

Gainsborough Parish Church – All Saints

(visit by Suffolk Organists' Association in March 2025)

In 1793, George Pike England/Byfield and Son built a two manual instrument which was then rebuilt and enlarged by William Hill and Son in 1864. In 1906, that instrument was replaced by a new instrument in the old casework. (It is rumoured that the well-known builder James Jepson Binns did some of the work and that a rank of pipes he installed is still in the organ). Andrew Carnegie, the American philanthropist, contributed £450 of the total cost of £1,640.

The organ is fortunate in its fine open position on the west gallery of the resonant church which, apart from its 15th century tower and early 20th century vestries, dates from the middle of the 18th century when the body of the church was rebuilt in Georgian Classical style. Corinthian colonnades support an elaborate, moulded cornice from which rises a coved ceiling above the spacious and lofty interior. The organ was further restored in 1977 by Andrew Carter of Walkers – the consultant was Francis Jackson of York Minster and he gave the restored organ's opening recital in July 1977.

The most recent work included a great increase in the number of pistons, a new pedal board, cleaning and general repairs and new bellows on top of the originals. In the 1980s, the hand-driven bellows had to be used when the electrics failed. Also, a humidifier was installed to save the organist regularly filling buckets of water. (The buckets and hand bellows are still inside the organ and the organ stool has been unstable for years!). Further restoration was done in 1997 (see David Ashforth's notes).

The church has a distinguished musical tradition. Edgar Robinson succeeded his father as organist in 1906 and, later, he became choirmaster of Liverpool Cathedral. His successor, W.A.Montgomery, went as organist to Toronto Cathedral in 1913. Alan Stephenson left here to become organist of Coventry Cathedral in 1933. Stanley Vann (later organist of Peterborough Cathedral) was organist here from 1933 to 1939. Other organists have included F.C.Fea (who later became organist of Sherborne Abbey and then Aberdeen Cathedral) and the well-known recitalist Robert Munns. David Ashforth was organist here for thirty years from 1993.

The Choir continued to flourish as a large all male unit. In the 1980s, it had up to 24 boys and 16 men who were loyal choristers and sang at services twice on Sundays with Choral Evensong once a month and on Ash Wednesday, Easter Day etc.

ORGAN: ALL SAINTS PARISH CHURCH GAINSBOROUGH

The organ in the Parish Church at Gainsborough is considered to be one of the finest instruments in Lincolnshire and an excellent example of the work of J. W. Walker at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The organ by Byfield and Son was installed in 1793. It was rebuilt and enlarged by William Hill and Son in 1864. A new organ by J. W. Walker and Son was installed in 1906 for £1640. The case from 1793 was retained and extended on each side.

Work involving cleaning and some additions was carried out in 1925 with further cleaning in 1939. It was further cleaned and overhauled in 1954.

A major restoration was carried out in 1977 by J. W. Walker with Francis Jackson of York Minster acting as adviser. The tubular pneumatic action was replaced by electro pneumatic action with solid state switching components. Further restoration was carried out in 1997 when the original pneumatic stop mechanisms were replaced by all electric. Pedal levers were replaced by pedal pistons and pistons were provided for all three manuals.

Work continues on the organ to keep it in good playing condition. The tremulant which had been out of use for some years was re-leathered and brought back into use. The pedals which had become very noisy were overhauled and re-leathered. Ciphers had become a continual problem on all three manuals but particularly the swell organ. All manuals were recently provided with new reed switches to rectify this problem.

The latest project to commence in mid October of this year at a cost of £14,400 is the replacement of all swell magnets and a complete top overhaul of that organ. All pipework will be removed, cleaned and reshaped with new tuning slides where necessary. Splits in the soundboard table will be dealt with at the same time. Some stops which have been out of use will be playable again.

A major problem is the leatherwork on the main bellows, now almost 110 years old, which has been patched many times over the years. We are hoping that work can be started on this in the autumn of next year (2015). The estimate at the moment is £8,100 but will obviously rise with inflation.

Although there will be some money left in the organ fund after the next phase of restoration we are looking for some help from external sources to assist in maintaining this fine instrument.

At the moment the organ fund is regularly topped up by a series of summer lunchtime Concerts in July and August. This concert series is now in its 23rd year.

David Ashforth (2014)

Update 2025:-

The major restoration in 1997 was carried out by Andrew Carter of Wakefield (ex Walker Organs) (Leeds Parish Church, Leeds Town Hall, etc).
He continued to maintain the organ until my retirement in 2021.

The original organ had tracker action for Great and Choir and electro pneumatic for Swell and Pedals with slight time lag on the latter 2 departments.
The keyboard was replaced and the pedalboard was refurbished with new springs and leathers. The manual and pedal pistons have a fully computerised capture system.

The bellows were refurbished in 2015

After a major incident during a morning service when one of the largest front display pipes fell next to me the whole of the front pipes were reshaped and regilded.

The casework was refurbished – cracks were filled and made good and the whole repolished.

All soundboards have had cracks filled and the whole re-glued.

The Swell reeds and the Great trumpet in particular were revoiced. The trumpet has a much brighter sound. It was hoped to add a Great 3 rank mixture to brighten the full organ sound.

After 30 years of transporting 6 buckets of water up to the organ chamber most months a humidifier was at last attached (just a few months after my retirement!).

David Ashforth (March 2025)