

Helping others to worship for 50 years

HE became organist at St Mildred's Church in Whippingham back in 1966 – and he's still doing it today!

Les Snow, 72, has been organist and choirmaster at St Mildred's for more than 50 years, and has performed the same roles at nearby St James Church in East Cowes for 47 years.

Music has been an integral part of his life, from his experiences as a young chorister to teaching schoolchildren to play the piano, singing on cruise ships, and leading choral groups.

And it's also been an integral part of his Christian faith. He expresses his own faith through hymns, anthems and organ recitals, as well as helping others to worship God.

Les calculates he has played for more than 6,000 church services and 900 weddings.

For much of that time, he has dashed from the end of the 9.30am Sunday service at St James to be there in time for the 11.15am service at St Mildred's. For 10 years he was playing at a third Sunday service in Newport as well.

"For me, the music helps to enliven the words of the hymns, and helps people to worship," he said. "I have had a wonderful musical life, most of it working for the Lord.

"There has been so much joy teaching church choirs, schools choirs and the local Wootton Choral Society."

Les was baptised in St Mildred's Church in 1944 and was in the Sunday School, Junior Church and church choir. He played hymns for all three on the piano and organ before his teens, and for a full church service in 1956, aged 12.

His parents were staunch believers, and he grew up knowing about the faith and gradually came to make it his own. At the age of 19 he started playing the organ regularly for a Unitarian church in Newport, which gave him sufficient experience to take over as the St Mildred's organist in 1966.

"The previous organist died,



Les Snow at the organ in St Mildred's Church, Whippingham: (right) the church itself

and they asked me if I could take over," he said. "My dad said I should take this opportunity, and I'm still there now! In February 1970 I took over playing the organ and leading the choir at St James's too."

He studied the organ in the early 1970s with Christopher Gower at Portsmouth Cathedral, and his choirs sang Choral Evensong there.

He played for several important services broadcast live on BBC Radio Solent in both churches, and St James Church choir also made recordings of hymns for them.

The St Mildred's choir and later

choirs sang carols each Christmas at nearby Osborne House, which became famous as Queen Victoria's island home. At that point, it was a convalescent home for armed forces officers.

Les worked as an engineering design draughtsman for a variety of firms, including Vosper Thornycroft. In 1976 he became personnel officer there, which involved a lot of responsibility, and was also involved in teaching music to children at church.

"I felt a great satisfaction about teaching, and it felt as though the Lord was calling me to become a schoolteacher," he said. "I also had a friend that also worked

during the week and only returning to the island at weekends to see his family and play in church.

"I took assemblies there, played for school services in St Thomas's and St John's Churches. Later I did supply teaching at Carisbrooke C of E Primary and so played in St Mary's Church too."

Les was also a peripatetic music teacher, teaching piano at home for 40 years, singing for 30 years, and recorder and keyboard. He has been a cricketer, a table tennis player, and now plays golf at Osborne. He is also a weather

forecaster, and can repair cars, as well as doing other DIY jobs.

He has been a member of the PCC, regularly leads intercessions and reads the lesson at both churches. And because of St Mildred's royal connections, he has shook hands with Lord Mountbatten, then governor of the Isle of Wight – whose parents are buried in the churchyard – as well as Prince Philip, Prince Charles and Prince Edward when they visited the church over the years.

"My faith had developed gradually over the years, but there have been several crossroads in my life, such as when I decided to go into teaching," he said.

"I have felt the Lord guiding me to do the right thing. I have led some services in church and wondered about ordination, but I think I would miss leading the music.

"I like to play quietly before the service to help people to concentrate on God. I try to play softly and loudly at various points during the hymns, to help emphasise the words, and I play rousing music at the end of the service to send people away feeling uplifted.

"I sing solo during Communion these days at St Mildred's, although at St James I still have a small, very experienced adult choir, nothing like the choirs we used to have."

In the past 11 years, he has been on several cruises, singing on board, and also visiting churches around the world to play their organs. He has played organs as far apart as Greenland and New Zealand.

To mark 50 years as organist and choirmaster at St Mildred's, he held an organ recital there last November.

Les managed to inadvertently reveal the bronze plaque in his honour before it was supposed to be officially unveiled. It's now on the side of the organ loft.

"I'll never retire from music," he said. "I still feel spiritually uplifted by hymns, and I still think others get a lot out of it. It's a privilege to help people worship in this way."

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