

Hunting for Hunters

Paul Hale

I wonder how many readers have heard or played an organ by A. Hunter & Son of Clapham? It's not a name that regularly crops up in organ circles outside London, yet the company built many superb instruments, mainly but certainly not exclusively in the Greater London area. A glance at the NPOR reveals no fewer than 258 organs listed; there will have been many

more. I have a Hunter catalogue from about 1922 – an elegant and modest publication, compared with most company 'puffs' of the time – which lists about half of these instruments. Both sources of information remind us that the company built some particularly significant organs, many of which have been rebuilt or replaced, but a large number remain, still playing.



The 258 NPOR-listed organs date from across the whole period of the firm's existence – 1856 to 1937, when it was bought by Henry Willis III. It is worth bringing to mind some of the more significant of these before turning to the two three-manual Hunters which are the main focus of this article. Many three-manual organs of 30–36 stops were made. Larger three-manual Hunter organ were made for Sedbergh School Hall, Christ Church and St Philip & St James in Cheltenham, Eton College Lower Chapel (since replaced), St Paul's, Southsea, Queenswood School, Beckenham Congregational Church, St Mark's Bromley, Holy Spirit, Clapham, St Peter's, Clapham (and several other Clapham churches), St Augustine's, Highgate, All Saints', Langham Place, St James', Spanish Place, the Welsh Church of Central London, Crescent Congregational Church Beckenham, St John the Evangelist Putney, St John the Baptist Windsor, and St Andrew's Worthing.

Four-manual organs were made for Clapham Wesleyan Chapel, for Westfield Lodge, Surbiton (a 51-stop house organ), for St Cuthbert's Philbeach Gardens, Earl's Court, and a five-manual with three 32fts was installed in the capacious

**List of Organs built by
A. HUNTER & SON,
Organ Builders,
87, HIGH STREET, CLAPHAM,
LONDON, S.W.**

- SPA FIELDS CHAPEL, King's Cross.
- THE GERMAN REFORMED CHURCH, Goulston Street, White-chapel.
- WESLEYAN CHURCH, Putney, S.W.
- ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, Petersham, Sydney, N.S.W.
- THE CATHEDRAL, Colombo, Ceylon.
- WESLEYAN CHURCH, Waverley, Sydney, N.S.W.
- ST. MARK'S CHURCH, Kennington, S.E.
- CHRIST CHURCH, Gosport, Hants.
- THE VICTORIA HALL, Gladstone Buildings, Portsmouth.
- WESLEYAN CHURCH, Roupell Park, Tulse Hill, S.E.

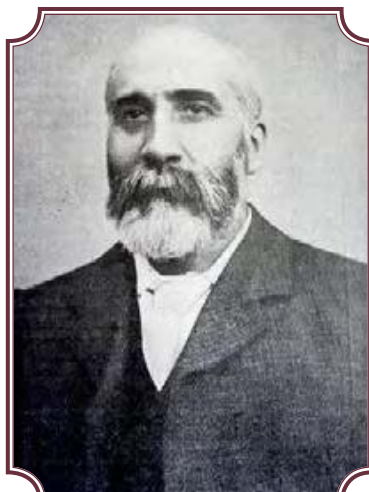
residence of J.M. Boustead in Wimbledon (an astonishing 105 stops – some of which are now in St Mary the Virgin, Ringmer. See NPOR N13956).

