

A TRIUMPHANT TRANSPLANT

A Peter Collins organ for St Bartholomew's Church, Orford

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This is a story with a happy ending. Saved from flood and from years in storage, the 1977 Peter Collins organ made for the Turner Sims Concert Hall at the University of Southampton has found a worthy new home in St Bartholomew's Church, Orford.

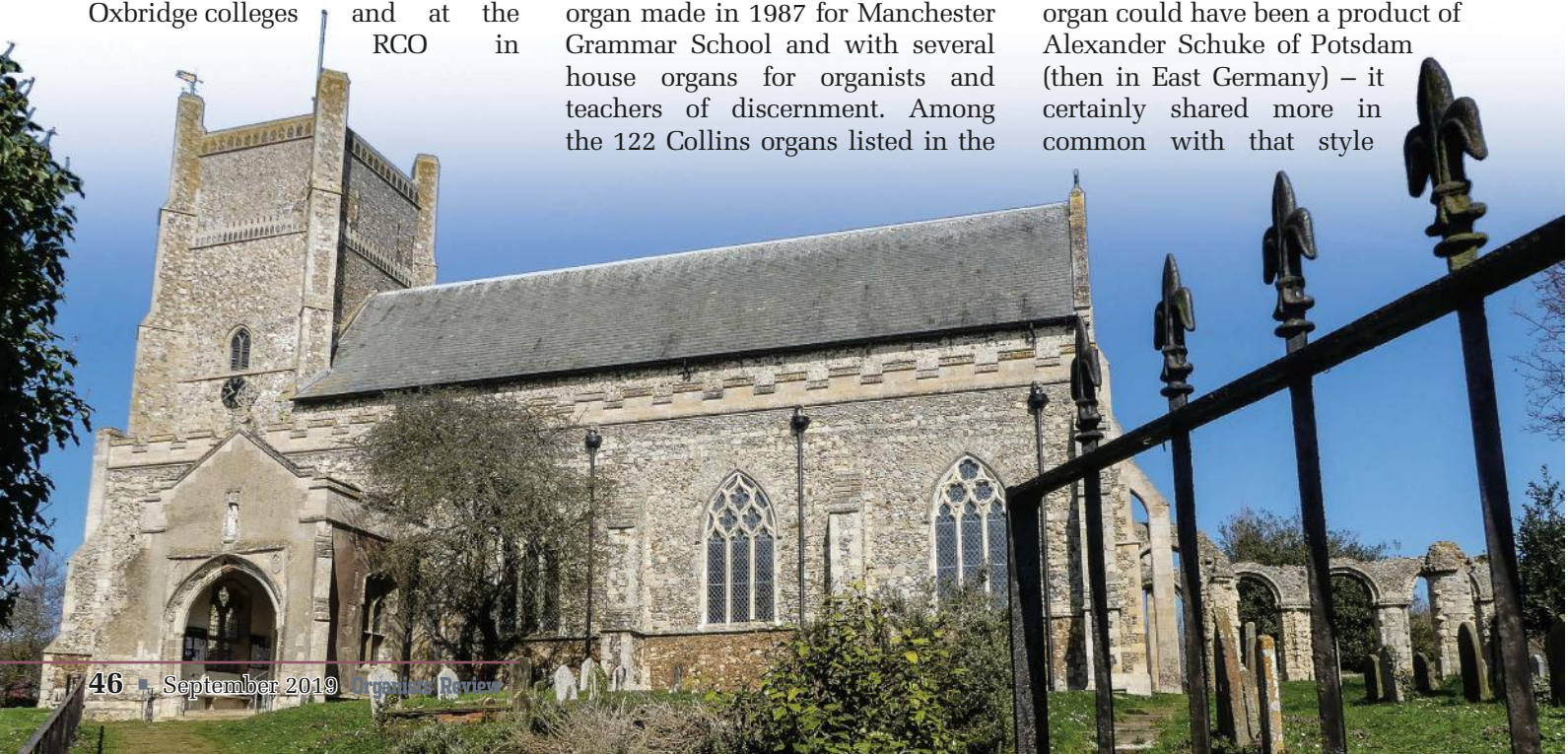
During the 1960s and 1970s several British universities and music colleges commissioned new organs, many of them with tracker action, designed to play Baroque and modern music. Readers will immediately recall New College, Oxford, the Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall at York University and the Meeting House at the University of Sussex (all by Grant, Degens & Bradbeer) along with the Whitworth Hall at Manchester University, Merton and University Colleges, Oxford (all by J.W. Walker), Corpus Christi and Jesus Colleges, Cambridge (by Mander), Wood of Huddersfield (Huddersfield Polytechnic [now the University] and St Edmund Hall, Oxford), several neo-baroque rebuilds by Hill, Norman & Beard (in Oxbridge colleges and at the RCO in

