

Derby & District Organists' Association

Registered Charity No. 510567

Newsletter



In Search of the World's Oldest Organ

Inspired by a personal visit to Sion in Switzerland last October I published an article about the reputed 'world's oldest organ' in the [November Newsletter](#). I soon realised that there was much more to the story than Sion and, after a bit more online research, I gave a talk following the AGM about rival claimants. Then, thanks to a tip from Dr Tamsin Jones, our newest member, I was able to push the story back a further 300 years. More of that later.

It is no surprise that there comes a time in the natural life of a pipe organ, an instrument with many moving parts, that requires repairs and the replacement of worn or damaged components. The repair-free lifespan is extremely variable, depending upon many factors and, above all, the quality of the original materials and workmanship. Perhaps anything from 15 to 100 years might be reasonably expected in the absence of environmental incidents and accidents. Over-arching all practical issues however, there

will always be the unpredictable variables of generational change. Each generation feels the need to do something differently: tastes, fashions, needs and conditions of use change; technical innovations come along, but affordability is usually a final arbiter. All these factors combine to make it very rare for an instrument to survive in the state that it was originally built. So prevalent are 'mongrels' in the world's historical stock of organs, exceptions are readily celebrated when a prestigious builder can be credited, such as "Father Willis", "Cavaillé-Coll", or "Silbermann", etc. The brief histories presented here, all illustrate the prevalence of change.

Over time, the organ case might be the most ancient component when a builder decides to retain an expensive or very beautiful piece of furniture but is otherwise compelled to create completely new contents. Then there is the common situation where some old pipes survive alongside new contents. Multiple rebuilds over many years can blur the antiquity of an organ or its components making the process of

DDOA Meetings 2026

Saturday 28th February 2.30 pm
Celebrity Lecture by Gordon Stewart at St John's Church Hall, Mickleover
See page 8.

Other Events

Saturday 31st January, 1.00 - 7.00 pm
Bloomsbury Organ Day
Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church,
235 Shaftesbury Ave, LONDON WC2H 8EP
Recital by Loreto Aramendi [Details](#).

Sunday 1st February 6.15 pm
Derby Cathedral. *La Nativité du Seigneur*
(Messiaen). Alex Binns (organ)
Retiring collection.

Your Association

New Chairman and Committee 2026

Andy Storer (Chair)
Peter Shepherd (Vice-Chair)
John Maxwell-Jones (Secretary)
Gillian Chatto (Treasurer)
Laurence Rogers (Newsletter Editor)
Denis Littleton
Tony Westerman
Alex Binns (Past Chair)



Andy Storer (Chairman)

Subscriptions for 2026

These are now due. Please respond to the Treasurer's reminder notice. Email recipients: If you have not received the reminder, please check the contents of your Trash folder.

Photo: The 1457 organ at Rysum Church, reputed to be the oldest working organ in Germany.

certifying a single date very difficult or impossible. The further back one delves, the murkier the dating process becomes. The Sion example, with relatively few interventions over five centuries, is maybe one of the best for transparency.

The list of candidates

- 1435 Sion, Switzerland
- 1457 Rysum, Germany
- 1475 Bologna, Italy
- 1479 Utrecht, Netherlands
- 1425? Ostönnen, Germany
- 1500? Kiedrich, Germany
- c.1500 Old Radnor, Wales

Germany

Sometimes the best-preserved instruments are to be found in small towns and villages that fell on hard times such that ambitious modernisation could never be afforded. This is the case of our closest rival to Sion; **Rysum** (pronounced "Reesum") has a population of less than 700 in the extreme north-west corner of Germany by the River Ems. The prominent Dutch city of Groningen lies 15 miles away on the opposite bank of the river, and it was from here that the organ for the church was purchased. The payment was in kind; the farmers of Rysum paid their best ten cows for the organ's construction. In order to transport the animals across the river a written permit was required and the entry for this was dated to 1457. This is taken as the origin of the organ, but it was probably built a few years earlier. Like most organs of the late Gothic period, the organ built by Harmannus had a blockwerk structure; i.e. all the ranks sounded together like a giant mixture. (I find it interesting that medieval builders sought to make their organs louder by adding pipes at higher pitches rather than multiples of 8' pitches. This practice evolved several centuries before the harmonic theory of sound had developed.)

