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Transcription of entry for St Swithin's Church, Worcester

Attracted by the glorious creations of Handel, Tallis, Croft, Hayes and Co., on the morning of 20th April, in the year 184_, I found myself (together with a genuine half-crown I had hoarded up for the occasion) most comfortably stowed away in the churchwarden's seat of St Swithin's church, embowered among silks, satins, velvets, white kids, starched cravats, embroidered 'vests', and the other pretty trappings in which people usually approach the house of prayer and praise. The 'grand selection of music' (in which the Worcester Harmonic Society were to take the chief part) commenced with one of Tallis's anthems - the Old Hundredth Psalm; then followed the chanting of the *Venite, Te Deum*, and *Jubilate*, which was well done, although the selection of similar chants for the occasion produced something like tedium and monotony. After the Third Collect came Palestrina's anthem, 'We have heard with our ears', which was almost faultlessly given as was also the anthem 'Save, Lord, and hear us', arranged from Handel. Then followed the announcement of 'The Eighty-Fourth Psalm, new version'; but owing to there being several eighty-fourth psalms in the absurd collection which obtains in the Worcester churches, I succeeded in finding out the right one just in time to join the orchestra in the third line of the last verse, and thus lost the beauties of the fine old 'Burton tune'. By the bye, I wish someone more capable than myself would agitate the question of reviving a uniform, recognised version, to be use in *all* churches, and at the same time an adaptation of tunes to them which should ensure something like propriety and decency. This is a matter of much more importance than the question of surplice or gown, altar or table, east or west; for I believe a greater diversity of doctrine may be read in the different selections of psalms and hymns in use at present than in any other mode of either ministering or preaching: not to mention the inconvenience occasioned by this diversity to the attendants at different churches. I believe that the clergy, almost to an individual, will agree with me that the present selection is most incomplete, omitting as it does a large number of psalms altogether; that it tends very frequently to confusion in presenting duplicate copies of many others; the versification is also occasionally of the most sorry if not ludicrous description; and the whole requires close revision with reference to its doctrinal points. Add to this revision a selection of tunes by competent judges, whose duty should likewise be to classify them to suit the tone and sentiment of each particular psalm, and something considerable would be gained to church harmony. In the mean time the simple fact that not one of the numerous versions which have been introduced since the Reformation, and of those now in use, has at any time received authoritative sanction, ought to weigh with the heads of the Church in coming to the decision of displacing both old and new versions for compositions evincing a purer taste.

The text selected by Mr Havergal was - "Serve the Lord with gladness and come before his presence with a song". These inspiring words, he observed, through constant use and familiarity, now passed so smoothly over our ears, as to produce no effect on the great majority of hearers as evinced in that criminal indifference to church music which too much prevailed. He then proposed to consider - first that reasonableness and the propriety of the injunction; and secondly, the manner in which we may best fulfil it. Under the first head the rev. gentleman observed "How affecting, and yet how elevating the thought, that when singing in church, we are imitating, thought with almost infinite poverty, the employment of our glorified kindred; and are tuning our hearts (I will not say our voices), for the choruses of eternity! Seldom has the thrilling beauty of congregational singing been more happily painted, than when infantile poesy described it as like a little heaven below". To praise God was a duty incumbent on all His creatures, at all times and under all events; it was not less becoming in adversity than in prosperity, as was evinced by Christ himself in singing a hymn just before his

betrayal. Church music, he regretted to state, was but seldom viewed as a hallowed act - as an incentive to the highest order of worship, as a propulsive vehicle for holy praise; and it was evident that a great proportion of cheerfulness - a necessary adjunct to thankful praise - was lost to those who did not sing. As to the *manner* of singing, we should come, first, with a deep sense of unworthiness, also with a lively perception of God's goodness, with great devoutness and earnestness of belief - for levity was intolerable when the honour and praise of the Great Eternal was the object. By earnestness he did not mean vociferation; earnestness, however, he grieved to say, was not a characteristic of our congregations, but rather listlessness and gazing: how many a voice which delights in the drawing-room is totally suppressed in the house of God! Perhaps it was owing to a silly notion that it was not fashionable, but rather vulgar, to sing at church; let such take good heed that their scruples exclude them not from one day taking part in the song of Moses and the Lamb! Lastly, we should study to come with the best and most becoming music. This was the desire of the fathers of the Church, and of those who framed the regulations in the time of Elizabeth.

