

This is man behind organ restoration

HE was just visiting Gosport, looking for a second home by the sea to relax and watch the ships go by.

But when Geoffrey Holroyde saw Holy Trinity Church and its historic 'Handel Organ' it was love at first sight. Any thoughts of relaxing in a waterfront flat disappeared – and the second home became his work base!

Eight years on and the church has become renowned as a centre of music in the town and the neglected 18th century organ has been fully restored to its former glory. This transformation is largely due to the sterling work of 84-year-old Geoffrey.

"My wife Elizabeth, and I live in Warwick. We had owned narrow boats for 30 years, but now fancied a pad by the sea instead," he said. "We had noticed the blocks of flats on the harbour front, near the Gosport ferry, which seemed a possibility. Then we noticed on the green behind the flats a lovely late 17th century church, and went in. It was Holy Trinity.

"The lady looking after the church showed us the church and the amazing historic organ dating from 1720. I fell in love with the place. She told me her friend was trying to sell her flat in a tower block, with a harbour view. We bought it that afternoon."

The pair attended Holy Trinity when in Gosport, and the then vicar gave Geoffrey permission to use the organ. It was in a sorry state. It was last rebuilt in 1897, and despite regular maintenance was ready for major restoration work. Many notes didn't play –



Geoffrey Holroyde with the organ at Holy Trinity, Gosport

particularly in the winter when the heating was on.

The vicar left soon after Geoffrey had arrived. During the interregnum, Geoffrey played for many of the services and made some preparations for a possible restoration. When the present vicar, the Rev Andy Davis arrived, Geoffrey became the honorary organist, and agreed to drive a project to raise funds and get the organ restored.

The minimum work needed for

the organ was around £160,000. Some £42,000 was raised through an ambitious programme of concerts, an 'adopt an organ pipe' initiative, and ruthless begging from individuals. Charitable grants were also secured including one for £8,000 from the Hampshire and the Islands Historic Churches Trust.

Geoffrey became honorary director of music and secured recognition of the importance of the organ as a 'national treasure' beyond the boundaries of Gosport, and by people whose opinions carried weight.

He said: "I felt the time was right to seek Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) support. I was joined by Dr Carey Bowker, the organ fund treasurer, who steered the HLF application with determination and attention to detail. Carey was instrumental in achieving the HLF grant of £167,000."

HLF was impressed by the quality of the application and the creative ideas and awarded this grant so that the church could not only restore the organ, but also promote and preserve it for generations to come.

Work has started on a DVD

telling the story of its link to world-famous composer George Frederic Handel, its restoration and its place in Gosport. Also in the pipeline is the creation of a model 16-pipe organ with big keys in the church for children and young people to have a go on.

"Anyone who has ever put together an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund will understand what I mean when I say it is quite a terrifying experience. It is a very lengthy process and you have no idea how the trustees are going to react to the application," Geoffrey said. "When we found out that we had been awarded even more than we applied for it was just such an amazing relief.

"The organ was rebuilt by Andrew Cooper who is based on the Isle of Wight. It was nice to be able to use a local person. We have gone on raising money because we want to build an endowment fund so its subsequent maintenance will be guaranteed for years to come. We are now working on renovation of the casework, as that has seen better days."

The restoration project helped to establish the church as a centre for music, drawing audiences and performers from far and wide. It has become renowned for its regular programme of concerts.

Now it wants to branch out into dance and drama, exhibitions of painting, drawing, photography and sculpture, as well as film, lectures and discussions. And it wants a volunteer honorary artistic director to drive the project and

have organised 108 concerts. I'm losing my creativity and I shall be 85 by then. I'm getting old!

"It is time for me to step down and for someone with fresh ideas to drive it forward. I will enjoy having more time to play the organ! I would like to say thank you to the vicar Andy Davis, who has been hugely supportive of my initiatives, however risky!"

Geoffrey doesn't have any firm plans for his retirement, but he is convinced that something will come along for him to do.

"My whole life has been a series of accidents or coincidences, whichever way you choose to look at it," he said. "I am a Christian and I certainly think that there is influence in our lives that is greater than us. Nobody could possibly disagree with the Christian principles of how one should live one's life."

Geoffrey was born in Sheffield and moved to Stockport, where he became a choirboy at St George's at the age of nine. The family then moved to Huddersfield when he was 11, and he was a chorister there and took organ lessons.

When the regular organist was called up for military service in the Second World War, Geoffrey ended up playing the organ for church services aged only 12.

At 14, he won an organ scholarship to Wrekin College. At 16 he planned to go on to study music, but his dad wanted him to study for a physics degree instead.

He was head of an inner-city

my faith

Geoffrey Holroyde stumbled across Holy Trinity Church in Gosport by accident. But thanks to him, its historic organ, played by Handel, has been restored in an ambitious project

really put the church on the map as a centre for music and the arts.

To find out more about this role, contact the Rev Andy Davis on 023-9258 0173 or andy-chris@adavis.fsbusiness.co.uk, or Geoffrey on geoffrey.holroyde@btinternet.com. Geoffrey will be stepping down from his role as honorary director of music in December, though he will still continue to play the organ.

"Being the director of music is incredibly hard work," he said. "By the end of this year, I shall

comprehensive in Coventry, then director of Coventry Polytechnic, and finally the director of GEC Marconi Management College.

Alongside his paid work, he has always indulged his passion for music. For 10 years he led the music at St Mary's Church, Warwick, and later established a choir of 24 young people in Coventry Cathedral. After retiring, he graduated in 1995 with a second degree, in music, at Birmingham Conservatoire, where he is now an honorary life fellow.

Historic organ played by Handel

THE historic organ described as a "national treasure" can be traced back to the 18th century, when it was owned by the Duke Chandos who employed the world-famous composer, George Frederic Handel.

It was built by Abraham Jordan, for the Duke of Chandos, in 1720, and at that time Handel was the duke's composer-in-residence and would have advised on its building.

After the duke died in the mid-1740s, the organ was

bought at auction by Holy Trinity Church for £117.

It was originally installed in the west gallery in 1748 and moved to its present location in 1867. It has been enlarged and added to over the years. The present organ was built by William Hill in 1897, but some of the pipework dates back to 1720.

BBC Songs of Praise presenter Pam Rhodes once described it as a "national treasure".

To find out more, visit: www.holytrinitygosport.co.uk.