Originally it stood in the choir on a rood-screen, but in 1513 the organ was moved to the west-end gallery and the possibility of playing the 8' Praestant pipes in the façade separately from the full blockwerk was added. This involved a separate wind supply and the function was controlled with a large



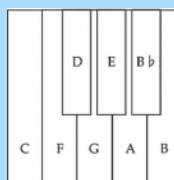
Rysum console with Praestant control lever

lever just above the music stand. In 1680 the organ builder Joachim Kayser carried out repairs and created the slider soundboard enabling the selection of individual stops. After a further two centuries of periodic repairs, including the addition of a pull-down pedalboard for the bass pipes, some organ builders in 1915 declared "The organ is totally worn-out..... It is impossible to say exactly how long the instrument will remain useable, because its extreme age could lead to sudden failure." (Sounds a bit like a house-surveyor's report!) Mercifully the instrument was not scrapped, but it had to wait until 1959 for a thorough reconstruction by Jürgen Ahrend. Numerous details of the 1513 specification were reinstated including the removal of the pedalboard, reconstruction of some of the lead ranks, and mean-tone temperament with pure thirds was restored. All the prevailing pipework is made from hammered lead giving it a quite flutey, warm, rounded tone, quite different from Schnitger instruments possessing pipes with tin content. [Listen](#).

'Short octave'

It was common for the bottom octave on early keyboard instruments to omit C#, D#, F# and G#. Keys based on these roots were seldom used in mean-tone tuning systems.

For organs it also usefully reduced the number of large bass pipes needed.



'Gothic' organ at Rysum church, north Germany

- 1457 Blockwerk organ on rood screen by Harmannus of Groningen.
- 1513 rebuilt on western gallery
- 1680 rebuilt by Joachim Kayser with independent stops.
- 1959 restored to 1513 spec. by Jurgen Ahrend.

Praestant	8
Gedackt	8
Octave	4
Octave	2
Mixtur	III-IV*
Sesquialtera	II*
Trompette	8*

*Reconstructed by Ahrend & Brunzema. Recent silvering of the façade pipes with tin foil,

Italy

The oldest organ in Italy is to be found in the **Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna**. The building of this enormous church, dedicated to the patron saint of the city, began in 1390. It was intended to rival the size of St Peter's, Rome, but its vast ornate marble western façade was never completed. Uniquely it hosts two historic organs which face each other high in the choir either side of the altar. The elder of the two, on the right hand side, was built between 1471 and 1475 by Lorenzo di Giacomo da Prato. In 1530 it accompanied the coronation of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. It has ten independent stops, almost double the normal number, and was built at a time when the practice was well established of performing sacred texts with alternating contrasting musical forces. Thus with psalms, the organist's improvisations of a verset would alternate with the choir singing the counter versets in the Gregorian chant. It is useful to understand this context in that the organ, as a soloist, did not have to possess great power, so wind pressures were very low, never more than 2". The numerous stops therefore were used for conjuring variety of tone rather than loudness. (It was several centuries later that congregational singing was allowed in the Catholic church.)

The second organ, on the left, was built by Baldassarre Malamini in 1596. It was added to allow the performance of polychoral compositions. Both had matching



Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna. Organ by de Prato, 1475

Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna, Italy

1475 organ by Lorenzo di Giacomo da Prato.
1982 restored (Luigi Tagliavini)

Principale Contrabasso	24	(low G)
Principale	12	(low G)
Ottava	4	
Flauto in VIII	8	
Flauto in XII	2 ² / ₃	
Duodecima	2 ² / ₃	
Quintadecima	2	
Decimanona	19	1 ¹ / ₃
Vigesimaseconda	22	1
Vigesimasesta	26	2 ² / ₃
Vigesimanona	29	1 ¹ / ₂

cases covered and decorated in the Baroque era. In the passage of time, both instruments must have been remodelled several times, but a major project to restore their ancient voices was conducted between 1974 and 1982. [Listen](#).



Basilica of San Petronio, Bologna.

commissioned a working copy of the instrument using meticulous research on the original parts conducted by specialists Rudi van Straten and Wim Diepenhorst. The Amsterdam Orgelpark supported this plan by commissioning Orgelmakerij Reil in Heerde to build this copy which has been given the name The Van Straten Organ. The result is an instrument that mirrors the sound of the late Middle Ages.