All the larger Hunter organs had particularly well-developed Swell Organs – almost always the largest department, with magnificent reeds and spacious, lofty swell boxes enabling all the pipes to stand unmitred. Philbeach Gardens is an impressive example:

Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Keraulophon	8
Voix Celeste	8
Echo Salicional	8
Echo Voix Celeste	8
Octave	4
Octave Gamba	4
Super Octave	2
Harmonics III	17.19.22
Contra Fagotto	16
Horn	8
Oboe	8
Vox Humana	8
Clarion	4

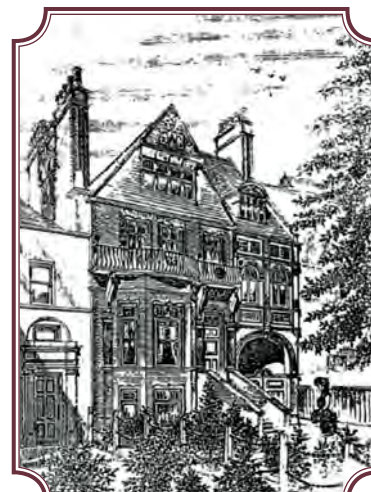
Two modest organs were made for Oxbridge college chapels – a 2/19 for Magdalene College, Cambridge (installed 1928, replaced in 2001) and a 3/26 of 1931 for Hertford College, Oxford. This latter organ, dating from six years before the firm was sold to Willis, was restored by the Willis firm in 1971 and I well remember as a New College undergraduate going to listen to Noel Rawsthorne giving a splendid opening recital that Autumn. It was only the second Hunter I had heard, the first being the very much larger and better-known instrument in St James' church, Spanish Place, London. The Spanish Place Hunter is a truly wonderful organ with the finest stopped 32ft Sub Bass (a Hunter speciality) you are likely ever to come across (see NPOR N08089). Both organs impressed me with their fine reeds, excellent Diapason choruses, resonant flutes, first-class strings, and sonorous pedal basses.

Other than giving a recital on the much-rebuilt Hunter in All



Robert Hunter
– Organ builder

(photo: Musical Opinion December 1931)



The family house &
workshop in Clapham

(The Builder: 1885)

Souls', Langham Place, my path had not again crossed Hunter's until recently. Following a DAC inspection visit to a small but perfectly-formed Hunter here in Nottinghamshire (St Peter's, Widmerpool), which delighted me, I received an invitation to survey the large Hunter in St Andrew's Worthing. At much the same time, Nicholson & Co. were working on a complete refurbishment of the Hunter organ in the Welsh Church of Central London. The final section of this article is an outline description of these two distinguished organs – one fully restored; the other in serious need of restoration.

But first, who was Hunter? And, from where did this London-based firm spring?

Alfred Hunter, a Londoner, was born in 1827, apprenticed to G.M. Holdich (of Greek Street, Soho) and then went to work for Henry Bevington (also working in Greek Street), before joining J.C. Bishop (whose workshop was in the neighbouring Marylebone area) in the early 1850s. A fellow craftsman at Bishop's, Mr Webb (whose Christian name I have been unable so far to find) married Alfred's sister, Sophia, and in 1856 Hunter and Webb set up their own company in York Road, Lambeth. Webb having

left the partnership in 1864, 'to become a publican' (according to Laurence Elvin's researches), Hunter ran the firm on his own from 1881, moving three miles south to High Street, Clapham, and taking his son Robert (born 1856) into partnership in 1885, the firm then becoming A. Hunter & Son. Robert took over the firm on Alfred's death in 1911, in turn taking his sons Alfred (jr), Robert (jr) and George into partnership in 1921. Robert (sr) died in 1932 and the firm was taken over by Willis, as has already been mentioned, in 1937.

Their earlier organs used mechanical action, but an efficient tubular-pneumatic mechanism and up-to-date consoles (many of which are still in use, some electrified) were fitted to most of their organs from the start of the twentieth century. They clearly offered exceptional value for money, for among the many London firms, in late Victorian and Edwardian days they seemed to be able to offer a client more for his money than other metropolitan builders, some of whom (notably J.W. Walker) were very expensive.

