.

At their former home, the Abbey at Elm Hill in Norwich, an organ had been installed in the chapel there. It had been built by Gray & Davison, the well known organ building firm from London. In their Account Ledger 07 page 218 for the Benedictine Monastery, Norwich an order is recorded:

1864.	The Rev'd Father Ignatius	
July 18 th .	To Organs in Stock for an Organ of one Manual & Pedals erected complete at Norwich as per Est.	£130

A quick calculation on a money conversion website (the internet is so useful!) tells us that this is the equivalent to about £5,600. Good value at today's prices!

Thus far no stop list has come to light but we can surmise that the instrument was indeed of one manual and pedals with probably about half a dozen stops and was bought from stock. In an age of intense church building and rebuilding most organ builders would have had small instruments readily available for hire.

On August 22nd 1872 the foundation stone of the, never to be completed, church was laid by Ignatius under the centre of the eastern wall. This section of the church was to have been the quire with the nave extending westwards connecting to the monastery buildings. This quire was of three bays, 70ft long, 30ft wide and about 45ft to the vault. Into this space was placed the small organ and it was regularly tuned and maintained.

We hear no more about this instrument until 1882 when Attwater, again in ‘Father Ignatius of Llanthony’ p.67, quotes Ignatius’ own writings from his Log:

‘1882 (September) 30, St Jerome’s Day: the first stone was prepared to be laid. On this day also the Choir (sic) was closed to the Divine Office & Mass was said in the East Cloister of the Abbey, for as much of the great Altar is to be completed, *a large new organ to be built* (my italics) & the new oaken Stalls to be erected.’

The Gray & Davison Account Ledger of 1882, 08A p.367 contains the following entry:

1882		
Dec 24	To an organ No. 10444 of 2 manuals & Pedals in a pine case stained and varnished with decorated front pipes including carriage as per Estimate	£500
	Extra cartage to New Llanthony Monastery	£7/7/-
	Extra mens time walking some 2 miles morning and evening in severe winter weather whilst erecting and finishing organ	£2/8/-
	Taking down small organ in chapel & reerecting in Community Room	£9/5/-
	A stool with moveable seat including packing case	<u>£2/12/6</u>
		£521/12/6

Payments were recorded as follows:

1882			
	Aug 26	By Cash	£100
	Dec 31	Balance	£421/12/6
1883			
	Jan 1	Balance	£421/12/6
	Feb 20	Cash	£375
	May 2	do	£25
	May 22	do	£9/15/-
	June 26	do	<u>£11/17/6</u>
			£421/12/6

So here was that 'great organ' about which so many have spoken together with a record of the deposit and subsequent payments. It is interesting to note the extra charge for the men having to walk some two miles morning and evening in severe weather. We must assume that they lodged further down the valley at Llanthony 'Prima'. 'Seculars' were permitted to stay at the monastery but these were tradesmen and as such, perhaps, not permitted by Ignatius.

The specification of this organ is recorded in the Gray & Davison Shop Book of 1882, 13, p.3 and reads as follows:

10.444

Llanthony Abbey

Two manuals, CC to G
& pedals, CCC to F

Great

Open Diapason	metal, through	8ft
Gamba	do “	8
Dulciana (grooved)	do , to C	8
Clarinet Flute	wood, through	8
Principal	metal, “	4
Suabe Flute	wood, “	4
Harmonic Piccolo	metal, “	2
Trumpet (spare slide)		

Swell

Lieblich Bourdon	wood, C	16ft
Open Diapason (grooved)	metal, Gamut G	8
Keraulophon & Lieblich Bass	wd & met. through	8
Voix Celeste	metal, C	8
Gemshorn	do through	4
Mixture, (12 th & 15 th)	do “	
Oboe	do “	8
Cornoepan (spare slide)		

Also provision for the future addition of a
Vox Humana, CC, in inner box, & a tremulant.