The copy has, just like the 1479 original once had, two manuals. The lower manual is a *Blokwerk*; the lower keys sound seven pipes which increase as you go higher such that the highest key sounds 18 pipes. The second manual, the *Bovenwerk*, has one rank of pipes and a Cymbel. The manuals may be coupled. The pedal clavier has its own pipes; the *Bourdonnen*. [Listen](#).



Amsterdam Orgelpark. Van Straten Organ

Netherlands

The oldest organ in the Netherlands was built in 1479 by Peter Gerritsz for the **Nicolaï Church, Utrecht**. It was used there for centuries up to 1886 when it was moved to the brand new Rijksmuseum. Here it resided, sadly not playable, until 1940 when the whole museum was evacuated because of impending war. The medieval organ was dismantled and stored and essentially remained in this state until well after the war. The Dutch State, owner of the organ, in 1957 gave the empty organ case to the **Koorkerk in Middleburg** where it may be seen today. The organ contents are preserved for study and research.

The Peter Gerritsz Organ Foundation strives, together with the government, for funds to reunite the organ and its case back in the Utrecht Nicolaïkerk where it was originally built. Whilst the reunification project is still under discussion, the Foundation has



Koorkerk, Middleburg. Empty case.

Nicolaï Kerk, Utrecht

1479 Blokwerk organ by Peter Gerritsz
1547 Rugpositief added
1600 Pedal board added with 8' trumpet
1886 transferred to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
1940 Dismantled and moved to safe storage
1957 Case given to Koorkerk, Middleburg
2012 Replica constructed as the Van Straten Organ in Orgelpark, Amsterdam

2 manuals:
Blokwerk + Bovenwerk

Two more German organs

The Gothic-Baroque organ of **St. Andreas in Ostönnen** claims to be among the oldest playable organs in the world and there is speculation that it is the *oldest* among the organs described previously!

The origins of the instrument remain unclear despite extensive research; neither the original builder nor the intended location is known. However, it is certain that it was



St Andreas Church, Ostönnen



Ancient pipework behind the Baroque facade

originally located in **Alt St Thomae Church in Soest**, a larger neighbouring city in central Germany. The first documented repair occurred in 1586 by a master named Bartholdus. He added two new stops: a Gedackt made from old pipes and a newly built trumpet. Evidence from dendrology tests suggest that the wood of the wind chests dates between 1425 and 1431, with some parts dating back to 1410.

In 1720, the then 21-year-old Johann Patrocius Möller was commissioned to build a new organ for the St Thomae Church, but was required to take the "old ruinous" instrument as part payment. He relocated this organ to St. Andreas Church in Ostönnen in 1721-1722. He added the missing notes from the former short octave and redesigned the case in Baroque style, retaining the original prospect pipes. The organ underwent various repairs and modifications over the centuries, including significant changes in 1820, 1874, and a major restoration by Paul Ott in 1963.

A comprehensive restoration by Rowan West began in 2000, aiming to restore the organ to its 1722 state. All pipes dating from around 1500 were preserved and reused, while pipes made by Paul Ott were replaced. The prospect pipes were covered with tin foil and gold leaf according to historical records. [Listen](#).

Another of the oldest playable organs in Germany is to be found in the church of **St Valentin in Kiedrich** in the state of Hesse. The instrument was built around 1500

by an anonymous organ builder, first probably with one manual. Repairs are documented for 1686 and 1692. Elias Salvianer restored the organ in 1710. His contract documents the disposition of the organ for the first time. A pedal was added in 1722. From about 1790 the instrument was not playable until its state was discovered by the English Baronet, Sir John Sutton. He financed a renovation, performed from 1858 by the Belgian organ builder August Hooghuys from Bruges. From 1985 to 1987, the organ was restored again by Orgelbau Kuhn. [Listen](#).



St Valentin, Kiedrich

c.1500 one manual organ by unknown builder
 1710 restored by Elias Salvianer
 1722 pedals added
 1790 unplayable
 1858 renovation financed by Sir John Sutton
 1987 restoration by Kuhn Orgelbau

St Andreas, Ostönnen

Pre-1500 one manual organ by unknown builder for St Thomas Church, Soest. (Windchests wood dated c.1425)
 1586 enlarged by Bartholdus
 1722 relocated to Ostönnen by Johann Möller in a Baroque-style case
 1820, 1874, 1963 changes
 2000 restored to 1722 spec. by Rowan West

Praestant	8'
Gedackt	8'
Octav	4'
Quinta	3'
Superoctav	2'
Sesquialter	II
Mixtur	IV
Trömpete	8'*

576 pipes (326 from 15th cent.)

