

# Organist inspired to help lead worship

Young musician **Hallam Saunders** was grateful for a bursary scheme that saw him play our cathedral's organ regularly

WHEN Hallam Saunders first thought about playing the organ, he felt daunted by such a huge and powerful musical instrument.

Fast-forward seven years and he's had experience playing the organ at Portsmouth Cathedral, and is regularly playing for services in churches on the Isle of Wight.

Hallam, who is now 18, benefitted from a bursary scheme to help promising young musicians to gain experience on the organ. Having sung in choirs and played the piano, he was familiar with church music, but he was still quite nervous when he auditioned to play the organ as an 11-year-old.

"My dad had seen this advert for a bursary opportunity, and thought it would be a good thing," said Hallam. "The audition for it was at Holy Trinity Church, Ventnor, and I thought it looked like a huge, daunting instrument that I'd never master. I played a piece of piano music, and passed. That gave me the opportunity to learn in Portsmouth."

Hallam had grown up attending St John's Church, Newport, where he'd been part of the choir since the age of seven. Its church organist, John Matthews, originally gave Hallam his first experience of playing the



Hallam Saunders plays the organ in Mottistone Church on the Isle of Wight

organ after services.

The Young Organ Scholars Trust (YOST) bursary scheme saw him travel across to Portsmouth every Thursday on the hovercraft after school. He was taught by cathedral sub-organists Oliver Hancock and Sachin Gunga.

The scheme was supposed to last for five years, but during the pandemic lockdown, he had to learn via Zoom, practising on a smaller instrument at home. He ended up continuing with in-person

training until this year, passing his grade 8 exam with distinction alongside his A-levels.

"It was amazing to learn at the cathedral," he said. "Going from never playing the organ before to playing the cathedral organ was a bit of a baptism of fire. It's so powerful and it resounds through the whole building."

"It's quite something when you hear four or five seconds of echo after you've played the notes. Sometimes I would stay for Evensong after my

organ lesson, and just listen to it being played.

"I do enjoy helping to lead worship. Having sung in a choir from quite a young age, I know I enjoy being involved. Churches are somewhere I feel safe and calm, and playing timeless music that might be hundreds of years old feels like a real continuation of history."

Duncan Williams, the organist at Holy Trinity, Ventnor, recommended Hallam to the church congregations at Brook and Mottistone. He started playing once a month for Morning Prayer at St Mary's, Brook, then played for Evensong, and then started playing at Mottistone Church.

## 'Playing timeless music feels like a continuation of history'

"It is different to play the Psalms and *Magnificat* for Evensong, and that's something I had to get used to. I've also played for some weddings and funerals, and some Christmas services. I think the fact that I'm a new face is good, as there's not that many young organists."

Hallam has also played in the worship band at St John's, Newport, as well as recording organ accompaniments for hymns used in their digital services during lockdown. He's now off to study Computer Science at the University of Surrey in Guildford, and hopes



Hallam enjoys playing the organ for worship in churches in Mottistone and Brook

to find a church organ he can play there.

"I don't know if I'll have a career in music, but it's certainly a passion," he said. "I would like to be involved in music whatever I end up doing. But I am grateful for the bursary as without it I wouldn't have done any

of this. I'm very grateful for this unique opportunity, and for the confidence that has given me."

His father Mark said: "Thank you to those at the cathedral for teaching Hallam the organ and making him feel so welcome. You've instilled a real love for the organ and for church music in Hallam, which he will have with him forever."

"Portsmouth Cathedral is a special place and having it as part of his life throughout his teenage years has been a great blessing and benefit to him."

The Young Organ Scholars Trust (YOST) was created in 2013 to train and support the UK's next generation of organists.

It offers bursaries to train young musicians across the country whose families may not otherwise be able to afford organ lessons. Find out more on [www.yost.org.uk](http://www.yost.org.uk).

## Could you be an organ scholar?

**COULD you – or someone you know – be an organ scholar, learning to play the organ while being part of our cathedral community?**

**The organ scholar post is run jointly by Portsmouth Cathedral and Portsmouth Grammar School. There are at least two cathedral services for the organ scholar to play every week – often Evensong on Monday and all or part of another weekday service.**

**The organ scholar may be involved in the training of choristers, plays at services and assemblies at the school**

**and usually works in the school music department office too. The cathedral organ scholarship is worth £1,500, and the school post £9,000. Accommodation is provided in cathedral property. Recent organ scholars have moved on to play for universities and other cathedrals.**

**The Portsmouth experience also involves the opportunity to be a part of a small community of broad music-making, particularly as part of StopGap, the scholars' close harmony group.**

**Do email [music@portsmouthcathedral.org.uk](mailto:music@portsmouthcathedral.org.uk) for details.**