Music should be of a suitable character and intelligible to all; but it was painful to think how that rule had been neglected. A certain sort of tune had become common amongst us, to the overthrow of all consistency; and instead of the fine old melodies, we now heard flashy prettiness, and tunes which had been foraged from songs, and ballads, and marches. Much resolution and right feeling would be necessary to banish this trash, seeing the strong hold it had got on the Sunday schools and choirs. Every clergyman and organist ought to cooperate in urging right principles and promoting good practice. Surely there should be some difference between the music of the Church and that of the world. The rev. gentleman concluded by an eloquent appeal on behalf of the funds for repairing the organ. St Swithin's church, he observed, was the first in the city which contained an organ, and it was therefore fitting that (next to the Cathedral) it should be the first to keep pace with the improvements of the day.

After the sermon the "Hallelujah Chorus" was performed in excellent style, though unavoidably too loud for this church; one or two ladies near me appeared in much mental distress from an over acute sense of hearing, but, contrary to expectations, not one of them fainted.

Gratified as I was with the entire services of the morning, I felt nevertheless that my mission to this church was not accomplished. One cannot judge of the regular habits and every day appearance of persons when dressed in the holiday garb, neither was it in my power, from attending on an extraordinary occasion, to give an opinion of the usual conduct here. On an evening a few Sundays afterwards I therefore again presented myself to the little old lady who pilots stranger visitors through all avenues and intricacies, to their sittings. Prayers were read by the worthy and much respected curate, the Rev. J Colville, who, although not possessing a sonorous or powerful voice, yet reads with sober solemnity and effect. Indeed, to a stranger - and much more to those who know him best - the piety of the practical Christian and earnestness of the pastor are breathed in every line.

The chorister children were ranged along the railings at the chancel; and I was informed that the rector's object in doing so was the very excellent one of producing congregational singing. It frequently occurs that when the choir remain in the orchestra they are looked upon as the exclusive high priests of harmony; in whose avocations the people have no right to take a part; while by drafting them into the body of the church, much staring and gaping is prevented, and the singers then partake more of the character of participatory in the psalmody. As far as I could judge, these means were highly successful, for the singing appeared to be general; indeed there was a party of half-a-dozen females close at my left, who, with myself and another old gentleman (provided they would have

deigned to accept of our rude bass) should have cut no very contemptible figure had the whole onus of the harmony been left on our shoulders. The organ was chastely played to good old psalmody. The rector preached an appropriate sermon on the Ascension, from *Acts* i, 10, 1, showing the practical use to be made of the promise therein contained.

I must not forget the schools attached to this church, to which, as I hear, 100 boys and girls belong – a large number in proportion to the parish, which only numbered 9000 inhabitants at the last census.

The Girls' School is under the superintendence of Mrs Sarjeant, who is also well supported by female teachers. The children are dressed uniformly in frocks, bonnets, collars and shawls; and I shall not forget their creditable, indeed, I may say unique appearance, among the other Sunday schools which moved in procession to the Cathedral on Whit-Monday; they were arranged on the principle of the "sliding scale", or rather of that instinctive economy exhibited in the flight of pigeons, who wisely manage to cut the air with the thin end of the wedge. So on this occasion two pretty little poppets, some four and twenty inches high, led the van, after whom the height graduated up to 5 feet, which was about the compass of a knot of bonny, healthy, cheerful teachers, who brought up the rear. There are unfortunately no school-rooms for their accommodation, and hence the girls had to assemble in the church, while the unlucky boys were to clamber up a dark, spiral, antique flight of stairs, into the *belfry*! Where, amongst ropes, and dust, and rubbish, they will have to date their first acquaintance with literature and theology; some of the younger fry often accomplish, at the risk of their neck and shins, the dark and toilsome journey, unlike the *facilis descensus* of Virgil; while the more infantile portion are indebted to the shoulders of their stalwart fellows for a vehicle to the seat of learning. Surely this might be obviated, if those who take an interest in education would only put their shoulders to the wheel; and, since writing the above, I am informed that the large room of Queen Elizabeth's School, situate close to this church, not being occupied on Sunday's, has recently been granted by the six masters for the use of the girls' school.