Pedal organ

Open Diapason	wood, through,	16ft
Bourdon (spare slide)		

Couplers

Swell to Great

Swell to Pedal

Great to Pedal

Three composition pedals to Great

Three do----- Swell

Case of pine, stained and varnished.

Front pipes decorated.

A stool with back – and seat moveable up & down.

1 July 1882.

From these records it is clear that some thought had been given to the provision of a new and larger organ for the abbey for some time before a firm order was placed (July 1882) and a deposit or first instalment paid (August 1882).

Characteristic Gray & Davison stops are included viz; the Clarinet Flute on the great and the Keraulophon on the swell but of note is the provision of an adjustable seat: Oh that these might become standard, even today! There is space provided for the future addition of four extra stops (Trumpet on the great, Cornopean and Vox Humana on the swell and Bourdon on the pedal) to be inserted, possibly, when funds allowed.

The case pipes were to be decorated and from the only evidence yet uncovered it looks like rather standard stencilling on, presumably, zinc bass pipes.

Where the small organ stood in the church we do not know. However, we do know from Ignatius' own record that the new larger organ was to be placed centrally on the screen which divided the monk's quire from the western third of the building where the laity were allowed; in the same way as in some university college chapels. The organ is also shown to be free-standing in a detailed technical drawing made by the organ builders. This shows that the organ had two 'fronts' i.e. two sides of decorated pipes, one facing east into the monk's quire and one westwards. Given the quite cramped layout of the unfinished church, this organ would indeed have seemed 'great' and imposing. Anyone entering the west door of the church would immediately have had to look up at an acute angle to see the west front of the organ. Again, so far, no representation of this side of the organ has come to light. As for the east front I have managed, quite by chance, to find a postcard picture photograph of what must be the great organ of New Llanthony Abbey.

A study of this picture points in many ways to this being the organ in the abbey church of Llanthony. It stands on a gallery with light entering from behind; it looks rather like a Gray & Davison organ of the period with the pierced woodwork over the console and the painted pipe decoration; the trellising on the gallery edge is clearly seen; the carved woodwork of the returned stalls is seen at either end of the picture and this was removed when the abbey closed eventually finding a home at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire where it can be seen

to this day; the vaulted roof matches that which can be seen in other representations of the inside of the church. If one looks carefully, the outline of the swell box can be seen together with the tops of the pedal open diapason pipes on the left with nothing corresponding on the right hand side. A comparison with the builders' drawing shows these details to be in the correct position and the pedal bourdon would have been on the right where nothing in this picture is seen. In addition there is written 'Llanthony Abbey' in pencil and in an old fashioned hand on the back of this card. Perhaps this picture was taken when the organ was relatively new?



Whilst it cannot be said to be a distinguished piece of organ design, it is functional. The use of four 'flats' (the groupings of pipes and their divisions by the uprights) without some centre pipe is somewhat unusual. In this design all five upright posts are finished as crocketed pinnacles; the central one topped with a celtic style cross. Some input from Ignatius himself maybe? He did change the dedication of the abbey replacing St Dunstan with St David and had consistently championed the Ancient British Church.

Regular tuning and maintenance was carried out and in November 1896 the organ builders returned to install some of the stops prepared for in 1882. This is recorded in the Gray & Davison Ledger 10. P.269

1896			
	Aug 11	To tuning and regulating organs	£7
	Nov 17	Cleaning and overhauling organ	£25
		Making Cornopean and Vox Humana	£45
		do Tremulant	£10

The payment for this work was made as follows:

1896			
	Sept 3	By Cash	£7
	Oct 24	do	£20
	31	Balance	£60
1897			
	Jan 1	Balance	£60
	Mar	By Cash	£20
	June	do	£20
	Sept	do	£20
			<u>£60/-/-</u>

The Gray & Davison Account Ledger 11 part 5, p. 404 records:

