

A tale of two manuals

Paul Hale



Wolvercote



Bedford

The sad demise of Peter Collins Ltd serves to remind us how thinly spread is the demand for new organs in the UK. In any one year, these days, probably not more than five completely new instruments are being made (excluding a still fairly buoyant market for the inelegantly named “box” organ). Thus it is that firms who set out bravely in the 1960s–1980s to design and make new organs, rather than carry out rebuilding or restoration, have struggled in recent years to secure sufficient contracts. Some have turned to rebuilding work to keep busy, some (most) have downsized the labour force, and now one formerly dominant player, Peter Collins Ltd, has gone to the wall.

However, new organs are still appearing, being made by firms of

all sizes. In this article we celebrate and compare two two-manual organs both completed in January of this year, one built by the largest firm of British organ-builders, Harrison & Harrison, and the other by a single craftsman, Robin Jennings. These organs are of particular interest as they are also examples of the never-ending challenges of:

- (a) finding somewhere in a parish church to place an organ;
- (b) designing a “multum in parvo” tonal scheme to nourish liturgy and music-making and;
- (c) to do all this at an affordable cost.

To deal first, briefly, with the third challenge – funding. My experience, as an organ consultant working in

all parts of the UK, suggests to me, quite simply, that “where there’s a will, there’s a way”. Funds can be raised and are raised, often by the most apparently unlikely venue, for new instruments or other costly organ projects. However, experience shows also that the “will” needs to be shared by all concerned at the church: any loud dissenting voice will shake the confidence of those who would otherwise support such a project. This is one area where the dispassionate but experienced consultant can help – by answering positively and convincingly any questions raised by the doubters at meetings, and, crucially, by reinforcing positive attitudes during the fragile first stages of a project, where all could be lost on the vote of an ill-informed sub-committee.

Bedford Specification

GREAT		
Open Diapason		8
Stopped Diapason		8
Principal		4
Harmonic Flute		4
Fifteenth		2
Sesquialtera 12.17		II
Mixture 19.22.26.29		IV
Trumpet		8
Clarinet		8
Tremulant		
Swell to Great		
SWELL		
Gedackt		8
Salicional		8
Voix Céleste		8
Gemshorn		4
Flageolet		2
Larigot		1½
Mixture 22.26.29		III
Hautboy		8
Tremulant		
Sub Octave		
PEDAL		
Open Diapason (A)		16
Sub Bass (B)		16
Principal (A)		8
Bass Flute (B)		8
Trombone		16
Great to Pedal		
Swell to Pedal		
Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled		
Generals on Swell Foot Pistons		

Wolvercote Specification

GREAT		
Open Diapason		8
Stopped Diapason		8
Principal		4
Flute		4
Fifteenth		2
Mixture 22.26.29		III
Swell to Great		
SWELL		
Gemshorn		8
Flute		8
Principal		4
Fifteenth		2
Sesquialtera 12.17		II
Fagotto		16
Trumpet		8
Tremulant		
PEDAL		
Bourdon		16
Principal (Great)		8
Bass Flute (Great)		8
Great to Pedal		
Swell to Pedal		



The two churches concerned in our story today (St Peter's, Wolvercote, just outside Oxford, and St Andrew's, Bedford) successfully managed the fund-raising, determined as they were to replace organs which had proved both tonally inadequate and in the wrong place in the church for current worship patterns. Happily, elements of both the older organs have found fresh uses: five good ranks of pipes from the Wolvercote organ have been incorporated in the new organ, and the entire Bedford organ (a clever compact extension organ of "classical" bent, by Johnson of Cambridge, using mainly Binns pipework) is being rebuilt in a new home near Leicester, by Henry Groves & Son.

The nave is these days almost always the space in which organs are placed; the "Oxford Movement" position of choir, clergy and organ in the chancel now being almost everywhere a rapidly fading memory. But where to situate the organ? Floor space is always at a premium; finding sufficient height is a real problem, west galleries are like hens' teeth since being swept away by the Victorians, and such useful spaces as exist are now often (happily) occupied by lavatories and kitchens.

