



Paul Hale

The Dean's Delight?

Dean Close School, Cheltenham – the new Nicholson organ

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I recall reading in 1969, as a 17-year-old organ fanatic, an advertisement by the John Compton organ company, then trading solely in electronic organs, proudly proclaiming that one of its products had been installed in the church of St Mary, Charlton Kings, near Cheltenham. I noted that the church had housed a 1902 Hill until then, and was sad at the thought that it was being displaced by an electrone. Alas, how many church organs have suffered similar displacement in the decades since then. As it happens, the Hill organ found a new home nearby, installed in the chapel of Dean Close School (Cheltenham), founded in 1886 as an independent school of an Evangelical nature, and named after the late Dean of Chester, the Very Revd Dr Francis Close (1797–1882), who had been Rector of Cheltenham from 1826 to 1856 – a priest firmly opposed to the Oxford Movement, alcohol, tobacco, horse racing and

the theatre. One wonders how he felt about organs...

The Hill organ was rebuilt and installed by Daniels of Clevedon, then a very busy firm, doing good solid work almost entirely in the field of electro-pneumatic rebuilds with tonal alterations. This was indeed their approach with the Hill organ, whose pipes were placed in an organ chamber on the north side of the handsome chapel (where the new organ now stands), the console being situated in the west gallery. With a new action and console, and tonal developments very much in the spirit of the time, the organ had the following synoptic specification:

- Great 16.8.8.8.4.4.2²/₃.2.III
- Swell 8.8.8.8.4.2²/₃.2.1³/₅.IV.16.8.4 (unit)
- Positive 8.4.4.2.1¹/₃.1.III.8
- Pedal 16.16.16(Gt).8.8.5¹/₃.4.4.2.16.8 (two flue units plus Swell reed unit)

Like all school organs it received a heavy pounding from enthusiastic young pupils and indifferent treatment by the Chapel's heating system. After more than four decades it was worn out mechanically and electrically, and distinctly dated tonally. Benjamin Nicholas, Director of Choral Music at Dean Close from 2005 to 2012, decided, with the enthusiastic backing of the Headmaster, that something needed doing, and that that something should be an entirely new organ. Aware of their triumphs at Llandaff and Bridlington – two organs of immense drive, colour and richness of tone, with tonal schemes which lend themselves with gusto to all periods of organ music and to hearty choral accompaniment – Ben knew that Nicholson's of Malvern could build just the sort of organ to fulfil the needs of the Chapel.

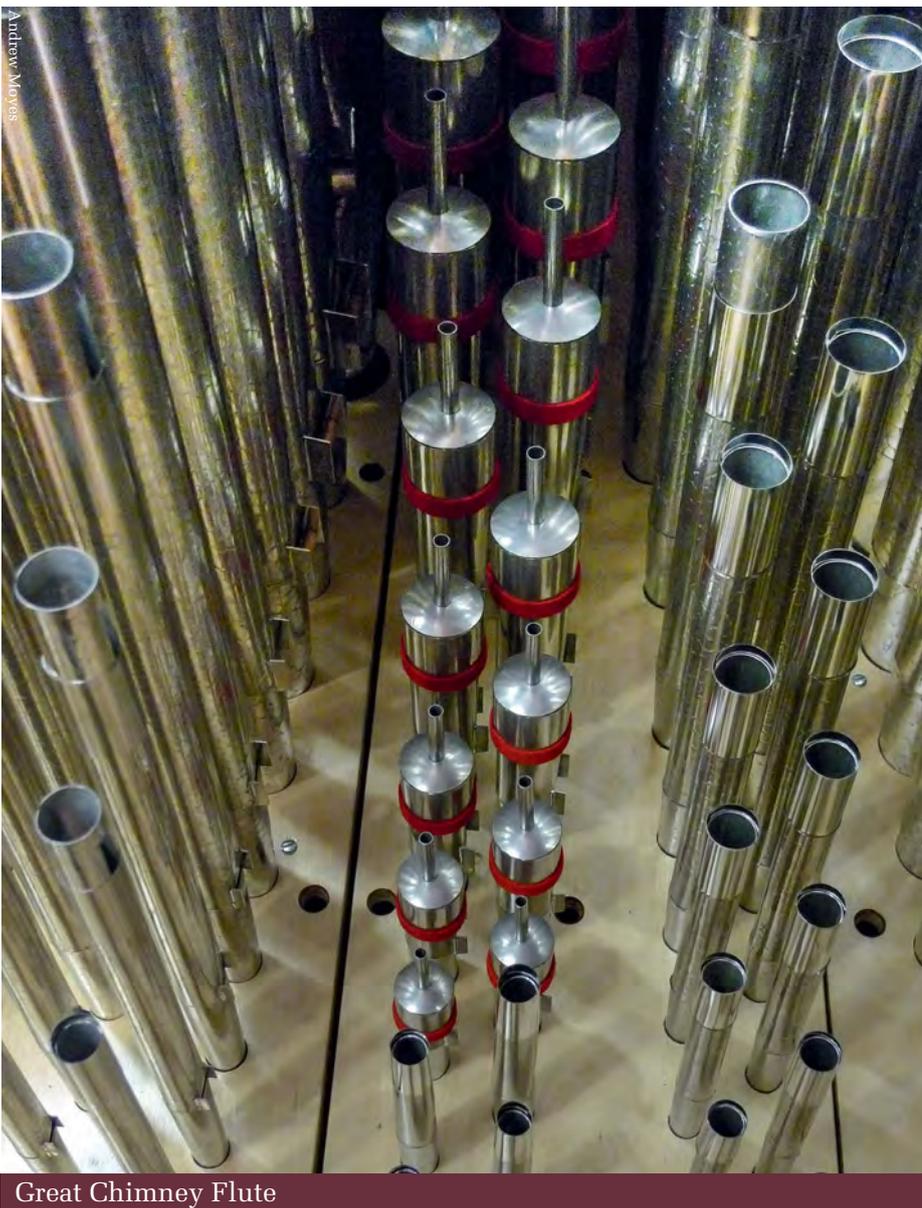
Ben Nicholas's successor, Simon Bell, has seen the project through to completion. He writes:

Dean Close specification

GREAT ORGAN (58 notes, 4ins wind)		SWELL ORGAN (58 notes, 4ins wind)		SOLO ORGAN (58 notes, 8ins wind) (enclosed)		PEDAL ORGAN (30 notes, 4¾ & 8¾ins wind)	
Double Open Diapason	16	Open Diapason	8	Flûte Harmonique	8	Open Wood (old)	16
Open Diapason I	8	Stopped Flute	8	Concert Flute	4	Principal (fr. Great)	16
Open Diapason II	8	Viola	8	Corno di Bassetto	8	Subbass	16
Stopped Diapason	8	Voix Celeste TC	8	Bombarde	8	Quint (ext. Subbass)	10 ² / ₃
Gamba	8	Principal	4	Tremulant		Octave	8
Principal	4	Tapered Flute	4			Bass Flute (ext. Subbass)	8
Chimney Flute	4	Fifteenth	2			Fifteenth (ext. Principal)	4
Nazard	2 ² / ₃	Sesquialtera 12.17	II			Posaune	16
Fifteenth	2	Mixture 15.19.22.26	IV			Clarion (ext. Posaune)	8
Blockflute	2	Basson	16				
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅	Trompette	8				
Fourniture 19.22.26.29	IV	Hautbois	8				
Trumpet	8	Clarion	4				
Tremulant		Tremulant					

Mixture Compositions

SWELL MIXTURE		GREAT FOURNITURE	
C1	15.19.22.26	C1	19.22.26.29
G20	12.15.19.22	C13	15.19.22.26
G#33	8.12.15.19	C25	12.15.19.22
A46	8.12.12.15	C37	8.12.15.19
		C49	8.12.12.15



Great Chimney Flute

Having been appointed Director of Choral Music at Dean Close in March 2012, one of my first jobs was to get up to speed with the chapel organ project. The previous chapel organ was, by this time, in a terrible condition, with multiple stops not working, and notes off on whole divisions. I visited Nicholson's within a few weeks and spent a morning looking at the proposed scheme and discussing the tonal side of the organ's design. Having heard the quality of the chapel choir's singing, and also having witnessed 500 students singing Thine be the glory with considerable vigour, it was clear to me that the new instrument needed considerable depth of sound and plenty of character to support the full school in Chapel. It also needed a wealth of accompanimental colour (hence the second enclosed division) and a wide-ranging stop list to enable the performance of solo repertoire both in services and in a concert situation.