St Andrew's, Worthing, specification

GREAT		CHOIR (enclosed except Tubas)	
Double Open Diapason	16	Geigen Diapason	8
Open Diapason Major	8	Lieblich Gedacht	8
Open Diapason Minor	8	Viol d'Amour	8
Clarabella	8	Unda Maris	8
Dolcan	8	Harmonic Flute	4
Octave	4	Harmonic Piccolo	2
Hohl Flute	4	Clarionet	8
Super Octave	2	Orchestral Oboe	8
Mixture 17.19.22	III	Tuba Mirabilis	8
Double Trumpet	16	Tuba Clarion	4
Trumpet	8		
SWELL		PEDAL	
Lieblich Bourdon	16	Open Diapason Wood	16
Open Diapason	8	Violone	16
Stopped Diapason	8	Bourdon	16
Salicional	8	Lieblich Boudon (Swell)	16
Voix Celeste	8	Octave Diapason	8
Echo Gamba	8	Bass Flute	8
Echo Voix Celeste	8	Trombone	16
Octave	4		
Super Octave	2		
Harmonics 15.19.22	III		
Contra Fagotto	16		
Cornopean	8		
Oboe	8		
Clarion	4		



Console

St Andrew's, Worthing

The large organ in St Andrew's, Worthing, was made in 1902/3, with a handsome console with angled jambs, though lacking any sort of casework. It was one of no fewer than eight new organs the Hunter firm worked on during 1902. Despite its size (42 speaking stops including five at 16ft pitch) it cost less than £2,000; that is about

£220,000 today, which would buy less than half that number of stops. The Swell soundboard was made with 12 extra treble notes for use with the octave coupler, perhaps inspired by the same device carried out by Hunter's mentor, Holdich. The pneumatic mechanism lasted until 1963 when the Compton firm, executing one of their very last contracts before being taken over by

Rushworth & Dreaper, fitted electro-pneumatic conversion machines, electric pistons and generally overhauled the instrument. In more recent years Bishop & Son have fitted a modern combination system to the console and have carried out some modest releathering. There it sits today, awaiting a decision as to the future of this beautiful and formerly very musical church,



Tubas



Organ front



before a restoration project can even be imagined. I enjoyed playing it and climbing around it. Its wonderful reeds would not be out of place in a large cathedral.

A glance at the specification will give the reader an idea of the power, variety and colour this instrument boasts.

The wind system is now failing, the 1963 electrics are going the



Compton electrics from 1963



same way, the exceptionally fine spotted-metal pipework is in need of restoration and the console needs a complete refurbishment. But the structure is basically sound, the soundboards are of superb quality, with much mahogany, and are in generally excellent condition. The sound remains glorious, just as one can imagine from reading through the stop list. If ever a high-romantic British organ deserved a restoration, it is this one. Let us hope that it comes to pass.

The Hunter in the Welsh Church of Central London was made seven years later than the Worthing instrument, and though somewhat smaller, is cut from the same cloth, as a glance at the stop-list will show. As at Worthing, it has the luxury of a 70-note Swell soundboard. Just as Compton partially electrified

the Worthing Hunter in 1963, so A. Noterman of Shepherd's Bush carried out the same to the Welsh Church Hunter a couple of years later. They fitted their own patented 'compound magnets' to the main soundboard actions (a type of magnet also often used by Compton in the bass of their larger unit chests, reintroduced in recent years in the work of a few UK firms), undertook some re-leathering, moved the Swell Piccolo to the Choir (on a unit chest) and fitted a new Fifteenth to the Swell in its place. As at Worthing, much of the tubular pneumatic action remained.