Kensington Gore) and occasionally by Harrison & Harrison, plus a small but highly significant clutch of imported instruments by Beckerath (Clare College, Cambridge), Frobenius (The Queen's College, Oxford), Hradetzky (RNCM & St Andrew's University), Metzler (Trinity College, Cambridge) and Rieger (Christ Church, Oxford).

Alongside these, Peter Collins, then based at Redbourn in Hertfordshire, was producing his own modern organs, inspired by his time at Rieger Orgelbau, about which he never failed to talk. After a rather faltering start in the world of academic organs – a 1972 instrument for Brasenose College Oxford, shoe-horned into a beautiful but hopelessly-proportioned case by Thomas Jackson (since rebuilt by Richard Bower), and a rather more successful 2/9 for the University of Nottingham (since removed) – Collins came to full bloom in 1977 with his 3-manual instrument for the Turner Sims Concert Hall in the University of Southampton. He followed this with a smaller organ made in 1987 for Manchester Grammar School and with several house organs for organists and teachers of discernment. Among the 122 Collins organs listed in the

NPOR, these are the only ones made for the academic world.

Chief among them was a gem – one of the finest organs Peter Collins's team ever made – the Southampton University instrument. Conceived and tonally designed by Professor Peter Evans and opened by Piet Kee, the 3/28 organ was an immediate success and was regularly broadcast. Clearly inspired by the GDB at York University, which it closely resembles, it, too, was made according to the *Werkprinzip*, only one department deep, the manual departments one above the other (*Brustwerk*, *Hauptwerk* and *Oberwerk*) with no Swell division – merely token doors, hand-operated, in front of the *Brustwerk*; the Pedals flanking the *Hauptwerk* and all tuned from the rear. It was made with tracker action (wooden), Collins's own design of wind regulators built in to the soundboards, open-foot voicing, and a distinctly 'North German' tonal scheme. There was no eclecticism in this scheme – no nods to French or British repertoire. The organ could have been a product of Alexander Schuke of Potsdam (then in East Germany) – it certainly shared more in common with that style



than with the Rieger style (with its French nuances) which had earlier influenced Peter Collins.

The composer and organist, Alastair Johnston, was an undergraduate when the organ was installed. He writes:

I remember especially the transparent Great chorus complete with 16ft if desired, the balancing Oberwerk and a Pedal organ that did not need coupling in most cases. The Bach 'Dorian' sounded stunning underpinned by the 16ft Pedal reed. Flutes and mutations galore could be used to colour melodic lines in Choral Preludes and the relaxed manual chorus reeds were useful in solo and ensemble contexts. The Oberwerk 8ft reed I remember as being an inoffensive and useful Oboe-like stop that combined well with the flutes and mutations and there was also a Gamba with a decidedly authentic 'scrape' to it. The little Brustwerk division (which had previously been a one-manual chamber organ in the hall) worked admirably in a continuo context and in appropriate vocal repertoire complete with a Regal-like reed ideal for Monteverdi etc. Similarly, later repertoire

worked well on the organ: Mendelssohn for example and later Hindemith (no one seems to play his music these days) and more contemporary composers fared well with the transparent and characterful sounds.

