

Arthur Edward Watts, FRCO **Organist & Choirmaster January 1949 – October 1952**

Arthur Watts was born in London on April 9th 1908. He was educated at Boys' High School, Sutton, Surrey, and the Royal College of Music. Whilst organist of St. Alban's Holborn he was Music Master at Hampton Grammar School. He married Cicely Couling and had two sons and two daughters.

January 1949: 'On the first Sunday in the New Year, our new Organist will take over his duties with us. He is Mr. Arthur E. Watts, F.R.C.O., and has been previously Organist and Choirmaster at St. Andrew's, Stockwell (1929), St. Saviour's, Ealing and Esher Parish Church (1946). During the war he served in the R.A.F. In him I believe we have one who is not unworthy to follow in the steps of our musicians of the past and who will maintain the best traditions of music. In addition he is a practising Catholic so I ask you all to welcome him and make him feel he really is a member of the family of S. Alban's, Holborn. Mr. Watts will assume entire responsibility for the music at S. Alban's and will play at all the main services.'

February 1949: 'Our new Organist and Choirmaster is anxious to form a choir to assist with the singing at Sunday Evensong. Already he has a nucleus of some boys, but more are wanted. Surely there must be many boys in the parish who would like to help the Service of God in this way! And what about a few men to strengthen the singing? At the present moment, Mr. Watts is conducting a choir practice on Friday evenings at 6.30 in Little S. Alban's. All who would like to help in this new venture of reviving the parochial choir are asked to come along to the practice or write to Mr. Watts at 212 Staines Road, Laleham.'

March 1949: Music lists appeared in the Parish Paper, for the first time since September 1939.

April 1949: 'Lent has started very well indeed. Some of the services have drawn embarrassingly large numbers and we are able to appreciate more than ever the gross inadequacy of our present quarters. The Thursday midday service has been so packed that it will be necessary, at least until Easter, to move to Little S. Alban's.'

Holy Week 1949, Vicar's letter: 'I would just like to mention my appreciation of the work put in by our Organist and the young boys in our new choir. The musical side was also helped by certain friends of Mr. Watts and myself who generously gave up time to assist us in the singing of *Tenebrae* and the Holy Saturday ceremonies.'

May 1949: THE TEMPORARY CHURCH: 'Probably all of you will have read the announcement in the *Church Times* that a licence has been obtained for the construction of our temporary S. Alban's. As you will know, this scheme was first brought out some 18 months ago, but there have been several delays in putting it into operation. Had this licence been obtained, as I hoped, a year ago, we would all have been overjoyed. But, in the meantime, much has happened and the news was received with mixed feelings. I may as well write openly and candidly about this. Recently publicity was given to the fact that at least two churches in London are to be completely restored. It was only natural that many members of the congregation should ask, If these churches can be rebuilt, why not S. Alban's? And, of course, we believe we have some claim to sympathetic treatment. In this area five neighbouring parishes have lost their churches during the war. I believe it is no empty boast to say that, in spite of the setbacks, S. Alban's, Holborn is by no means a "dead church", far from it. Those who saw Little S. Alban's nearly full for the midday services in Lent will know that this church does exercise an influence beyond the people of its parish and congregation, and that there is a need for an adequate church in this business area.

So from some quarters, I was urged to cancel the application for the licence and press for the complete restoration of our church. A fear was expressed that if we were contented with a temporary building, the real thing might be delayed for some years.

It was a difficult decision for me to make and before coming to any definite conclusion, I did take expert advice. There is no-one who more desires to see the "Real S. Alban's" than I do, but on the other hand, there is no-one who knows our present difficulties more than I do. And I must say that I do not feel we can go on much longer in our present circumstances. As Fr. Ross said at the annual bazaar, we have no apparatus here - church and schools both destroyed and for any big services we have to borrow another church. We have no room for expansion and all of us are getting a little tired of a make-shift arrangement. A long delay would be necessary to get out plans, obtain a licence and collect the money, if we were to press for a complete reconstruction. I personally feel we cannot afford to wait. Our schools cannot be restored for use until Little S. Alban's is dismantled. I called the Advisory Committee of the PCC together and we carefully discussed the whole position. In the end, we came to the conclusion that the only thing we could do was to take the opportunity and build the temporary church.