Visually and tonally, the organ has exceeded all our expectations. The casework sits perfectly in the building and is interesting to the eye, but doesn't dominate. The looks of amazement from our pupils the first time they heard it

speaking in Chapel were a delight to see, and the singing from the congregation was immediately lifted in volume and quality. It is already proving to be an excellent teaching instrument, and is a hugely colourful instrument which supports the choir wonderfully and also allows for the performance of an enormous range of repertoire from Sweelinck and Bach through to Messiaen and Leighton.

Nicholson's embraced the project with particular enthusiasm; there is something very special about building an organ for a large school chapel where the builder knows it will accompany both a fine chapel choir and the hearty singing of an entire school, as well as inspire and educate the next several generations of aspiring young organists. Managing Director, Andrew Moyes, has this to say about the technical side of the organ:

Wind pressures are higher than normal (100mm on the Great and Swell, 200mm on the Solo) which, together with the generous stop-list, required a more complex system of pallets than normal. The touch is designed to be constant throughout the compass and across all three manuals. As at Bridlington Priory and Llandaff Cathedral, the reeds, upperwork and foundations are separately winded, giving the choruses greater tuning stability by ensuring the larger stops do not draw wind away from the sensitive upperwork.

Electric action on the pedal allows the Open Wood to be against the back wall, the Open Metal in the case and the Pedal reed against the side wall. It also permitted some Pedal extension with the Great double duplexed to the Pedal. Our outlook has been pragmatic on this, not driven by dogma or a wish to imitate history. Having said that, the same thinking caused the late Victorians to combine