Great Britain

A search for the oldest organ in the Britain usually finishes at the Parish Church of **St. Stephen, Old Radnor**, in Powys, central Wales. Alas, only the case survives. It is thought to have been built between 1500 to 1530 during the notorious reign of Henry VIII. The present contents were built by J.W. Walker in 1872.

Of Derbyshire interest, the case design was imitated by Peter Collins in the 1998 rebuild of the organ in St Wystan's, Repton.



St Stephen's, Old Radnor. Ancient organ case

Jerusalem

The story for the search of the world's oldest organ took a surprising leap less than six months ago in September 2025. The 'Oldest organ in Christendom,' dating back to the 11th century, was unveiled to the public at the Saint Saviour's Monastery in Jerusalem's Old City. This was the culmination of a project pioneered by Dr David Catalunya of the Complutense Institute of Musical Sciences, Madrid. Several years ago whilst conducting research at the University of Oxford he first learned of a cache of ancient pipes unearthed in 1906 in a former cemetery by the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. There were 222 copper pipes, a carillon of 13 bells, and an array of other liturgical objects left behind by the Crusaders. The artefacts were soon placed on display at the Franciscan Archaeological Museum, today's Terra Sancta Museum in the monastery, which had been founded in Jerusalem only a few years earlier. For more than a century, however, they attracted little scholarly attention. The notion that this ancient organ might one day be heard again, eight centuries after it was likely last played, remained unexplored. Dr Catalunya's project studied the pipes, including their materials, construction methods, and acoustics, with the object of creating a faithful replica of the instrument. During the analysis, he discovered that eight of the original pipes had survived in perfect condition. Photographs show them mounted on a keyboard alongside carefully crafted replicas.

It is known that Byzantine communities were already using organs as early as the 4th or 5th centuries. It is thought that the organ was brought to Bethlehem from France by European crusaders who reached the Holy Land in 1099. After two centuries of political upheaval, Jerusalem fell to Muslim rule in the mid-13th century. Amid the turmoil, the church's Christian community likely hid some of its treasures underground, hoping to safeguard them. "This organ was buried with the hope that one day it would play again," said Catalunya. After 800 years of silence, the miracle of its rebirth has been achieved. [Listen](#).

Laurence Rogers



Dr David Catalunya explains the structure of the pipes



Dr David Catalunya demonstrates the sound of the ancient pipes

Your Association

New members

We are happy to welcome Dr Tamsin Jones, Director of Music at St Mark's Church, Winshill and Eilidh Harris, organ student at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. We look forward to meeting them at futures events here and in Birmingham.

Organ Restoration Project 2025

Despite the general decline in the use of the organ for services (and the availability of someone to play!) four grants have been awarded this year to churches having an instrument of the type on which Ed Stow might have worked.

The grants offered by the DDOA are for the restoration of small instruments, usually with mechanical action, though pneumatic or electric pedal and stop actions are not excluded. The

criteria for the grants and the necessary forms can be found on the DDOA website, but essentially the grant will be for up to 25% of the total cost, with a maximum grant of £5,000. Churches must demonstrate that: they have a future; someone to play; funds to cover the majority of the work, and that the organ is regularly used for services.

It is important that the procedure for obtaining a grant is followed. Once an application has been received, a small number of Committee members will visit before work commences and make a recommendation to the Committee. Once agreed in principle, a letter of intent is sent to the PCC. Funds are retained by the DDOA until the work is completed to a satisfactory standard; following a further visit to the church to assess the completed work, funds are released.

There is already one restoration project for 2026. Let us hope that there will be others.

Organs restored in 2025

Hazelwood: St John. C Lloyd 1902

Swarkestone: St James.

C Lloyd & Co 1876

Bradley: All Saints. JH Adkins 1954

Pending restoration in 2026

Breedon-on-the-Hill: St Mary and

St Hardulph. JH Adkins 1951

Tony Westerman

Member's News

Adopt-a-Pipe Project at St Anne's

Following Tom Corfield's article in the [November Newsletter](#), fund-raising for the new organ at St Anne's, Derby is underway. Details of the story so far, plans for the future and how you can contribute are now published on this website: www.adoptapipe.co.uk

Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Students - Update

This will be the fifth year that the DDOA has supported an organ student at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) with an Edmund Stow Legacy bursary. In the present academic year the recipient is **Eilidh Harris** whom we also welcome as a student member of the DDOA. Eilidh is an undergraduate organ student at the RBC, studying under the tutelage of Daniel Moulton and Nicholas Wearne with generous support from the RBC McDonald Foundation Scholarship. Originally from Glasgow, Eilidh has previously held positions as the Bernard Porter Organ Scholar at St Mary's Cathedral Glasgow and Organist of All Saints, Jordanhill. During that time Eilidh also studied as a pianist and flautist at the Music School of Douglas Academy.