I have received the assurance of the Diocesan authorities that the construction of a temporary church will in no way prejudice the building of the permanent church, nor will it cause us to lose any priority.

So, my dear people, I am hoping very soon to be able to welcome you all back to S. Alban's, Holborn again. It will not be the grand church of the past in shape, but it will be our own and I am sure that in a short while we shall have made it our home and a beautiful home at that. The new church will be of brick and it will stretch almost the entire length of the old church. The new high altar will be roughly where the old one stood. The seating capacity will be just under 300. There will be a proper choir, so Mr. Watts will soon be asking for men and boys to come along and fill that choir. There will be two entrances to the church, one through the old archway by the Macknochie Chapel and the other up the old steps in Baldwins Gardens. What a joy it will be to have our own church once again.'

October 1949: 'Starting from October 9th our Sunday High Masses will cease to take place at St. George's, Bloomsbury. Various circumstances have arisen which have made this change advisable. In any case, we should shortly have to remove all our belongings from St. George's and we are thus anticipating the move by a few weeks. It will enable us to get everything sorted out and arranged before the re-opening of S. Alban's. I had hoped that the end of October would see us back in what is both our old home and our new one, but the repairs to the tower and walls of the old church have taken longer than was thought and the completion of the new building has therefore been slightly delayed...For a short while, we shall be rather cramped for space in Little S. Alban's and I would urge all who can to make more use of the Sung Mass at 9.45a.m. on Sundays...The loss of our church has meant much more than the loss of an adequately sized place for our worship. It has meant the loss of a place to love...Much of this has been denied the present congregation. The older people have their memories of the grand past and their hopes for the future to uphold them and they can look upon the present situation merely as an annoying interim period of difficulty. It is very different, however, for our younger children and for those who have come along to S. Alban's in recent years. Some indeed have grown quite fond of Little S. Alban's, but since the building has to be kept locked for most of the week, it is not sanctified by prayer and devotion as a church is. S. Alban's was destroyed nearly nine years ago and therefore quite grown up young people now have but vague memories of what it looked like. It comes with quite a shock to realise that many of our children here have little idea of the fame and tradition of the church they attend. How can it be expected when that church is obviously a converted schoolroom? Last Sunday I was giving the catechism children an instruction on Holy Baptism and mentioned the font. Some of them did not know what I was talking about. There is no proper font in Little S. Alban's, so how could they?'

November 1949: 'This week the roof is going onto the church and the actual building ought to be completed shortly. But there is still much to be done, in the matter of flooring, inside decoration and furnishing...I am not quite certain about the form of the opening. It will not be a consecration since there will be nothing really to consecrate. The altar is coming from Little S. Alban's. What I am planning therefore is that a bishop shall bless the new building. It will be obvious to everyone that there will be an enormous demand for tickets for the opening service and the accommodation of the church will be limited. Priority in the distribution of tickets will therefore be given, as is right, to *bona fide* members of the congregation, Friends of S. Alban's and the donors to the Restoration Fund. Without them and their loving interest, there would be no S. Alban's to open or any congregation to fill it...Meanwhile we have moved back to Little S. Alban's...All our many belongings have had to be moved back from S. George's and the only reverent place available to store some of them is S. Sepulchre's Chapel. This chapel therefore will be closed for the time being, except that my confessional will be found there.'

December 1949: THE ANNUAL BAZAAR: I doubt if any introduction is needed of our opener on the second day. The name of THOMAS ADAMS will ever be remembered at S. Alban's as borne by one of our greatest organists and choirmasters. He died in 1918 but every year by tradition we sing the Christmas hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" to the tune he composed. Mrs. Adams has always taken a great interest in S. Alban's and has done so much work here. It will be a joy to have her with us on this occasion.

