

## A VERY ENGLISH ORGAN

We tend to take it for granted when we go into a church – there will be an organ, often in the chancel, close to the choir stalls, or sometimes in a gallery on the west wall. Yet this would not have been the case in most churches just two hundred years ago. An organ was (and is) an expensive instrument to install and maintain: and in early days you did not only have to find an organist but also an organ-blower to pump the air! While cathedrals, college chapels and fashionable city churches might have the wherewithal, village churches relied on the parish clerk to lead the singing, possibly ‘assisted’ by a group of gallery musicians.

It was only in the nineteenth century that a number of factors came together to change this. The Oxford Movement encouraged parish churches to imitate cathedrals, introduce choirs and do away with the gallery bands; there was a greater enthusiasm for congregational hymn singing, particularly in the rising non-conformist movements; and the new industrial age was bringing increased prosperity and lower costs of production. The result was a boom in organ building with firms like Forster & Andrews of Hull expanding rapidly, setting up a London office and selling their organs not only across the country but beyond. Their workforce increased from 30 to more than 100 as their output grew. In 1864 the Royal College of Organists was established to support the training of organists and shortly afterwards *The Organists’ Quarterly* was founded to provide a flow of new music

The result was that by 1900 most churches had an organ, probably with two manuals and a pedal board. During the same period cities had installed larger instruments in their municipal concert halls to bring music (often transcriptions of orchestral pieces) to a larger public and to accompany the choral societies. This proved to be a golden age for the organ, before the arrival of recorded and broadcast music. Technological advances allowed organs to become vast symphonic instruments with many playing aids for the performer – and electric power saw the demise of the organ-blower. But the parish church organ remained largely unchanged as congregations lacked the resources to upgrade in response to the latest fashion. This probably helped preserve Fletching’s organ largely as it was when donated by the Earl of Sheffield over 100 years ago. The wind is now blown electrically and the pedal board works through electrical rather than mechanical tracker action, but otherwise it sounds much as it did then. We can be grateful for the ‘good and durable tracker work’ of Forster & Andrews, acknowledged as ‘better than most and sometimes equal to the best’.

During much of the 20th century interest focused on the Baroque revival and it was fashionable to look down on Victorian and Edwardian music. Now attitudes are changing and that repertoire is being rediscovered. How privileged we are to have in Fletching an instrument that can give authentic voice to that music.

### Most popular composers in organ recitals 1880-1930

<i>All composers</i>		<i>English composers</i>	
J S Bach	10,341	E H Lemare	2,702
A Guilmant	5,988	<b>H Smart*</b>	2,431
<b>F Mendelssohn</b>	5,000	W Wolstenholme	2,372
G F Handel <sup>a</sup>	4,228	A Hollins	2,321
E H Lemare	2,702	W Faulkes	1,118
<b>H Smart</b>	2,431	<b>E Elgar<sup>a</sup></b>	1,065

<sup>a</sup> More than 50% of works played were transcriptions

*Source: Henderson 2005*

\* Smart headed the English lists for 1880 – 1900.