Eilidh has performed in concert with Sowne of Organe on historical instruments across Scotland, and as an accompanist for concerts and competitions (including the Cumnock Tryst and Rotary Young Musician Finals) in Scotland and the UK.



Sowne of Organe

Here is some news of previous bursary recipients.



Elli-Mae McGlone has recently completed her Final Year Undergraduate Studies at the RBC and is currently Assistant Organist at St Peter's Collegiate Church, Wolverhampton.

Elli-Mae has performed in concert at venues such as Bristol Cathedral, Leeds Minster and St. Lawrence Jewry, London, and, locally, has given memorable recitals at St Modwen's, Burton-upon-Trent. She is very much looking forward to performing more concerts as musical life opens up.

Recently she appeared in the documentary 'Crafting a Legacy'; she was playing the Juliet organ and teaching a class of children in a primary school.

Presently she is studying at the RBC for a masters in conducting. After completing her training, Elli-Mae hopes to inspire younger generations through teaching and performance, as she herself has been inspired by the creativity of other musicians.

Godfrey Leung writes:

It has been a while since I had written for the DDOA, when I returned triumphant from the Dame Gillian Weir Messiaen Prize at Beverley in 2024. I have since progressed on to my final year of my undergraduate studies at the RBC.

The final year calls for extra attention, as it consists of 75% of my degree. My focus for this year has shifted to finishing off unfinished business, ensuring there will be no regrets as I may never encounter the rigid practice discipline and tutorship the conservatoire environment offers once I enter the field of work. My unfinished business includes: completing several sonatas in which I had only learnt selected movements, exploring remaining areas of the organ repertoire to round off my broad repertoire portfolio of four years in higher education.

I am also mindful of leaving a legacy after my departure. Away from the console, I spent my summer holidays filtering, organising, and cataloguing all the music donations the RBC organ department has received over the years from various organ associations and retired concert organists, such as Dame Gillian Weir. Prior to my work, these were gathering dust as they lacked organisation and discouraged use as items were challenging to locate. Since the launch of my catalogue, I am proud to say usage has increased by 200% according to the loan book. Conveniently, I have been offered the role of RBC Orchestral Librarian for the 25-26 academic year as part of my final project, becoming the first student from a non-orchestral department to hold such a role. The wealth of orchestral experience I acquired in my previous life as a violinist proved valuable.



Tom Howell writes:

Four years ago your Editor asked me to write a piece about a week in the life of an organ student at RBC. Now, I am almost the other side of my studies with Dan Moulton and Nick Wearne.

Firstly, I must say thank you for your support and investment in me and mention that the money from the DDOA bursary was put to great use. It afforded many essential books of repertoire and the remainder helped purchase my iPad - which I could not survive without. This is because all my music making now happens from this precious little screen which accompanies me here, there and everywhere. Most recently, last week, I went to France, to accompany two Handel 'Messiah' concerts conducted by Dr. David Flood. The month before that, I gave a recital in Westminster Abbey (photo opposite) and another in St. Andrew's University.

The conservatoire is a busy and exciting place that quenches musical thirst daily. Over the past few years, I have enjoyed accompanying countless classes and recitals for the opera department. I have also studied the harpsichord and play continuo in an early music group that has won the RBC Corton Hyde Early Music Prize in '24 and '25. Beyond the Conservatoire, I have won prizes in organ competitions in York Minster and Beverley Minster, and friendships have taken me to Poland which included a little improvising on live local radio.