December 8th, 1949: THE BLESSING OF THE NEW CHURCH: 'There was one moment on that great day when I quite seriously wondered whether it would not be better to ring up Fulham Palace and tell the Bishop we really could not be ready in time. During one particular delay I asked one of the workmen if he realised that the church was due to open in three hours' time and not three months! But it was really not his fault and I would like here to say how much we owe to the willingness and good temper of the foreman and workmen on the building without whom the chaos would have been greater.

The trouble all started with a delay in receiving the oilcloth, which somehow got lost between Glasgow and London. Until that was laid, we could not put in the pews. The pews we had obtained from another church which was being dismantled and originally they were exactly twice as long as we required, so each one had to be sawn in half and have new sides fitted. The pews in turn were filling up the carpenter's yard and after he had been able to deal with half of them, he could not get at the remainder. The linoleum arrived only three days before the opening and an army of operative workmen were speedily at work laying it. Those who used the Mackonochie Chapel for their prayers at that time must have wondered at the strains of harmony coming from the church, where the men were laying "lino" and singing happily away at the same time.

Less than 36 hours before the opening we were able to start putting in pews. The new altar curtains had been put up, the Stations of the Cross were in place and another band of workmen were fixing the organ* (see footnote). At 3.30 p.m. on the 8th, we suddenly realised that all the pews would not be there on time and so we had to mobilise every spare man, woman and child to move chairs from the social centre into church. Startled spectators were entertained by the sight of priests in shirt-sleeves (has any Vicar of S. Alban's ever been seen in the streets in such undress uniform?) lumping chairs along Baldwins Gardens.

However by 6 p.m. everything was as ready as we could make it. Already queues had formed at both entrances to the church. I have forgotten to tell you that in addition to everything else, illness had held up the making of the hassocks and they were delivered in batches throughout the day. Long before the hour of 7 p.m. every available seat was taken and latecomers were waiting in the courtyard hoping to stand at the back.

At 7 o'clock the Bishop of London entered after going through a Guard of Honour in the courtyard, formed by our Scouts, Guides, Cubs and Brownies...Standing at the High altar, the Bishop said the first prayers of blessing and followed this by sprinkling the walls of the new church with holy water and then censuring them. After the prayers of dedication, Solemn Evensong of the Dedication was sung...After the service, there was a moving little ceremony when the Most Holy Sacrament was for the first time carried into the new church and placed in the tabernacle on the high altar.

Some 250 people had filled the church that evening, and most of them later attended a small reception in the Parish Hall, at which the Bishop was present...Early on Friday morning, the 10th, a very large congregation attended the first High Mass at 6.30 a.m. Many had stayed in town for the night to be present. Masses were said throughout the morning.'

EXPENDITURE 1949

Organist	£155 5s. 0d.
Ladies and gentlemen of the choir	£276 4s. 0d.
Boys	£8 9s. 9d.
Organ hire & tuning (re St. George's)	£23 1s. 3d.
Piano tuning	£3 2s. 6d.
Hymn books & music	£21 9s.11d.

January 1950: 'I would like to tell the choir how much the carol service on New Year's Evening was appreciated by the congregation. I received quite a number of letters from those who were present. We would congratulate Mr. Watts on the excellent way the boys are singing now and we know how much of it is due to the work he has put in with them.'

April 1950: 'A very beautifully bound Lectern Bible has been given to the church by Mrs. Thomas Adams in memory of her husband, for so many years our noted organist. To preserve the cover from damage, during the week, this Bible is kept in the Sacristy, but Sister will be only too glad to show it to anyone interested.'

