French treasure on the Isle of Wight

Paul Hale

Enjoying the ferry crossing from Portsmouth to Fishbourne on the Isle of Wight, the traveller soon becomes aware of a group of curious red-brick buildings - complex yet somehow self-effacing – which gradually emerge from the dense trees as one approaches the Island. Doubtless many who wonder what this is are soon distracted by the prospect of a few days break in that delightful 'back to the 1950s' refuge which is The Island. But for those who determine to seek out this place, a wonderful surprise awaits them as they turn down a leafy drive and find themselves approaching Quarr Abbey.

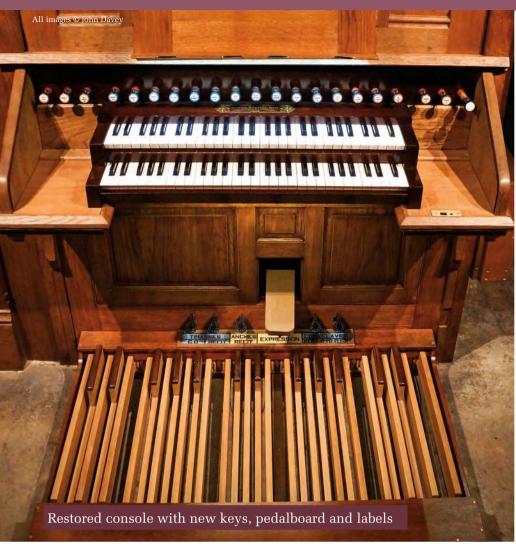
St Mary's Abbey, Quarr
was founded in 1132 for
the Savigniac Order
(later merged
with the
Cistercians)
by Baldwin

de Redvers. First Earl of Devon and Fourth Lord of the Isle of Wight. His remains, along with those of Princess Cecily of York (d.1507), second daughter of Edward IV and godmother of Henry VIII, still lie on the site of the mediæval monastery. The name Quarr comes from 'quarry': stone from this quarry was used in the Middle Ages for both ecclesiastical and military buildings, including parts of the Tower of London. After the Monastery was dissolved in 1536 (the year in which the Dissolution of the Monasteries began, the smaller houses such as Quarr falling first), the land was acquired by a Southampton merchant, George Mills, who demolished most of the abbey. The monks were dispersed and that might have been the end of the story. Fortuitously, it was not.

The Benedictine monks of Solesmes Abbey, France, spent decades in the $19^{\rm th}$ century

researching and reconstructing plainchant and the liturgies of the Church, which ultimately led to Pope Pius X's Encyclical on sacred music of 1903, motu proprio, which aimed to rid the church of 'profane' music. However, following the election of the French Third Republic's anti-clerical government, a law was passed which banned religious orders, except by special dispensation. As a precaution, Abbot Paul Delatte of Solesmes (1848–1937) sent a monk to England to seek out a house to shelter the community. He chose Appuldurcombe House on the Isle of Wight (now a ruin) where the community moved in 1901, buying in 1903 a small Mutin Cavaillé-Coll







the community acquired Quarr. Although they had not expected to be exiled for long, a young architect, Dom Paul Bellot, designed a range of Flemish brick buildings for the community - now Grade I listed - in a curious mixture of Franco-Flemish and Byzantine style, which were built between 1907 and 1912. In 1922 most of the monks returned Solesmes, leaving a small community behind at Quarr which became in 1937 an independent abbey, recruiting English monks. There they continued to sing all their services to plainchant in the true Solesmes tradition, as they do to this day.

