

Tayside Organists' Society

Visit to organs in Stonehaven

23rd April 2022

Review by Kevin Veal

Seven members of the Society travelled to Stonehaven in the morning of Saturday 23 April for the Society's 2022 Organ Crawl. In the forenoon, a visit was made to Fetteresso Parish Church. After a light lunch at Arduthie Guest House, those present proceeded to the Scottish Episcopal Church of St James the Great in the centre of the town, where another member of the Society joined the group. The whole visit was "rounded off" with a meal at the Ship Inn, located at the waterfront in Stonehaven.

At Fetteresso Parish Church, a short presentation was given by Keith Stewart on the history of the church and the organ. The organ (2 manuals and pedal board) had been installed by Father Willis in 1876, and attended to by Wadsworth of Manchester in 1886, 1904 and 1909 before being rebuilt by Willis in 1912, and JW Walker in 1974. Recent work was undertaken by M J McDonald, Glasgow in 1984 and 2008. A short demonstration was given by the church's deputy organist, David Baker, before those present were afforded the opportunity of playing the organ. All present very much enjoyed the visit, and very much appreciated the preparation that the church authorities had made to ensure that the visit was a success.

Immediately after the visit to the church, the members went to view (from the outside!) a property – not more than 200 metres from Fetteresso Church – at the corner of Bath Street and Baird Street, Stonehaven, which had been the home for 10 years of the organ builder, John Wardle. John Wardle who, when he first came north, was an employee of Wadsworth of Manchester, had come from his home in the north west of England to establish a base for his employers in the north east of Scotland. He had lived in this house, which was also the "headquarters" of his employers' business, for 10 years. From this house, he would go to St James the Great Episcopal Church in Stonehaven where he was the organist and choirmaster for 58 years. Even after John Wardle moved from Stonehaven to live in Aberdeen, he continued to travel to Stonehaven every week, to continue as Organist and Choirmaster of St James' Church.

Our two guides from Fetteresso Church, Keith and David, joined the group for lunch, at the end of which David Smith thanked them for their help, assistance and facilitation of our visit.

In the afternoon, the group went to St James the Great Church, where they were warmly welcomed by David Fleming, Buildings Convener of the Church. He gave a fascinating account of the history of the Church, and its very special connection with John Wardle, who had been organist of this church for 58 years until his death in 1941. At the back of the church was an exhibition depicting the involvement of John Wardle in the life of the church and community – with particular reference to the organs that he had built and maintained during his long association with the local area and beyond in Scotland. The exhibition also featured memorabilia relating to Mr Wardle, some of which had been donated by his relatives, and an interesting display about the history of the Episcopal Church in Scotland.

The organ presently in the church was built by Wadsworth of Manchester (in reality by the hands of John Wardle personally) in 1881. It was subsequently adjusted by Mr Wardle in 1885 and 1912, before being overhauled by Wood Wordsworth in 1980. It was again overhauled by AF (Sandy) Edmonstone in 1991. The instrument possesses a Grade II Historic Organ Certificate of the British Institute of Organ Studies.

The organ was ably demonstrated by Peter Parfitt, the church organist, before members present were invited to try the instrument. All were very impressed with the range of musical colours and sounds, and the effectiveness of the instrument, assisted by the superb acoustics of the church building. Before the group left the church building, David Smith thanked Mr Fleming for his considerable contribution to the Society's visit, and his imparting of so much information about both the organ and the activities of John Wardle, through his long association with this church.

On leaving the church, members proceeded to the Ship Inn, located at Stonehaven Harbour, where they enjoyed a meal together. They were also pleased to have David Fleming present as our guest for the meal.

The whole day was a great success due, in no small measure, to the initiative and organisation of our longest serving member, David Smith. He ensured that every detail was in place, and that nothing was left to chance! All present are indebted to David for his meticulous preparation and organisation.

Details of the organs visited can be found on the National Pipe Organ Register:

Fetteresso: <https://www.npor.org.uk/NPORView.html?RI=R00536>

St James the Great: <https://www.npor.org.uk/NPORView.html?RI=N18137>