APCM 11th April 1950: 'One of the biggest surprises since I have been at S. Alban's was provided on Palm Sunday morning by the choir, especially the boys. Many members of the congregation have told me how much they appreciated the way in which the traditional music was sung. It has to be remembered that our boys do not come from any choir school. For the most part they come from the back streets of Holborn and Islington and some of them, when they first came along, had very vague ideas of the Catholic Faith. It seems to me little short of miraculous that these boys should be willing to give up some three evenings a week during Lent for rehearsal and that during Holy Week itself, they should have attended and sung at three lengthy services, apart from Evensong. After all this, they turned up smiling for more on Easter Day itself. Obviously someone is inspiring them and no one has any doubt as to his identity.' Fr. Startup went on to pay a very warm tribute to the organist and choirmaster, Mr. Arthur Watts, for all he has done to inspire and teach the boys, and all his devotion to the musical side of things at S. Alban's.'

EXPENDITURE 1950

Organist	£152 2s. 0d
Choir ladies	£102 2s. 0d.
Choir gentlemen	£149 3s.10d.
Boys (including fares)	£47 13s. 6d.
Music	£9 5s. 4d.
Piano tuning	£5 10s. 6d.

January 12th, 1951: 'I took the choir to Olympia, having filled them up with fish and chips first.'

APCM, 27th March 1951: 'The Chairman said how much he had been impressed and encouraged by the way Holy Week had been observed this year. In particular, he would like to repeat something he had already said publicly in church, his own deep appreciation - and he was sure that of the congregation as well - of the way in which the choirboys had worked that week. These boys had spent many hours in church, both at the services and at rehearsals beforehand. Their behaviour and their singing had been exceptional. Of course, everyone knew that much of this was due to the one who encouraged and inspired them - Mr. Watts, our talented organist and choirmaster. On behalf of the congregation, he would like to offer the congratulations of the congregation to Mr. and Mrs. Watts on the birth of another son recently.'

PARISH REGISTER - HOLY BAPTISM May 26th 1951: Andrew St. John Watts.

S. ALBAN'S DAY, 1951: 'S. Alban's Day opened with a heavy rainstorm and sister Sacristan hurriedly got out buckets in which umbrellas might be left and thus save the precious flooring of the church. The rain may have affected the numbers at the first Sung Mass at 6.30 a.m. At 9.30 a.m. the school children came to make their devotions to our Patron Saint at Mass. By 11 o'clock, there were few empty seats in church for the High Mass. Owing to difficulty in obtaining freedom from school for our own choir-boys, the music was sung by a visiting choir under the direction of Mr. D. Coates.

At the luncheon which followed I was able to give preliminary notice of the scheme for the re-organisation of parishes in Finsbury and Holborn under which our parish boundaries will be considerably enlarged. I was able to startle my listeners by telling them that if the scheme is finally approved, S. Alban's, Holborn, comes to an end. It is proposed that in future the parish shall be known as "S. Alban's, Holborn with S. Peter's, Saffron Hill" and, provided I am still here at the date of the amalgamation, I shall be called the first Vicar of the new parish. You may be sure that I shall always think of myself as the sixth Vicar of S. Alban's, Holborn, and that is my proudest title.'

SATURDAY IN THE OCTAVE: 'In the years after the destruction of the beloved church and before the temporary church had been built, the custom arose of singing High Mass at noon on the Saturday within the Octave in the open air within the walls of the old church. Although there is really now no need for this, I like to preserve that custom. I rather hope it will become one of our traditions and that it will remind us and those who shall follow us of the days when this congregation courageously carried on through appalling difficulty and loss.'