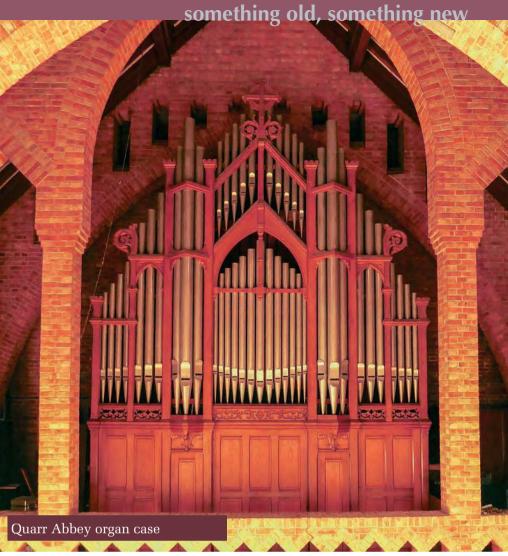
In recent years, with a shrinking community and aging buildings, the World Monuments Fund identified Quarr Abbev as one of the 100 most endangered historic sites in the world. In July 2012 the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded Quarr a £1.9 million matching grant. The project included repair and conservation of the mediæval abbey remains and modern abbey church, as well as forming a Visitor Information Centre with many facilities. This all came to pass, and now the Abbey flourishes once more and is much visited.

What of their organs? Having once sung to the accompaniment of a Mutin Cavaillé-Coll (the name Aristide Cavaillé-Coll's firm adopted on his death in 1899, when his foreman Charles Mutin assumed the reins), the Quarr monks were determined to commission a similar instrument when their Abbey church was ready to receive it. Perhaps, in addition, they were inspired by a similar Mutin Cavaillé-Coll instrument made in 1905 for the Solesmes foundation of Farnborough Abbey. The firm was busy in 1911 making a very beautiful orgue de chœur for Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, so it was in 1912 that one of their standard orgue de chœur models was installed in the lofty west gallery at Quarr. Joseph Bonnet (1884–1944) the renowned French organist, was a regular visitor; correspondence with him concerning the Quarr organ remains in the Abbey's archives.

As built, the organ had (and now has again) a colourful stop list (see p.33), with two soundboards of 86 notes each, including sections of the Pedale on each chest.

In 1963 Noel Mander carried out a rather invasive rebuild, removing the tracker action, the Barker pneumatic-lever machine and the mechanical stop action, electrifying the mechanism and fitting a new console, with Anglicised stop names and seven stops prepared for though never installed. The Swell reeds were stored on top of the swellbox and replacements fitted; the 8ft Trompette, oddly, was supplanted by a 2ft Fifteenth and the Plein Jeu recast to a higher pitch. In 1995 Matthew Copley carried out much work in an attempt to move back towards the original (which including reinstating the 1912 reeds), yet by 2006 the organ ceased to be reliable enough to play, so was taken out of commission. At the same time there was a plan to build a far larger organ incorporating the existing instrument, with a detached console in the monks'





stalls. Materials were gathered and stored, but the plan was eventually abandoned.

The Mutin Cavaillé-Coll might have been lost, but fortuitous circumstances came to its aid. Adrian Mumford takes up the tale:

'Interest in restoring the organ started with the election of Dom Xavier Perrin as Prior (now Abbot and himself an organist) and the appointment of visiting Titular Organist, Hamish Dustagheer (now Maestro di Cappella at St John's Co-Cathedral, Malta). My first visit was in early 2013 when the organ was coaxed into action, but it was mechanically unreliable with a copiously leaking wind system and choked with dust. Inspection of the interior presented a sorry sight, not least wiring and wind conveyancing solutions worthy of Heath Robinson.

Nevertheless, it was clear that a significant proportion of the Mutin Cavaillé-Coll organ was extant, not least the pipework, soundboards, wind reservoir, case and panelling, and much of the console. There was interest in reviving the instrument and bringing it back into regular use, so I was invited to prepare a report which then formed the basis of an invitation to tender.

In as many aspects as possible, the underlying philosophy was to seek to restore (or recreate) the organ to how it would have looked, sounded and been operated a century earlier. No work would be undertaken that moved further away from the original conception.

After due process, Andrew Cooper was appointed to undertake the work. Very much the local organ-builder, Andrew recognised the historical importance of the instrument and was also keen to seek to return it, as far as practicable, to its original condition.'

