

# From strength to strength in Leeds

Andrew McCrea, RCO Deputy Director & Director of Studies, reports on the Diocese of Leeds Organists' Training Programme as it reaches a significant three-year milestone.

Three years ago we reported on the start of a joint Diocese of Leeds/RCO initiative when, thanks to the generosity of the Liz and Terry Bramall Foundation, funding became available to Leeds and the RCO for the setting up of the Diocese's Organists' Training Programme (OTP).

It was believed that the establishment of such a programme would begin significantly to build the numbers of young and adult organ students in Yorkshire and the North West and thereby reverse, in regional terms, a national trend which has seen the decline in numbers of skilled and knowledgeable organists (and choral directors) working in parish music. It was the view of both institutions that the OTP, and the manner in which it organised itself, could provide an effective, cutting-edge model for similar initiatives elsewhere.

How did all this begin? The Diocese's highly acclaimed Schools Singing Programme had, over a number of years, raised aspiration and levels of attainment in many children – of all faiths and denominations, or no faith, and often from underprivileged backgrounds – and in the process it had also generated a welcome and significant interest in the organ. It was this unprompted demand, and a number of other factors, which led both organisations to conclude that it was an opportune moment to seize the initiative.

Rapid progress was made in the early stages (some initial three-year targets were met ahead of schedule) and many outcomes have since exceeded original expectations. Such progress has allowed other developments to take place sooner than expected, and this innovative and now well-established Programme is looking forward to a long-term future under the direction of David Pipe, who moved from York Minster to become Director of the OTP and the

Cathedral Organist for the Diocese of Leeds in May 2016.

As of April 2019, the OTP has almost 50 young people receiving regular organ lessons within the Diocese, with teaching centres in Leeds, Bradford, Harrogate, Huddersfield, Keighley and Skipton. Around a third of the students are girls, and roughly a quarter are from BAME backgrounds, making it one of the most diverse programmes of organ study in the country and, indeed, internationally. Several of the students are already playing for services in their local churches, supporting one of the Programme's primary aims of strengthening and promoting links with parishes.

The two Cathedral Organ Scholars, one a gap-year student and the other studying at the University of Leeds, receive regular tuition and guidance through the OTP. The scheme has also enjoyed success with Oxbridge entry: a former pupil from St Aidan's High School, Harrogate, is reading



OTP students tackle the organ under the watchful eye of David Pipe

music at New College, Oxford, and the Cathedral's former Organ Scholar is reading music at St Catharine's College, Cambridge, as Organ Scholar. The demand for lessons has been such that additional tutors have been appointed.

Given the Diocese's varied demographic, the OTP has been particularly pleased to offer organ lessons in Bradford, Huddersfield and Keighley, where pupils have not previously had the opportunity to study the organ. In Huddersfield, lessons are held in St Patrick's Church and are paid for by the parish, a successful and sustainable model of the links the OTP is striving to create.



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By April 2019, eight adults were having regular lessons, with nine others as occasional students. Amongst the regular students there is a mix of those playing in Catholic and Anglican churches.

The age-range of adult students is considerable. One, a Masters student at the University of Leeds, is a Cathedral Choral Scholar; at the other end of the age-range is a retired primary school teacher in his eighties, who has revisited his studies for pleasure in recent years. One adult learner from Leeds was the first organist to acquire the RCO's Certificate of Accredited Membership (CAM), at Stage 3 (Advanced), as reported in *RCO News* in June 2017.

Internationally regarded performers and pedagogues have given annual masterclasses, which now form part of the related annual Leeds International Organ Festival (May–July 2019). The Festival also includes

lectures and workshops, and this year will welcome Sir James MacMillan (recipient of the RCO Medal in 2012) to talk about his life and work.

After three years of rapid progress, the OTP is now seeking to offer greater provision in its existing teaching bases and to expand elsewhere. The RCO continues to support OTP aspirations as it establishes links with teaching centres further afield, offers more support to adult church organists and organists' associations, and builds on the success of the new Organ Festival. The RCO salutes colleagues in Leeds at this significant, optimistic milestone!