October 1951, THE ANGLO-CATHOLIC PROGRESS: 'This morning I attended a Solemn Celebration of Holy Communion by the Bishop in Oxford Cathedral. In the days of struggle, what encouragement would Fr. Mackonochie and Fr. Suckling have had, could they have known what would be won so soon. Would they have dared to imagine that a scene such as I witnessed this morning could take place within so short a time? As far as I could see every seat was occupied. Christ Church, Oxford, is not the best place in which to assist at Mass and the greater number of those present could have seen or heard little of what was happening at the altar. In choir, religious from the various Orders and Communities could be seen, most of them in black habits, with a little change of colour being provided by the brown of the Franciscans. The Bishop and the Sacred Ministers were robed in most lovely and colourful vestments. The ceremonies of High Mass were most correctly and reverently carried out. No-one who was present could help being inspired and uplifted by this spectacle of an Anglican Bishop solemnly celebrating the Most Holy Mysteries in his own Cathedral.

When I first heard the title of next week's effort, I must confess I did wonder if we had any right to talk about Progress.... Can we say that Catholicism has progressed? Many a parish priest, especially in London, often feels somewhat downhearted and depressed. Take our own parish and church as an example. Many of you can remember what you call "the good old days" or the "great days", the days when the name of S. Alban's, Holborn, priests were a household word throughout the Church of England, the days when Fr. Stanton preached to a packed church in which an hour before a service it was often a case of "standing room only".

It is very different today. Sometimes I ask myself how much is my fault. My own sins and shortcomings are of course responsible for much. But I do not think that this is the whole story. Two wars have taken their toll and especially the second one. One only has to walk round the streets neighbouring our shattered church to realise that S. Alban's, Holborn was a front-line parish. The early death of Fr. Eves was largely brought on by his devoted service throughout those war years. The church has gone. The schools have gone. For some years our children were dispersed and lost their contact with their parish church. Many of the older members of our congregation had to leave London, in many cases because their homes were destroyed. Many of them retain their love of the old church and support us most generously, but they are not here to swell its congregation. Slowly we are trying to recover from these blows.

These are some of our difficulties and problems. Have we progressed? YES.

I never preach at any church away from London, but there is at least one member of the congregation who comes up to me afterwards and says, "I learned the Faith at S. Alban's, Holborn". And in the majority of cases I find that those people are helping to form a strong rock of Catholicism in their particular parish. It would not be progress if Catholicism were concentrated in individual parishes. The leaven from S. Alban's, Holborn, and many another famous Catholic church has gone out to leaven the lump of the whole Church in this land. It has progressed away from S. Alban's, Holborn, but it has not been lost. The High Mass I witnessed at Oxford this morning would not have been possible had not Catholicism progressed out from churches like our own.

On the other hand, we must not be self-satisfied. We should be sad that we can no longer report crowded congregations. S. Alban's, Holborn, in its present state holds 250 people easily. Its parish contains some 3,000. The church ought to be full. It may astonish you to know, but it is a fact, that even today, our weekday Communion are more than the numbers in 1900-1910. The obvious inference is that today most of our Communicants come from the parish, while in those times they came from a distance. Now there must be a missionary spirit in the parish itself. We have sent out missionaries into many a parish in England, but the centre itself must be constantly nourished.'

February 1952: 'This has been a sad month for us all...Suddenly, and almost unbelievably, the message came to us, "The King is dead"...On the day following the King's death, Requiem Masses were offered for the repose of his soul and the next day, we gave our intentions to the new Queen who was then making her sad arrival in the capital city of her realms. On the morning of the funeral, Requiem Masses were offered here every half hour from 6.30 a.m. until every priest here had said Mass. More Communion were made that morning than for a very long time at S. Alban's. On the Saturday, the day following the funeral, a Solemn High Mass of Requiem was sung at mid-day. The church was nearly full and we were honoured by the presence of representatives from Holborn Borough Council. After the Absolutions of the Dead had been given, the Last Post and Reveille were sounded and I would like to thank the Commanding Officer and Officers of the London Rifle Brigade Rangers (T.A.) for their kind permission for buglers from that Regiment to attend and make that act of homage to the memory of our King.'