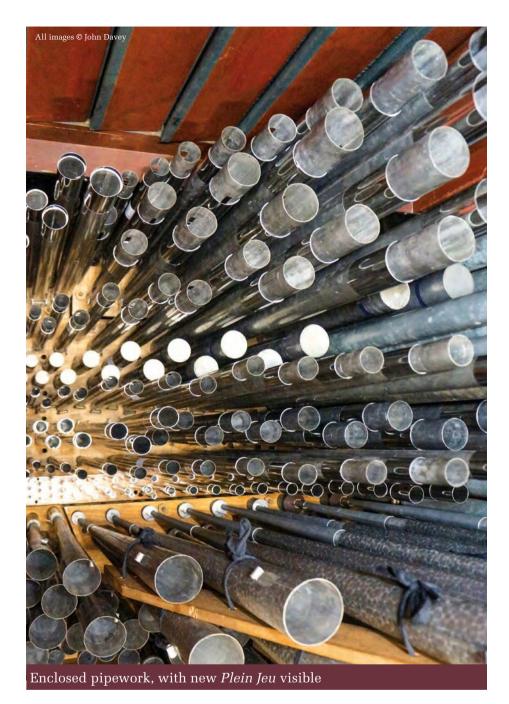
Adrian's thorough assessment of the instrument revealed many aspects where major decisions had to be made, starting with the pipework.

Mercifully, much of the pipework was readily restorable, though the *Récit* Flûte Octaviante had been radically altered, removing its

Specification

CRANDE ORCHE	
GRANDE ORGUE	
Bourdon	16
Montre	8
Bourdon	8
Flûte Harmonique (enclosed)	8
Salicional (enclosed)	8
Prestant	4
RÉCIT	
Diapason	8
Cor de Nuit	8
Viole de Gambe	8
Vox Céleste	8
Flûte Octaviante	4
Plein Jeu	III
Basson	16
Trompette Harmonique	8
Basson Hautbois	8
PEDALE	
Contra Bass (stopped with helpers)	16
Soubasse (fr. GO Bourdon 16)	16
Bass Ouverte (fr. GO Flûte H. 8)	8
Bass Ouverte (fr. GO Flûte H. 8) Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit)	8
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit)	8
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson)	8
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson) Tirasse <i>Récit</i>	8
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson) Tirasse <i>Récit</i> Tirasse <i>Grand Orgue</i>	8
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson) Tirasse <i>Récit</i> Tirasse <i>Grand Orgue Récit</i> to <i>Grand Orgue</i>	8
Bourdon (fr. Récit Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. Récit Basson) Tirasse Récit Tirasse Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue, Octaves Graves	8
Bourdon (fr. Récit Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. Récit Basson) Tirasse Récit Tirasse Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue, Octaves Graves Ventil Expression pedal	8
Bourdon (fr. Récit Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. Récit Basson) Tirasse Récit Tirasse Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue Récit to Grand Orgue, Octaves Graves Ventil Expression pedal notes:	8 16
Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson) Tirasse <i>Récit</i> Tirasse <i>Grand Orgue Récit</i> to <i>Grand Orgue Récit</i> to <i>Grand Orgue</i> , Octaves Graves Ventil Expression pedal notes: 1) the knobs could be turned to set 'on'	8 16
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Bourdon (fr. <i>Récit</i> Cor de Nuit) Trombone (fr. <i>Récit</i> Basson) Tirasse <i>Récit</i> Tirasse <i>Grand Orgue Récit</i> to <i>Grand Orgue Récit</i> to <i>Grand Orgue</i> , Octaves Graves Ventil Expression pedal notes: 1) the knobs could be turned to set 'on' 'off' for 'Appel' and 'Renvoi' pedals [no longer].	8 16
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[no longer].



