

## **Old High Church Organ Restoration: an invitation to schools**

**Peter W Nimmo: Minister of Old High St Stephen's Church**

I would like to invite your school to take part in a unique project!

The Old High Church stands on St Michael's Mount at the riverside in Inverness City Centre. It is the oldest Church in Inverness. There has been a church on the site since Celtic times, when St Columba visited and converted King Brude and his people in 565 AD. Although the existing building dates mainly from 1772, parts of the tower date back to Mediaeval times. The Church might be termed 'the parish Church of the City of Inverness' for it has been the scene of many important occasions in the history of the city, including 'Kirking of the Council', an annual service which continues to this day. Many Inverness worthies are memorialised within its walls, and there are moving memorials to the Cameron Highlanders, whose regimental church this was, including a wooden cross brought back from the battlefield of Martinpuich during the First World War. We even have stored in our tower a reusable 'plague coffin'! It is a building full of stories and history!

The Old High is blessed with an organ of world-class standard. 'Father' Henry Willis, the greatest of Victorian organ builders, installed our organ in the late 19th century. Our Kirk Session has taken the decision to restore the organ to its original condition, to give Inverness the finest pipe organ in the Highlands. Fund-raising is now well advanced, and work should begin after Easter 2010. The work will involve the total dismantling of the organ, with the thousands of parts being transported to a workshop for restoration, and the entire instrument being rebuilt as Willis had first intended. A major funder is the Heritage Lottery Fund, who have given the maximum grant available for this sort of project- an indication of the national importance of the project.

Our congregation regards this building as belonging to all the people of the city of Inverness, regardless of religious affiliation. Therefore we are keen to involve the community as much as possible in this project. We plan that the restored organ will play a role in opening up the building for all the people of the city by extending our programme of concerts and events open to all. Some of the funds for the restoration are being put aside into a 'music development fund', which, among other things, will allow us to offer scholarship to young people wishing to learn to play the organ. We are also inviting school groups to tour the building before, during and after the restoration project, giving pupils a once-in-a-generation insight into the art and craft of the organ builder. We also hope to involve school pupils in making a film about the Church's history.

Another project is our 'information boards' project. We have funding to create a series of information boards about the Church and the organ both inside the Church and in the historic graveyard. We are inviting local schools to be involved in this project by offering pupils the opportunity to research the history of the Church. They would use historical documents and artefacts and tap the knowledge of some of our church members. Pupils would be asked to contribute both to the text and the design of information boards. The finished designs would also appear in leaflet form and on the internet, and would. Full credit would of course be given to the pupils and their schools. We hope that this project would help teachers with various parts of the school curriculum, including religious education, social education, history, community involvement, art, music, technology, and English, Gaelic and modern languages.

I invite you to visit our website [www.oldhighststephens.com](http://www.oldhighststephens.com) for further information about the congregation of Old High St Stephen's (including its history), and our new organ website at <http://www.ohss-churchorgan.co.uk/> (from where you can download extra copies of this document).

If you would like to organise a tour, give a concert, take part in the information boards project, or have any other ideas for involving your school in this historic project, please contact me at [peternimmo@minister.com](mailto:peternimmo@minister.com) or at 01463 250 802. I look forward to working with you!

***The patron of our project is David Sutherland CBE:***

“I am extremely privileged to be Patron of this Restoration Appeal, as the Father Henry Willis organ at the Old High Church is the work of a master craftsman and thus a historic asset to the city and wider Highlands.

“As an Invernessian, I appreciate the Old High’s heritage as the ‘town church’. I believe it would be a severe blow should this ancient organ be unable to play the tunes and hymns for which it was so skilfully designed.

“As patron, I urge individuals and businesses to consider contributing to this deserving cause – to revive the majesty of this historic organ as a cultural benefit to our area.”

***Another supporter is the Provost of Inverness, Jimmy Gray:***

“The Old High Church has been a central feature in the history of Inverness and now, with City status, it is right that this Church is recognised for that. The restoration of this important Victorian organ will rightfully raise its profile as being historically significant and encourage those with an interest in music and history to the centre of the Old City”.