APCM April 1952: ' We have just gone through another Holy Week and the Vicar felt that the following of that week gave an inspiration to the whole year. A great deal of the wonder of Holy Week depends on the correct rendering of the traditional music of the Church, and therefore much rests on the choir and in particular the choirmaster and organist. Amidst much applause, Fr. Startup paid a tribute to the work of Mr. Watts and the members of the choir, especially the boys who have given so many hours during Holy Week to assist at the various ceremonies.'

'On August 15th 1952 the Bishop of Stepney instituted me as first vicar of the new parish (of S. Alban's, Holborn with S. Peter, Saffron Hill). The ceremony was done privately, but it involved certain legal duties. On the first Sunday afterwards I was bound to recite the whole of the Thirty-nine Articles before the congregation and proclaim my assent to them. When I performed the same duty some five years or more ago, I never dreamt that I should have to do so again quite so quickly. I am glad to say that many of the congregation remained behind after High Mass on the 17th and patiently listened to my readings. They found much of the contents a magnificent exposition of the Faith, but some confessed that they found parts obscure ("Who are the Anabaptists, Father?" was one question)...After the recitation of the Articles, the Rural Dean, representing the Archdeacon of London, inducted me to the new living.'

October 1952: 'Our organist and choirmaster had accepted an appointment to S. Barnabas', Pimlico. We are deeply grateful to Mr. Watts for all he has done for the musical side of our services at S. Alban's, for the great work he has put in with the choir and we are extremely sorry that he is leaving us. His departure presented me with a serious problem which at the time of writing I have not solved, but I hope to have more news for you next month.'

Arthur Watts stayed at St. Barnabas Pimlico till the Summer of 1953. He moved to Holbeach, Lincolnshire, in 1956, and soon after to Ipswich; there was a brief move to Norfolk, then back to Ipswich.

In October 1960 a letter from him appeared in *Musical Opinion*, in response to a letter from a member of St. Alban's choir. He felt the letter gave the impression that the choir had not been very good when Ted Bloomfield took it over in 1959, and he felt that reflected badly on him. In his letter he says:

'I am proud of the fact that during most of my time at St. Alban's the choir consisted of the traditional type, ie men and boys, was robed and sat in the chancel of the temporary church. Most of the boys came from the Hugh Myddleton Secondary School. That these boys did ultimately reach quite a good standard is generally recognised by all who heard them....As to the music for the Holy Week liturgy, this was *always* sung unaccompanied during the whole of my time at St. Alban's....The choir also sang at the Gregorian Festival Services each year at St. Paul's Cathedral and at the Anglo Catholic Progress Rally in 1952 at the Royal Albert Hall. Before I left one of the boys succeeded in getting a place in Westminster Abbey Choir and subsequently became Head Chorister there.'

Arthur Watts died in August 1986.

Music performed at St. Alban's under Arthur Watts

Burgess	Missa Seraphica
Darke	Mass in F
Harwood	Mass in A flat
Lloyd	Mass in E flat
Palestrina	Missa Brevis
	Palm Sunday Passion Choruses

	Pueri Hebræorum
Patrick	Mass in A minor
Richardson	Mass in A
Schubert	Mass in G
	Mass in C
Stanford	Mass in B flat
	Mass in C
Wood	Mass in the Phrygian Mode

This list is undoubtedly very incomplete. Following Arthur Watts' appointment in January 1949, music lists appeared in the Parish Paper in March, and continued till September. July is missing, and there was normally no choir in August at this time. No further music lists appeared for the remainder of Watts' time as Organist & Choirmaster. Thus, sadly, we have only 5 months' music lists.

CCP
Revised Mar & Dec 09

*Footnote Dec 2016: I have recently learnt from Arthur Watts' son Richard that the organ in the temporary church was a Compton Electrone. This was an electronic organ specifically designed for churches (as opposed to theatre organs). Here is a small picture of one. The speakers can be seen either side of the altar, & the console is to the right of the altar, in the photo of the temporary church within the walls of the old church.