We can learn much from the contrasting techniques employed at Wolvercote and Bedford. In the former, an ancient church, quite small, but with a decent width to its north nave aisle, space for the footprint of a small organ was made at the head of the aisle (its eastern end), the soundboards and pipes at impost level being generously corbelled out above the heads of passers-by. Making an organ in this fashion allows floor space for console, tracker action and a blower, with the much larger area needed by the two soundboards set above head level. It does not allow space for a bulky traditional wind system, so regulators (*Schwimmers*) built in to the bottom of the soundboards are key to taking up so little floor space. At Bedford a contrasting approach was taken; one which I believe could be more widely adopted. The organ has been kept shallow in depth (only one department deep, as opposed to two at Wolvercote), though in two cases, side by side, and thus has been fitted within the two arches at the eastern end of the nave/north nave aisle. The aisle, though narrow, is still wheelchair accessible behind the organ (which was achieved by altering bulky heating pipes against the north wall

and removing a radiator). The left-hand case contains the console at floor level, the Swell above that and the Great at the top. The right-hand case contains the Pedal organ, with the blower and three double-rise reservoirs above head level behind it in the aisle. The key action to the Pedal passes immediately behind the pillar between the two cases, and the wind trunks run from one case to the other within oak panelling in front of the pillar.

A glance at the two stop lists, herewith, will quickly show that the larger Bedford organ needs much more space and height than the Wolvercote instrument. For a start, it has the luxury of a full-length 16ft metal Open Diapason on the Pedal, in addition to a wooden Trombone (whose bass resonators are actually half-length though generous in scale). These things gobble space and cash! The Great and Swell are not dissimilar to Wolvercote, the lack of a Swell Trumpet being dictated by the box having insufficient height, for which reason the 8ft string has a Haskelled bass (which makes the bodies nearly half length, using a re-entrant tube inverted in the pipe to push the pitch down an octave).

Small swell enclosures are very often a challenge with vertically



Left: Wolvercote – combination mechanism
Middle: Bedford – wooden Trombone pipes being made
Right: Bedford – Andy working on the Pedal Trombone

laid out organs such as this. In our neo-classical days this was not a problem, for a *Brustwerk* or even *Brustpositif*, with no open 8ft rank and a fractional length reed, will fit in perfectly well. Now that we have largely returned to a more “romantic” Swell concept, the challenge in such a layout is very real, especially if, as here, there is also an arch to be considered at the top of the organ. Harrisons have planted the Swell basses at the sides, where the box has been carried up somewhat higher, and have made the Hautboy refreshingly open and telling, so that it acts perfectly well as a modest Trumpet, and can be softened right down by the excellent box. At Wolvercote, placing both manual soundboards at impost level allowed height for the Pedal Bourdon also to be that level and for the Swell of this smaller organ nevertheless to boast a 16ft reed (voiced by David Frostick), which is the making of the *tutti*.

At Wolvercote, Robin Jennings must be warmly congratulated in designing and making (immaculately) a completely mechanical composition pedal mechanism, which is settable by the player, who simply draws the required stops, slightly lifts a

composition pedal and thus moves a set of cams which lock that combination on to the pedal. This mechanism stretches from front to back of the organ at floor level, and is a joy to behold with the side panels removed. Pressing the composition pedals does not require the super-human effort it usually does on Victorian organs, and means that on a totally mechanical organ, the player has the huge benefit of readily adjustable combinations to each department. Marvellous! Bedford opted for electric stop control, which meant that the console (built to the comfortingly familiar Harrison & Harrison pattern) could have a reasonably full complement of the usual pistons.

Both organs have beautiful oak cases, façades which reflect the layout within and are comprised of speaking pipes from the Great Open Diapasons (and at Bedford, the Pedal Open Diapason). At Wolvercote the front pipes are of tin; at Bedford they are of spotted metal. Access to higher levels of both organs is by external ladder, space being at a premium within instruments with such restricted footprints. In the risk-averse, safety-regulated world in which we now live (and let's not kid ourselves that Brexit will mean

the repeal of the more extreme examples of such regulation), the choice of external ladders has to be pondered in detail before agreeing to their use, for there are heights at which staff are no longer permitted to climb, even when they are not actually working on the ladder; and of course, ladders need to be fixed so as not to move whilst in use.

