

THE SPOFFORTHS AT SOUTHWELL MINSTER

By John Sheppard, February 2017



Thomas Spofforth (1742-1826), born in Southwell, was apprenticed to Edmund Ayrton as organist for a premium of £11. On Ayrton's death in 1764 he was appointed as organist, a post he held for over 50 years. Although John Byng said that he was a fine organist in his youth by the time the composer John Marsh visited the Minster in 1817 he was described as "an old deaf man" who "sadly overpowered" the singers. He is said to have been fugal in his habits. The Charity Board in the South Transept records a total of £650 left for the poor of Southwell and he also left £200 each to the Nottingham County Hospital and the General Lunatic Asylum near Nottingham. Ten guineas were left to the Minster Chapter "for the purchase of the best services and anthems for the use of the church". He was buried on the south side of the Minster although the grave slab is at present unreadable.

Thomas' younger brother William, a currier (he dressed and coloured tanned leather), had a son – Reginald, born in 1769 or 1770. Thomas paid for his education and the boy became a chorister and was articled to him as organist. He learnt other instruments and took part in services and concerts in Southwell and elsewhere. Sir Richard Kaye offered him the post of organist at Lincoln Cathedral but he decided instead to go to London in 1789. He was given an introduction to Dr Benjamin Cooke, organist of Westminster Abbey, and studied with him as well as playing the organ there. In 1793 he started to write glees for "The Nobleman's and Gentleman's Catch Club as well as playing in orchestras in London theatres. Later he devoted most of his time to teaching. He always worked hard, and was said to rise at 4.00am to visit schools out of London where he began to teach at 8.00, taught for 10 to 12 hours without refreshment, returned home by 9 or 10 to a hearty but hurried meal before sitting up practising or composing. Unsurprisingly by 1819 he became too ill to continue. He returned to Southwell in April 1826 when his uncle Thomas was dying and was left the bulk of Thomas's estate after the charitable donations referred to above. Reginald died in September 1827, a bachelor, and was buried in Kensington Parish Church.

Reginald is best remembered for his glees, including "Hail smiling morn", often sung as a Christmas carol in Yorkshire although the words have nothing to do with Christmas. The Minster Library has a copy of a biography by John Bayley of Tooting donated by Reginald's nephew, Thomas Chamley. Samuel Spofforth, Reginald's brother, became a chorister at the Minster in 1793 and later was organist at Peterborough Cathedral for 1798 to 1805 and Lichfield from 1807 to 1864. He may well be the same Samuel Spofforth who was installed as a bass "singingman" in the Minster in 1798.

The Minster Library has some incomplete handwritten parts for a "Sanctus and Commandments in Eb", variously described as being by J, Samuel or Thomas Spofforth. It also has the parts for many anthems and services written out by hand by Thomas, a task which will have added significantly to his income..