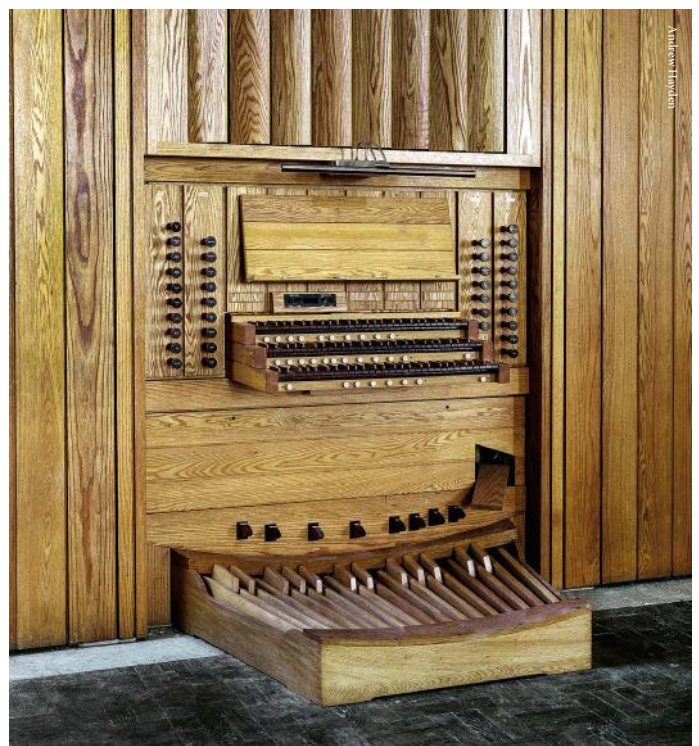
However, the organ's success was qualified by four things: the excessively dry acoustics of the Turner Sims Hall and the stratification of the heat in the room. The former prevented any warmth or bloom to the tone and the latter put the *Oberwerk* out of tune as a concert proceeded. In addition, the rather crude wind system led to the *Oberwerk* being short of wind and the over-thick trackers and ill-designed connections to the pallets led to a heavy and imprecise touch to the *Oberwerk* and (to a lesser extent) to the *Hauptwerk*.

Gradually the University fell out of love with the organ, and although it had one cleaning and electrical upgrading (in 1986) after the hall's floor flooded, it was removed to storage in 2011 and never reinstalled, leaving the blower and breakdown bellows behind, marooned in a narrow passage behind the wall against which the organ had stood.

Not knowing that it was to be in

long-term storage, the organbuilders had taken only modest care in packing the pipes. So it was hardly their fault that when it was eventually unpacked late in 2017, large numbers of pipes made with a high lead content had deformed, some almost squashed flat. But that was in the future.

Meanwhile, at St Bartholomew's Church, Orford, near Aldeburgh – the church in which Benjamin Britten conducted the first performance of his *Noye's Fludde* and of the three Church Parables – a need was felt for a more comprehensive organ than the very small second-hand organ by Bishop & Sons installed in the chancel in 1903. Whenever the Aldeburgh Festival needed an organ for an Orford concert, they had to hire an electronic – hardly satisfactory for such a festival. Graeme Kay, well-known for his work at the BBC, as a journal editor and for his regular column in *Choir & Organ*, directs the music at St Bartholomew's. He had been seeking for a suitable redundant organ when the Turner Sims Collins came to his attention. Graeme recalled with enthusiasm it being recorded for the BBC with players such as Dame Gillian Weir and immediately had a vision for the instrument to stand



in the north nave aisle at Orford. David Owen Norris (Professor of Musical Performance and Head of Keyboard at Southampton) by then had responsibility for the Collins organ in storage and persuaded the University to gift it to Orford.

There followed a lengthy campaign to secure permission for its installation – a Faculty which in the event was granted over the head of the St Edmundsbury & Ipswich DAC, which had recommended to the Diocesan Chancellor refusal of permission. Funds were sought and eventually identified – after work had begun, which is a challenging situation for any project.

Two of Peter Collins's former employees, who knew the organ well (a pipe-maker and cabinet maker / organ-builder) had moved to join Ian Carter at Cousans Organs (now in Coalville, Leicestershire) when the Collins firm closed. Orford therefore decided to award to Cousans the contract to restore and install the organ.