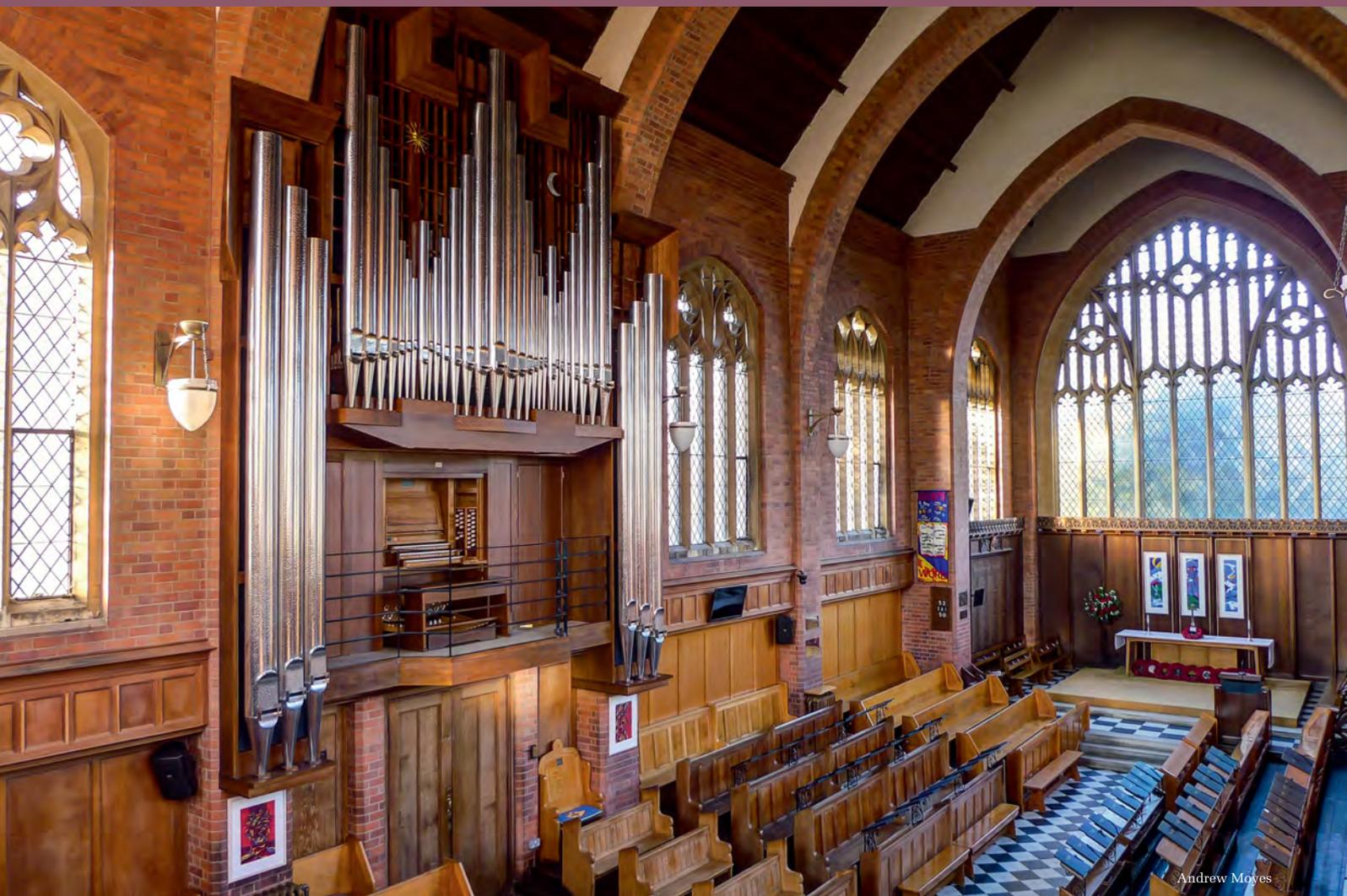
16ft front pipes

tracker action with pneumatic pedal action, although of course straight pneumatics are not used nowadays.

Apart from the 16ft Great double, all the manual pipework stands on the soundboards making them big but giving a clean interior. Using electric action for the pedals and stops means that the manual tracker action is as accessible as possible.

The Nicholson Tonal Director, Guy Russell, who scaled and voiced the Dean Close pipework (much of which was made in Nicholson's pipe shop) writes:

The tonal design of a school organ, especially a school such as Dean Close with its very musical and lusty singing, is harder than most other instruments. The organ has to underpin the singing of the whole school at assembly (with no acoustic in the building to assist), support and accompany the school choir for music of any genre, be a teaching instrument and also a recital instrument capable of playing music of any persuasion with conviction. The range has to be from a whisper to a shout and with all stops adding something to the whole.



Andrew Moyes

The interest shown and kind remarks from both staff and pupils were much appreciated by all who worked on site. Simon Bell could not have been more helpful and encouraging throughout the project and his beaming smile at every stage of the work was an inspiration!

Nicholson's began construction of the organ in January 2014, and it arrived on site on the first Monday of the summer holidays. The organ was handed over at the start of the second half of the Michaelmas term.

I went to see the organ just as it was finished, walked into Chapel beneath it, turned around to look, and was immediately faced with the truly impressive view of two full-length 16ft towers of gleaming spotted-metal pipes – not a sight one comes across every day. Not only visually stunning but also musically perfect for clarity and grip at 16ft pitch on Great and Pedal, these case pipes are augmented by

the one stop retained from the Hill organ – a fine “rolling” 16ft Open Wood. Together with a firm and prompt Pedal Subbass, these stops immediately signal that the organ will have some real bass. This real bass is gloriously augmented by the sonorous and telling 16ft Posaune, a stop which will gladden the heart and quicken the pulse of any schoolboy organist.

A studied consideration of the tonal scheme will bring the realisation that here are the resources of a well-specified 4-manual organ, distributed around three manuals, with two enclosed divisions. There are complete Diapason choruses on Great, Swell and Pedal, a wide-scale flute ensemble up to Tierce (the ‘cornet décomposée’), narrow-scale Germanic Sesquialtera (for chorale preludes and colouring the Swell flue/reed ensembles), strings on two manuals, solo flutes at 8ft and 4ft, a full set of Swell, Great and Pedal chorus-reeds, a commanding

solo reed and a Clarinet. Not a lot missing!

Reviews of organs in former days would always begin with a description of the Great Open Diapasons – always considered the backbone of the organ. In more recent decades the Open Diapason has lessened in significance into simply the 8ft foundation of the chorus. I am tempted to revert to the older style of review here because the Great 8ft Diapasons at Dean Close command attention. The no.2 is a beautiful silvery stop – lovely as a solo with the Great Tremulant, or for the Adagio of an 18th-century voluntary (perhaps combined with the charming Stopped Diapason), or as the basis of the Diapason chorus. The no.1 is quite a different matter – the sort of big but bright, full-toned stop of which Schulze or T.C. Lewis would have been proud. Added to the chorus and underpinned by the sonorous Pedal basses already mentioned this, at a stroke, produces the “cathedral”

sound that characterises much of the instrument's effect. The Great chorus is bold – indeed it sounds as if two Mixtures are drawn; the big Fourniture is balanced by the superb 16ft Double Open Diapason and capped by a perfectly-balanced Trumpet. The flutes 8/4/2 are nicely contrasted and well blended, with well-matched flute mutations to combine with them. The Gamba is of the tapered “Cone Gamba” pattern, silvery yet with a little more edge than a pure Gemshorn. Remarkably the open 8ft basses of both Open Diapasons and the Gamba all stand over their pallets in the centre of the soundboard, the case prospect pipes being drawn from the 16ft Double Open Diapason bass, tenor and middle octaves

