

Casson's Creations

Thomas Casson (1842–1910) and his organ in All Saints' Church, Thorpe Malsor, Northamptonshire – Paul Hale

The centenary of the death of a remarkably inventive organ-builder, Thomas Casson, was quietly but significantly celebrated in a hidden corner of rural Northamptonshire, where, in a tiny village where time has stood still, the only evidence of the Industrial Revolution is the remarkable organ at the west end of its church.

Enter All Saints' church, Thorpe Malsor, looking for an organ, and one might expect to find a tiny two-manual tucked away in Oxford Movement fashion somewhere at the east end, with standard pipe-rack of plain zinc 8ft basses above pitch-pine panelling. Perhaps a Holdich (his part of the world) or a Porritt (his, too) or even an early Taylor (on his patch).

But no: to enter All Saints' and then look west is to behold a quite remarkable sight – much the most spectacular nineteenth century organ in any village church the length and breadth of the land. Standing there, replete with 16ft pedal towers, all gloriously painted with lavish biblical references and images of saints and angels, is an organ by Thomas Casson, installed during the 1880s and restored by David Wood (Wood of Huddersfield) to full working order after many years of damply mouldering away.

Accompanying this article are numerous wonderful visual images of this organ, for it is those which should linger in the reader's mind long after these words have been forgotten. Let me briefly tell the tale – the tale of an ingenious man, rather out of his depth through his own ingenuity, many of whose little one-manual 'Positive' organs are with us still, but very few examples of anything larger.

Thomas Casson has been neglected in the annals of organ history since



Thorpe Malsor – a remarkable 16ft case



Details of the painted designs

Clutton and Niland published their seminal work *The British Organ* – with the notable exception of a splendid lecture/article by Dr Relf Clark in the *BIOS Journal* 26 (2002). Yet earlier authors – some of them organbuilders such as Walter and Thomas Lewis, some of them technical experts such as J. W. Hinton – were warm in their praises of his technical and theoretical developments. Let's redress the balance

as we celebrate the centenary of his death, for other great men in the organ world were directly influenced by him, as we shall see.

Sir Lewis Casson, the famous actor, (1875–1969) was a perhaps unwilling employee for a while of his father, Thomas Casson. The Casson family was a remarkable one in each generation. Lewis Casson married Sybil Thorndyke (for whom Shaw wrote *St Joan*); his

sister was Dr Elizabeth Casson (1881–1954) who founded Dorset House, the first School of Occupational Therapy in the UK. Their nephew, Sir Hugh Casson (1910–99), became a notable painter, later President of the Royal Academy of Arts. Thomas Casson's father had been a banker in Wales, a profession which the young Thomas seemed destined to follow – and did for a while, until the lure of his consuming passion for organ design led him to start having organs built to his plans, apparently with a somewhat experimental instrument in 1882/3. Casson at first worked with organbuilder John Bellamy in Denbigh (at St Mary's in 1882), though commissioning Ernest Wadsworth of Manchester to make an organ to his designs for the 1885 Inventions Exhibition. Casson left banking in 1892 to concentrate on his organ work. On falling out with Bellamy and the failure of his Welsh venture, Casson designed what was to become his trademark one-manual 'Casson Positive Organ' in 1896, established The Positive Organ Company in 1898 and removed to London around 1900. The firm continued in a small way after his death until 1941, though its later work is scarcely recorded.

Casson gave lectures (e.g. *Reform in Organ Building*, February 1888, and *Modern Pneumatic Organ Mechanism*, May 1908), wrote pamphlets (e.g. *The Modern Organ*, 1883; and *The Pedal Organ, its History, Design and Control*, 1905) and promoted his work in the firm's 24-page illustrated catalogue (dating from about 1903) entitled *Organs for Cathedral, Church, Concert and Music-Room*. He, like George Ashdown Audsley (1838–1925) and Col. George Dixon (1870–1950), was a progressive; the three of them had many ideas in common, ideas which were to influence the most significant organ-builders of the next generation: Arthur Harrison, Henry Willis III and John Compton.