The church of St Swithin, built in 1736, is situate in a part of the city formerly devoted to the sale of plates and dishes, and other crockery, before the nineteenth century had worked out its schemes of centralization with regard to markets, *et quibusdam aliis*. It is one of the neatest erections in the city in respect to the interior: the altar piece is Doric, and the ceiling above is stuccoed; the roof of the body is cove-ribbed Gothic; and the pulpit is an elegant design, surmounted by a pelican feeding her brood with her blood, emblematical either of the Christian dispensation or of Divine protection. An exceedingly handsome east window has since been added, the production of Mr Rogers of this city; the ground work of the centre compartment is composed of a rich scroll work of Roman character, upon which are introduced three large medallions, containing the Nativity, Baptism, and the Last Supper. The side lights are filled with a similar design, enriched with the symbols of the four Holy Evangelists, the whole being surrounded by rich borderings. The greater part of the monumental remains on the walls was beyond the reach of even my best pebble glasses. On the north side of the altar is a handsome monument erected to Joseph Withers, Esq, mayor of the city in 1749; Bacon was the sculptor, and the execution is remarkable for elegance and simplicity. Near the pulpit is a fine old monument to the family of Swifts, one of whom represented the city in the time of William and Ann; another member of this family left the yearly sum of ten shillings to ensure the preaching of a sermon on Good Friday, fearing the incumbent might forget himself without some such stimulant. Among the humbler records on the pavement are those of John Child, who fell in the retreat of the British army in North Spain, under Sir John Moore; and a small stone to Margaret Evans, an extraordinary woman whose remains lie near o the chancel: it is recorded of her, that being for threescore years the governess of one of the most reputable boarding-schools in the kingdom, there was scarce a county or

city in England and Wales but some of their most accomplished ladies have had their education at Worcester under this excellent woman, who was herself “the noble pattern of what she taught”. The charities of this church are almost confined to bread, coal, and clothing, except Thomas Laslett’s gift of £200 to be invested for the augmentation of the salary of the Sunday evening lecturer (on condition that the donor’s vault be kept sacred), and Jonas Underhill’s gift of £3 per annum for the rector to read prayers every evening at five o’clock. This latter has not been paid within memory. The total amount of charities dispensed in this small parish amount to about £30. That patron of celibacy and of forsaken women, Thomas Shewringe, also figures here in a bequest of “warm gowns” (I suppose he meant well-aired) to “ancient maides and widdowes”. Beyond this there is nothing remarkable in the church except that the Lord’s Prayer and the Creed have taken their departure from the altar-piece; the one has gained the north and the other the south door, apparently on their way out.

About half-a-century ago, as I gather from Chamber’s history, a set of chimes (the only one in the city) was presented to this church by a revolutionary churchwarden, who caused it to play “Britons, strike home!” His colleague, however insisted on its playing “God save the King”; and matters were at settled so that the tunes should be played alternately. The chimes, however, detesting party dispute, soon fell into a mode of playing so that it was difficult to recognise whether the tunes were revolutionary or loyal. Within the last few years they have made abortive attempts at Derby, Hanover, and sundry other old tunes, but now they rest quietly from all their labours, the expense of winding up having been a double bar to their music. Many years ago, a stone figure of Time, placed over the dial, was blown down and broken to pieces. The absence of a presiding genius, so necessary as he was, shows how utterly thoughtless the authorities must have been in attempting to set the chimes at work without reinstating this old gentleman in his place. The living is in the gift of the Dean and Chapter (value £170). Rector, the Rev R. Sarjeant, Curate, the Rev. J. Colville, Clerk, Mr Griffiths, Organist, Mr. Jabez Jones. Population about 900.