The Swell sits behind the Great, where it gains “atmosphere” – somewhat at the expense of projection. Its position proves ideal for choral accompaniment and although its Diapason chorus is naturally more reticent than that of the Great, all comes into perspective again when the reeds are drawn, particularly the very powerful 8ft Trompette, a stop which is arguably too loud for use solely with its companion stops in the Swell but which, when coupled to the Great, brings the Swell back into perfect balance. Guy Russell comments thus about the Swell reeds:

The Hautbois is fairly full and interesting and makes a good solo stop or it can be used as the basis of a reed chorus with the Basson and the Clarion. The Basson has a quality somewhere between Hautbois and Bassoon. It can underpin either reed chorus or if played an octave up is an interesting solo stop. The Clarion is constructed and voiced in French style. It is not overly loud and relies on its pitch and brightness to top the ensembles. The French style Trompette is unashamedly quite big and brash. In an empty chapel it can sound too big in certain contexts but when the chapel is full and any trace of acoustic

has disappeared it comes into its own either as a chorus reed or solo voice. It is all the more versatile being enclosed.

The Swell flutes 8/4 are quite different from those on the Great, the 8ft being a large-scale canistered metal rank in welcome contrast to the wooden 8ft on the Great. The bold Sesquialtera is clean and penetrating in tone – perfect for North German chorale preludes and for adding a Willis-like pepperiness to the ensemble.

The small enclosed third manual is a Romantic Solo organ – it has no need to be a Choir or Positive as all stops which might be found in such a department have been assigned to the Great and Swell. A warm, velvety 8ft open metal flute, its harmonic treble hinting at Cavaillé-Coll, is partnered by a bolder 4ft Concert Flute, either of which will blend and colour the warm and fairly full-throated 8ft Corno di Bassetto. The effect of the Solo's swell box is quite remarkable. Draw the 8ft Bombarde with the box shut and it sounds like a small French Trompette in the depths of the organ; open the box and this immense sound pours forth, dominating the organ in a manner no enclosed stop has the right to do. In single notes it balances Great to Fifteenth coupled to the Full Swell half shut – the ideal balance for a useful solo reed.

As so often, space for the Pedal was limited, but in addition to its luxurious 16ft complement the Dean Close organ manages a firm and well-voiced Principal rank at 8/4, and the even-toned Subbass plays also at 8ft pitch and at 10²/₃, which in the *tutti* adds a satisfying hint of 32ft pitch on the “best” notes. The powerful 16ft Posaune is ideal for treading out the bass in a French *Toccata*. Guy Russell adds:

The Pedal reed is a Posaune 16ft. The shallots are long English Vee giving a firm tonality and really adding gravitas and power to the pedal. The rank is extended up to Clarion 8ft.

The key action – even that to the Solo with its 8ins wind pressure – is mechanical, Nicholson's being expert in designing such actions with a pleasant touch. Stop action is electric, with the usual complement of pistons and accessories available on the company's beautifully made inset console.

This organ proves another milestone for the long-established Malvern firm, whose sights are now set on their greatest project ever – the construction and installation of a new 92-stop organ for Holy Trinity Cathedral, Auckland, New Zealand, which will be made in two sections between mid 2015 and mid 2017.

Paul Hale is Cathedral Organist at Southwell and a professional organ consultant.

Whilst Organ Scholar of New College, Oxford (1971–4), Paul Hale began to write about the organ – his first published piece was in *Organists' Review*, of which he was later to become Reviews Editor and then Editor (1990–2005). A noted recitalist, lecturer and choir trainer, Paul is well-known in the UK, in Europe and in the USA. As well as being an Organ Adviser for the Dioceses of Southwell and Lincoln, Paul is an accredited member of the AIOA and has designed many new and restored organs throughout the UK. He is a diploma examiner for the RCO, Chairman of the RSCM in his area, and has been awarded honorary fellowships by the GCM and the RSCM for his contribution to church music. More information is available at www.PaulHale.org

