

**EDOA Visit to St Silas the Martyr, Kentish Town,
Saturday 29th September 2012**

Background

St Silas The Martyr church building is the work of Architect Ernest Charles Shearman (1859 – 1939), who built six London Churches (1910 – 1935) including St Silas (consecrated 26/10/1912).



St Silas The Martyr – Kentish Town

Designed on the basilican model, with a wide nave and an uninterrupted view of the pulpit and altar sited in the centre of the apse, St Silas is a simple brick building with six capital-less arcades, and arch braced roof. The Chapel of St Francis of Assisi (added 1913), and the double porch and Calvary (1920) were designed by Sherman. The interior is lofty, spacious, and light, offers an excellent acoustic for music, and has been used for professional recording purposes.

The work at Kentish Town, an impoverished area of London, began as a Mission (1877) with open air services. A simple building in the early English style (brick and stone facings) was later created (1884) seating 150 people. St Silas was built adjacent to the Mission building, now used as church halls.

T S Eliot (1888 – 1965), was associated with St Silas, as was Charles Williams (1886 – 1945), novelist, poet, theologian and critic.

The Music

St Silas maintains a strong Anglo Catholic tradition with an emphasis on the traditional liturgy. The spacious gallery where the organ is situated offers a good space for singers and instrumentalists to be in close proximity to the organ console. Music by Haydn, Mozart, and Schubert feature, while more recently the Magnificat by Pergolesi, and Requiems by Fauré and Saint-Saëns have been introduced.

Professionals are brought in for special occasions and particular times of the year: this includes masses and motets for voices and instruments. More generally, a small group of

singers from the congregation provides musical input to services with hymns, plainchant, and a motet for every sung mass.

The Organs

Grand Organ:

J C Bishop and Son originally installed a two manual, tab stop, tubular pneumatic action organ (1914 / 1915), with casework and pipes mounted on the West wall at the rear of the church. The console faced east at the front of the Gallery. By the 1990's this organ became unplayable (with no stops above 4' pitch). The cost of full restoration was beyond the reach of the congregation, and the Bishop organ console was removed (1994) although the console, pipes, and eccentric blowing system are all preserved.

Copeman Hart were asked to install (1994) a three manual, tab stop organ, with necessary voices to enrich the liturgy and choral accompaniment, built and voiced to the organist's specification. Samples of the Warrington Cavaillé-Coll organ were used (Parr Hall); it was one of a very few examples in the UK that retained its original specification. The organ has proved particularly suitable for French and Baroque music and works very well with Bach. The Copeman Hart speakers are concealed behind the J C Bishop pipes and casework. It has a straight, flat pedal board, and both the Swell and Positive (Choir) organs are enclosed (with two expression pedals).

A professional recording of the Copeman Hart organ at St Silas Church is available (Lammas Records - Sounds from the Heart LAMM185D. <http://www.saintsilas.org.uk/section/161>).

Chamber Organ

St Silas is proud of a Grade II* (2007) Chamber Organ (NPOR D03541 v3.1) built by Jonas Ley (1772), located in the third bay of the south aisle. NPOR describes the organ as of historical interest, substantially in its original condition, and an excellent example of its type. It has a very fine mahogany case with gilded front pipes.



The keyboard slides out of a beautifully constructed reveal. The music stand has two shelves to hold the music, which allows for ergonomic height adjustment of the score.



There are seven square drawstops, and it is hoped that the Sesquialtera and Cornet may be restored to their original state in time. The original short octave in the bass remains, as does the original winding system (an electric blower is fitted). The original machine stop (a pedal to remove the upperwork) remains.



The keys appear to be of a more Baroque style: length and width smaller than modern keyboards. The short tracker rods contribute a light touch and responsive keyboard. Some of the pipes are believed to be perhaps centuries older (Manders – 2010). There is a missing wooden back, and the NPOR entry indicates that replacement would enhance the sound. The sound of the organ is very pleasing and remarkably full, even in a large space.



Jonas Ley Chamber Organ Pipe Array

Jonas Ley (floruit 1772 – 1786) was an organ builder based in Holborn. This particular instrument was initially installed in the private residence of Percy Daniels in Eckersley,

Clevedon, Somerset (EO 1871). It was installed in St Silas (c. 1940) having been moved from All Saints, Notting Hill (DO 3542) to protect the organ during the London Blitz.

There are two other Jonas Ley chamber organs referenced on the NPOR:

- a) N 15989 – Jesus Church, Forty Hill, Enfield – 4 stop, square shafts, in a beautiful mahogany case.
- b) E 00397 v3.1 – Eton College, Buckinghamshire – 4 stop drawstops, sliding keyboard.

It appears therefore that there are three surviving chamber organs by Jonas Ley, and quality of workmanship seems to be an overarching feature.

Organist

Peter St John Stokes has been organist of St Silas since 1992. He studied under Dr Francis Jackson, organist of York Minster and Naji Hakim, organist of La Trinité, Paris, and he takes a particular interest in improvisation. A full biography was included in the June edition of the newsletter.



Dr Peter St John Stokes Dec 1992 – to present

Fr. Graeme C. Rowlands, Parish Priest, offered a warm welcome to the EDOA members and Peter St John Stokes was very generous with his time, allowing members to play both instruments. Our thanks go to both of them for a very enjoyable and worthwhile visit.

David Hainsworth