Welsh Church specification

GREAT	
Open Diapason (Major)	8
Open Diapason (Minor)	8
Clarabella	8
Octave	4
Harmonic Flute	4
Super Octave	2
Trumpet	8

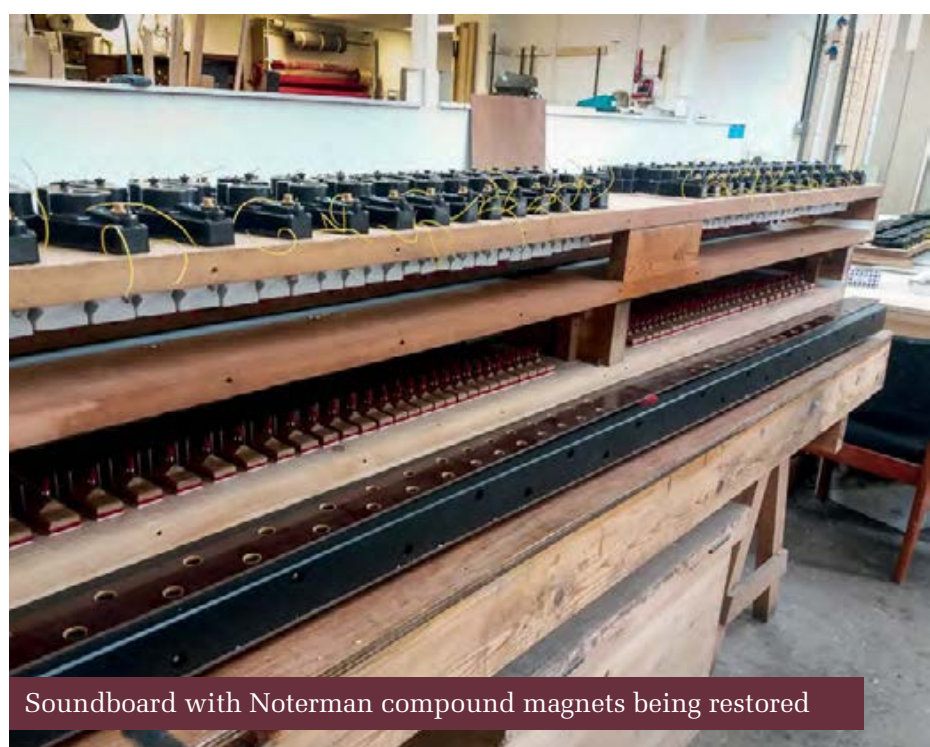
SWELL	
Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Stop'd Diapason	8
Salicional	8
Voix Celestes	8
Octave	4
Fifteenth	2
Harmonics 15.19.22	III
Cornopean	8
Oboe	8

CHOIR	
Geigen Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedacht	8
Dulciana	8
Wald Flute	4
Piccolo	2
Clarinet	8

PEDAL	
Open Diapason	16
Sub Bass	16
Lieblich Boudon (Swell)	16
Octave Diapason	8
Octave Bourdon	8
Trombone (added, ex. RCM)	16



Composition pedals fitted with switches



Soundboard with Noterman compound magnets being restored

The Welsh Church

After 50 years' more use, the organ was in serious need of a full restoration. In 2016 a contract was awarded to Nicholson & Co., which carried out the work during 2018. Everything was done – soundboards fully restored, split wooden pipes repaired, all leatherwork replaced, console completely rebuilt with its casework slightly reduced in size and some stop-knobs moved to more logical positions, new electrical fittings and equipment throughout, general pistons added, the Noterman compound magnets completely refurbished, slider solenoids fitted to replace the old slider machines, case-pipes repainted, with some gilded details, a new blower, and the Piccolo fitted to a new slide added to the Choir soundboard. The only tonal alteration was the addition of the 1901 Walker Trombone from the former organ in the Concert Hall of the Royal College of Music, which Nicholsons had removed in 2016 to make way for the College's new Flentrop.

The Welsh Church organ was re-opened by Jane Watts on 6th October 2018 in a memorable concert also featuring the A5 Brass Ensemble and Côr Llundain.

Meanwhile, the larger Hunter in Worthing awaits its fate. Of all the remaining large Hunter organs this is the most significant; let us profoundly hope that it, like that in the Welsh Church, receives a worthy restoration. Meanwhile, inspired by my recent researches into these fine organs, I shall certainly go hunting for some more Hunters – as I hope our readers will do, too.