		Llanthony Abbey	
		The Monastery	
Father Ignatius (Dec'd)			
1908			
	Feby 3	To Mans Time, Fare, Expenses & Materials in repairing, tuning & regulation organ	£6/2/6
	July 15	“ Tuning & regulating organ (Pd 09)	£2/17/6
1909			
	Apl 1	“ Tuning & regulating organ	£3/2/6

Payment was made thus:

1908			
	Feby 24	By Cash	£6/2/6
1909			
	Feb 22	“ “	£2/17/6
	Sept (?) 23	“ “	£3/2/6

This is the last record of any work done to the organ at the abbey. It is possible that another firm was engaged to come and tune the organ but unlikely. Father Ignatius had died on October 16th 1908. The last maintenance on the organ was in the following April and as we know from subsequent history, monastic life at Llanthony did not survive very long after the decease of its founder abbot. For one thing, the income of the abbey had been almost totally dependent upon the frequent and often extended preaching and money-raising tours made by Ignatius. With his death this came to an abrupt end.

It appears that the Llanthony Foundation had never quite succeeded in rooting itself firmly enough to be able to outlive its founder. With Ignatius' death, little income and the removal of all but the vestiges of monastic life to Caldey under Abbot Carlyle, the future was at best uncertain.

1913 was a year of great turmoil for Caldey with the split in the community following the conversions to the Church of Rome. In fact the Caldey monks were so reduced in numbers that it soon became clear that it would be impossible to maintain life on the island in addition to a monastic outpost in the Black Mountains of Wales.

On 29th September 1915 a sale was advertised. H. Montague (auctioneers) of Abergavenny was engaged to hold a sale of a great many items from Llanthony Abbey. Tables, chairs, bookcases and much more are mentioned but not the organs in the church and the community room. What became of them?

From the last tuning of the church organ in 1909 no further reference has yet been found. Presumably they remained in situ for a while at least. The small organ could have been sold to a private owner as a domestic instrument as still happens occasionally today. It could have been sold to a small church or to a local organ builder who may have rebuilt it elsewhere. Given its size this organ could well have survived with little or no alteration to the present day. Were either of them sold at all or did they remain neglected and suffering from damp and cold conditions? Montague's sales lists from this period have not survived.

The large church organ presents another problem. It was probably too large to be sold as a house organ but could have been sold on to another church or to an organ builder who would have had it to use in whole or in part in another place. It's rather lofty 'gothic' case may have prohibited its re-erection in many church buildings, although, it is also possible that it was removed and used in another church minus the casework, having the decorative pipes redistributed to form a new facade. It seems almost inconceivable that this instrument would have been merely broken up.

With the fate of the monastery seemingly sealed there was a glimmer of hope that restoration might, at some time, be possible when the premises were sold to Eric Gill, who lived there for a while. He and his companions did much to restore the monastic buildings but even then (1924) the church was reported to be beyond repair. Was the great organ upon which Father Ignatius 'so loved to perform' still there or had it been dismantled and stored when so many effects were sold in 1915?

There is one remaining piece to this mystery. Prinknash Abbey became the new home to the Caldey brethren when they were forced to sell their island home and so is, indirectly, successor, in part, to the Llanthony foundation. Fr Charles Watson was the monk organist at Prinknash for many years and dabbled with organ building now and then. In an all too brief reference to Llanthony in their archive at Prinknash Fr Watson says,

‘Batley used some diapasons to make (*support?*) some shelving in the scullery.’

Who was Batley? Wood or metal diapasons; and from which organ? To which scullery does he refer; one at Prinknash or Llanthony?

It would be wonderful to find one or both of these instruments surviving somewhere wholly or in part. With renewed interest in Ignatius and the Llanthony pilgrimage, might it be possible, in the future to restore the abbey as a great pilgrimage centre and rebuild that organ? Llanthony is a truly special place where holy things have indeed been made manifest.

As noted near the beginning of this article the fate of both these organs is at present unknown. Keep your eyes peeled!

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Cameron Luke
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