Casson's ideas can be summarised under the headings (a) provision of Pedal basses for all manual combinations, (b) the enclosure of some Pedal ranks, (c) the deriving an octave higher or lower of stops on one manual from another, (d) controlling a three-manual

organ from a two manual console, or a 4 [or more]-manual organ from a three, (e) specifying mutation stops (up to the seventh harmonic), (f) the provision of full choruses, (g) the grouping of couplers with the departments they augment, (h) advanced ideas in stop control, such as pedal 'helps', (i) 'melodic' treble and bass devices, (j) celestes of two ranks – one flat, the other sharp (mentioned in W. & T. Lewis *Modern Organ Building*, 3rd ed. 1939). For a detailed explanation with examples of most of these concepts, I refer the reader to Relf Clark's richly detailed article (*BIOS Journal* 26, 2002).

Though the Casson Positive is often to be found, those readers who have played them will know that their ingenious devices – the 'melodic treble' and 'melodic bass' stops – are invariably out of commission. They will also

concur with me that the touch is unpleasantly heavy and spring-dominated. This was the problem with Casson's theories – they had to be carried out using pneumatic action of the most complex and untried type; such mechanisms soon began to give problems and, the tuner doubtless scratching his head in perplexity, were – one by one – disconnected.

Imagine a large organ containing a whole raft of Casson's ideas and one arrives at an instrument such as Thorpe Malsor – an organ so obscure that not even Relf Clark's researches found reference to it although a few years ago a rather indifferent photograph of it did appear in an organ calendar.

The Positive Organ Company's brochure – a copy of which I have in front of me as I write, along with all Casson's writings – prints a variety of tonal schemes, many of them for organs

with two manuals but with a third department – a Choir Organ – available on the Great at the touch of a piston. Few such organs were made; the NPOR lists extant examples at Thorpe Malsor, at St Mary, Churchway, Redgrave, Suffolk (recently restored by Rodney Briscoe), St George's Hotel Llandudno (now in Bethania Methodist Chapel Eglwysbach Denbighshire (Gwynedd) and pictured in a recent issue of *The Organ*, at St Mary, Newick, East Sussex (rebuilt 1976) and no longer extant organs at The Church Congress Hall, Pavilion on the Sands, Rhyl Flintshire (Clwyd), and the Residence of Sir Thomas Bazley in Bournemouth. However, the organ at Thorpe Malsor is typical (for its specification, see over).

The organ is said to have been intended for the east end, but, found too large, was fitted into a west tower



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Thorpe Malsor specification

Casson

PEDALIER	
Open Bass (metal)	16
Sub Bass	16

GREAT ORGAN	
Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Hohl Flute	8
Principal	4
Wald Flute	4
Superoctave	2

CHOIR ORGAN (on Great manual)	
Lieblich Gedact	8
Salicional	8
Flauto Traverso	4

SWELL ORGAN	
Geigen	8
Claribel	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Gemshorn	4
Swell to Great	
Choir to Great	
Swell to Pedals	
Great to Pedals	
Tremulant	
thumb piston 'Great'	
thumb piston 'Choir'	
four composition pedals	
hitch-down swell pedal	

Accessories

There are five pistons apparently missing (3 on Swell, 2 on Great); probably Pedal 'helps' to each department, plus others whose function unclear as there is no extant mechanism.

Casson weight and sogginess of touch.

As we celebrate the life and work of this ingenious man, (whose pneumatic inventions of 100+ years ago could now be much more easily brought to life electrically) it's so good to be able to report that a piece of highly complex pneumatic machinery – very nearly a 'one-off', made before the era of reliable factory-produced pneumatic actions – is once again functioning as its designer intended.

I hope organists will go to see and play this remarkably beautiful and clever organ, will wonder who was responsible for the glorious art-work which adorns it, and in so doing, will re-evaluate the ambitions and achievements of Thomas Casson.

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arch instead – a very tight squeeze which left the 16ft Open Bass pipes standing uniquely and proudly in separate towers in the front, flanking the console (which has sloping jambs rather like a Porritt).

Wood of Huddersfield, with the writer as the church's consultant, took the organ apart in 2010 down to the smallest piece (many of the metal parts

rusted solid) and painstakingly restored it to a fully functioning instrument, working out as they did so the function of numerous tubes and pieces of mechanism which had been disconnected over the decades. The glorious painted pipes and casework have been conserved by Jenny Duffy. The result is an absolute delight to eye and ear – even if it does retain its

Laurie Walsh



Keyboards, showing missing pistons