Once all was unpacked and laid out (initially in an enormous bomb store on a disused US airbase near Orford), it soon became clear that the task was a greater and more challenging one than had been imagined, due to deterioration in store and also to design weaknesses inherent in the instrument. Problems with the organ whilst in the University were well documented, so Cousans drew up a comprehensive plan not only to restore the instrument fully but also to eliminate its weaknesses.

While every pipe was being rounded out, cleaned and put back on perfect speech (with no fundamental changes to the voicing), the soundboards were restored, most of the spruce trackers were replaced with far thinner ones, the connections to the pallets were made much simpler and friction-free and the wind system was entirely replaced with new *Schwimmers*; new tremulants, new slider solenoids and stop-knob solenoids were installed, along with a new capture system, using pistons in the same positions as those fitted during the organ's 1986 electrical upgrading. In addition, the

doors which had previously closed the *Brustwerk* were replaced with small swell shutters – a perfect match to the American red oak of which the entire organ casework is made. A balanced expression pedal was fitted to the right of the composition pedals, angled towards the player. Collins fitted shutters similar to these to other organs, such as the contemporary (1977) instrument in Dorchester Baptist Church, with its similar *Werkprinzip* layout, so no incongruity was felt in thus increasing the instrument's versatility.

The fine Discus blower was overhauled and installed in a new elegant cabinet along with a new breakdown bellows and space for the organist's music and robes – again matching the Collins design perfectly. The front pipes were burnished once the streaky varnish had been removed from those made of copper. Elegant new console lights were installed. Tonal regulation was thorough (cone tuning with slotted basses was retained) and to everyone's delight the organ began to sound as if scaled and voiced for Orford Church in the first place. Indeed, the generous acoustics of this spacious East Anglian building add warmth and beauty to the sound of the Collins, improving no end on its previous effect in the totally dry acoustic of the Turner Sims Concert Hall. Scarcely a metre deep, it takes only a small part of the width of the north nave aisle, allowing light still to stream in from the north-west plain glass window. The loss of light from the double-recessed north aisle window behind the instrument has in effect been no loss at all.

When all was complete, the church mounted the first Orford Organ Festival, entirely the vision and the hard work of Graeme Kay, over 10–12 May. The present writer was privileged to present the opening recital, including Karg-Elert's *Homage to Handel* with its 54 variations (and rather more registration changes). The following day, a Family Concert run by William Saunders proved a real hit with adults and children alike, followed by a visionary recital given

Orford specification

GREAT (manual II)	
Quintaton	16
Principal	8
Rohr Flute	8
Octave	4
Spitz Flute	4
Octave	2
Mixture	III–V
Trumpet	8
Tremulant	
I/II	
OBERWERK (manual I)	
Metal Gedact	8
Gamba (tapered)	8
Principal	4
Quint	2 ² / ₃
Gemshorn	2
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅
Scharf	IV
Schalmei	8
Tremulant	
BRUSTWERK (MANUAL III)	
Wood Gedact	8
Koppel Flute	4
Principal	2
Spitz Quint	1 ¹ / ₅
Sesquialtera (middle C)	II
Vox Humana	8
Tremulant	
PEDAL	
Subbass	16
Octave	8
Gedact Pommer	8
Wide Octave	4
Mixture	III
Fagot	16
I/P	
I Oct/P	
II/P	
III/P	

from memory by Bernhard Haas, organ professor in the academies of Stuttgart and Munich; his performance of Bach's *Passacaglia & Fugue* proved a monumental climax to the evening. The Sunday concert was a magnificent affair where Catherine Ennis performed with the Prometheus Orchestra (conducted by Edmond Fivet), delighting a full audience with the *Cuckoo & Nightingale* organ concerto of Handel, the ever-fresh Poulenc concerto and Duruflé's *Prélude, Adagio et Choral varié sur le theme du Veni Creator*.

It will be seen that the organ was given the fullest possible workout over the Festival, rising to the occasion with flying colours. Orford now has two organs – its charming little Bishop for services in the chancel, and this superb revitalised Collins for everything else. I urge readers to make a visit to beautiful Orford if in the area – this is an organ not to be missed. A triumphant transplant, indeed.