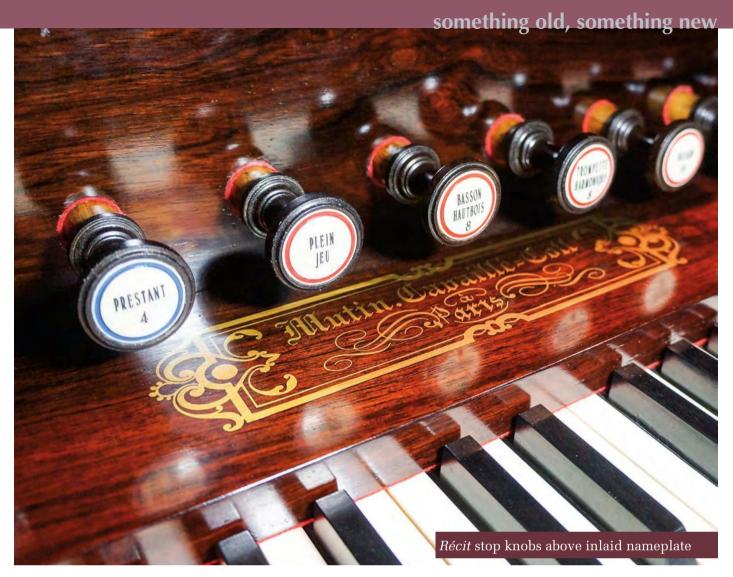
harmonic overlength, so needed remaking to return to it the striking treble-ascendant harmonic trebles which are the glory of these Cavaillé-Coll stops. The Plein Jeu had been altered at each rebuild; by 2006 it was reduced to single orphaned rank. Correspondence from Bonnet shows that he was not satisfied with the composition of the stop from the start. Research was undertaken studying the upperboards and rackboards to see what they would reveal about the original composition, and at the same time a study of other examples of a Mutin Cavaillé-Coll Récit Plein Jeu was made. Eventually a composition was decided upon (using Cavaillé-Coll pipe scales) which, whilst not exactly as made in 1912, was near to that, consonant with the company's regular practice and musically satisfactory.

Next, the action had to be addressed. To return to mechanical action and build a new Barker machine, or to stick with electropneumatic action? In the event, pragmatism and cost played their part, and Mander's well-made and responsive electro-pneumatic note action was retained, fully restored and with a new control system,



naturally. The 1995 electric swell shutter machine was removed, the mechanical linkages remade and two missing shutters located and reinstalled. In addition, as sufficient of the original mechanical stop-action remained for a reconstruction not to be hypothetical, this route has been followed.

Remaking the mechanical stop action meant rebuilding the original once again. Although console Mander had left it alone and built his console on the other side (south) of the organ, the original console had suffered questionable alterations. Consultant Canon Mumford and organbuilder Andrew Cooper were determined thoroughly to research and re-create a Mutin Cavaillé-Coll console, so trips were made to similar sized instruments in original condition, photographs and measurements were taken, and the Quarr console was remade in the correct style - right down to the appropriate labelling of the new coupler and ventil pedals. A similar 1912 Mutin Cavaillé-Coll organ in Highlands College, Jersey, proved an invaluable source of information and the new straight/ flat pedalboard is copied from that organ. The manual keys were considered beyond redemption, so



the ivories were removed, sanded and buffed, worn or cracked plates were replaced with better matches from reclaimed stock and all were then glued to completely new keys with tracker touch, made by P&S of Brandon as a copy of Mutin Cavaillé-Coll originals.

The wind supply was found to be unsatisfactory, partly owing to the manner in which an electric blower had been installed. Once the beautiful concertina trunks had been painstakingly restored (they had been stored in the blower room when replaced with flexible

connections) and the blower more efficiently routed to the organ, all was well once again. The two slider soundboards - beautifully made remained in generally sound condition, other than their pallets needing recovering. A new rackboard was made for the new Plein Jeu; new rackboards and stays were manufactured for the reed stops. The timber selected was Albizia to match the materials used by Mutin Cavaillé-Coll. The casework was cleaned and waxed and left quietly glowing in its subdued, slightly yellow elevated west-end lighting.

As a result of this meticulously researched and executed work, an extremely rare and special U.K. example of the work of the house of Aristide Cavaillé-Coll (even though made 13 years after his death) has been saved and restored. As Adrian Mumford writes: 'the restoration has brought back to life a distinctively French-flavoured instrument with an extraordinarily rich colour palette that once again serves the needs of the Benedictine community's daily cycle of worship from the simply contemplative to the majestically ceremonial'.

Paul Hale is a professional organ consultant, recitalist and choral conductor.

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, along with the Thomas Cramer Award presented to him by the Archbishop of Canterbury. More information is available at www.PaulHale.org