What has been special about four years of tuition (and over £80k of student debt) in Birmingham? Well, Birmingham has enabled me to specialise in organ performance, justify my musical decisions in a scholarly manner, and acquaint myself with some of the leading expert organ teachers in Europe and beyond. Daily practice on arguably the most sensitive instruments in the country and weekly lessons with energetic Dan and thoughtful Nick have been the backbone of this education unlike any other. Importantly, I can now do battle with all those scary looking pedalboards of eccentric dimensions and unequally winded organs as if we had been friends for years. I dislike the adjective 'colourful', but I do genuinely believe that study at RBC cultivates interesting performers. There's no slap-dash 'that'll do for Sunday'. The Welsh say 'Dw i'n canu'r organ' (I sing the organ) and that is what RBC does! Explainable yet imaginative organ playing that holds up under pressure.

Alongside this, it has been, for the past three years, my duty and joy to serve the RC church of English Martyrs, Sparkhill as the parish organist. This job came about completely by accident and there's nothing so permanent as a temporary situation. I have been able to consolidate a musical tradition here that suits the community (not a worship song in sight). Apart from my setting of the ordinary that I composed, we also sing fun things like antiphons at the beginning of Mass and during communion and Sequences when they are so appointed. There is no choir here but occasionally, singers from the conservatoire will offer little treats through the year (e.g. Haydn's 'Benedictus' for soprano). I also sing and cantor the psalm from the west gallery organ. I did think that a lack of choir might be somewhat lonely, but it does take a certain skill to encourage and improve a body of untrained voices. (This is a subject I am very interested in and do hope to pursue more fully at some stage). Whilst here, I have compiled a list of 'easy' organ voluntaries for every Sunday and feast of the year. I do hope to publish this anthology at some time.



I have a few big decisions to make for my next musical journey. It will be interesting to see where I'll be in another four years. At present, I don't really know where or what that will be. I am rather excited about many elements of music but I do hope that I can work as a classical musician with integrity and at least afford to live parallel to or above the UK minimum wage. In the short term at the Conservatoire my mind is focused on my end of year organ recital and my project performing Pre-Reformation English liturgical organ music by John Redford, Thomas Preston, Philip ap Rhys etc. on the department's Lady of Clare organ (photo).

Thank you DDOA for your support and interest.



Flashback to 2025



St Mark's, Broomhill, Pipes in the Peaks, Holy Trinity, Millhouses, St John's, Ranmoor, Plainsong Workshop, All Saints, Mickleover, Victoria Hall, Hanley, Chairman's Hauptwerk

Forthcoming DDOA Meeting

Saturday 28th February at 2.30 pm

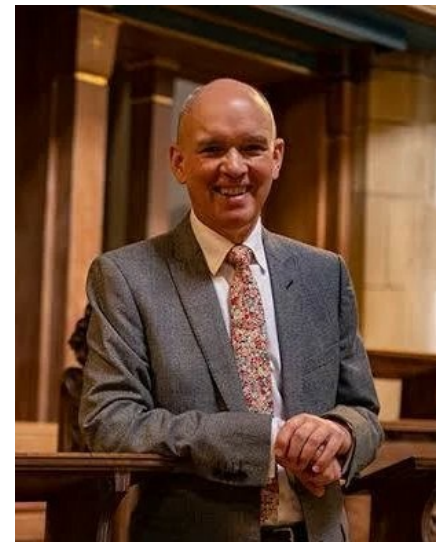
at St John's Church Hall, Devonshire Drive, Mickleover, Derby DE3 9HD

'Bach's Hidden Numbers' Celebrity Lecture by Gordon Stewart



We shall be privileged to welcome Gordon Stewart, the renowned concert organist and Organist Emeritus at Huddersfield Town Hall. Gordon has chosen to talk about the mystical role of numbers in Bach's music, a fascinating subject which has provoked curiosity and speculation for generations of musicians. Having studied the research, Gordon will present an authoritative interpretation of the story in his signature lively style. Be ready to be both informed and entertained.

If you wish to attend, please inform John Maxwell-Jones (johnmaxj@yahoo.com, 0789 0241673) This will help us provide an appropriate quantity of takeaway resources and John's famous cakes! The church has good space for car parking.



Items of news or articles for the March / April edition of the *Newsletter* should reach the Editor by **Monday 23rd February**, either via e-mail: DDOAnews@gmail.com or by post: Dr Laurence Rogers, 24 St.David's Crescent, Coalville, Leicestershire LE67 4SS. The Secretary, John Maxwell-Jones, may be reached via mail@derbyorganists.co.uk Please visit the DDOA Website www.derbyorganists.co.uk for information about Association activities, past editions of the newsletter, photo gallery and many special features of local interest.



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