Now to consider the tonal schemes and the sound of each organ, as well as the fact that each has mechanical (“tracker”) key action. Both organs seek to address the needs of a modest size church with a rich liturgical life and an active church choir, with a professional musician directing/playing. The interest in comparing them is heightened by considering the highly contrasted background of the two firms involved. For Harrisons, designing and building a “liturgical” organ for an Anglican church is at the heart of their comfort-zone; it's what they've done since the nineteenth century. Building one with a modern tracker action is, however, a much more rare opportunity; we will return to that. Robin Jennings, an exceptionally skilled craftsman sole trader comes from somewhere rather different: his earlier works were in the main small,

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rather “classical” instruments, chamber and box organs. Readers may recall my enthusiastic review of his effective two-manual in *Our Lady of Lourdes, Wanstead* – an organ similar in concept to that at Wolvercote, with David Frostick (with whom he has regularly worked since their time at Mander Organs) again acting as the specialist voicer. For Jennings, tracker action is the norm; addressing choral liturgical needs rather less so.

I’m delighted to report that, in my opinion, not only has each firm played to its strengths; it has also reached outside its most regular accomplishments with notable success. In other words, Harrison’s tracker action proves to be up there with the best modern actions, and Jennings’s tonal scheme, swell box and voicing allow the Wolvercote instrument admirably to fulfil its multiple liturgical functions.

At Bedford the organ has been voiced boldly, on somewhat heavier pressures than at Wolvercote, because (a) it is speaking across rather than down the building, and (b) has more powerful reeds, which benefit from a higher pressure. The Great diapason chorus is well-projected, topped by a powerful yet blending Mixture and enhanced by a bold, Principal-toned Sesquialtera. This makes both a splendid solo register and also acts in the chorus if added, imparting the peppery zing of the tierce rank to the ensemble. The Great flutes have charm and character, the 4ft working very well in a solo capacity, being somewhat treble ascendant, in the French manner. The capped Clarinet has an attractive “woody” character,

readily coloured by the flutes or Sesquialtera. Unenclosed clarinets have to be used with discretion as they cannot be faded away by a swell box, but make them too soft and they lose all character. This one seems just right to me, as is the splendid Great Trumpet – blending but telling. Because the Swell is not behind the Great it gets out just as well, and, stop for stop, balances perfectly. All the flues are just as one would hope, the Larigot proving surprisingly useful both at normal pitch and down an octave as a Nazard, while the bright Mixture gives the Swell chorus a perhaps unexpected zip, yet blends perfectly well with the Hautbois, a stop cleverly made and voiced also to act as a modest Swell trumpet as well as in its oboe role. The lack of a 16ft Swell reed is almost mitigated by the provision of a Swell Sub Octave coupler, which proves remarkably effective, and without making the touch impossibly heavy, too. Strings played up an octave with the Sub Octave drawn are ravishing, and flutes 8 & 4 can be contrived in the same manner. The Pedal’s 16ft open metal Diapason underpins all with sophisticated drive and warm clarity, and the rich Subbass is a perfect example of its genre. Their 8ft extensions are particularly useful. The wooden Trombone is sonorous without being obstreperous: it can be used as a “Bach” reed yet makes itself felt in the *tutti*, too.

At Wolvercote the Great diapason chorus also has been voiced fully, to reach straight down the north aisle and penetrate south into the nave. The Great flutes have a distinctly chirpy “old English” quality to

them, an almost chamber-organ like piquancy, particularly the 4ft. The two 8ft Great stops are borrowed to the Pedal (using non-return valves in the soundboard), giving the Pedal a modest but useful degree of independence. The Swell boasts an unusual and strikingly successful pairing at 8ft of an open metal flute with a tapered Gemshorn (whose bass gradually becomes cylindrical as it descends). Both stops are really beautiful, and drawn together the sound is seductive and immensely useful. The choice of a true Sesquialtera, voiced as strongly as the 2ft (as at Bedford), proves inspired, as it is so versatile a stop, in chorus or for solo use. A host of readers will know my view that as many organs as possible should have one! The reeds are prompt and incisive; “English” yet with fire in their bellies. A manual 16ft reed always makes an organ sound grander and this is no exception, underpinning the *tutti* remarkably effectively, yet without being too loud for the Swell. The Tremulant helps compensate for the lack of a Celeste, though it is queasily powerful and a touch too audible.

It was, frankly, a joy visiting and assessing these two delightful and successful organs. I would commend both of these somewhat contrasting responses to the need for nave organs in churches with a decent choral tradition yet of modest size. Let’s earnestly hope that more such projects rapidly come to pass, not only because they are a wise thing to do, but because there are British firms able and willing to make them – and thirsty for more work.



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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, 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