

Work in progress

Paul Hale steps inside the Malvern workshop of Nicholson & Co. Ltd to find a new organ for Radley College sitting alongside restorations of instruments by J.W. Walker and William Denman. WORKSHOP PHOTOS BY PAUL HALE

In at one end – out at the other. The long-established company of Nicholson & Co. Ltd followed several other firms (notably Harrison & Harrison, Peter Collins Ltd and Kenneth Tickell & Co.) in moving from rambling old buildings, pressed into inefficient use as workshops, into new purpose-built factory premises. Modern buildings offer greater efficiency all round, if carefully designed, the Nicholson plant being particularly notable in this respect.

Behind a large roller door at the front lies a spacious 'reception room' where disassembled organs and large new components arrive and are initially stored. Behind that are three workshop areas – one for action restoration and manufacture, one for the making of slider soundboards, and one for bellows work and new consoles. To one side is the timber store and mill, with a side entrance and staff kitchen on the other side. Upstairs is a capacious storage area, the electrical wiring room, the drawing office and the accountant's office. Outside the main building is a separate suite of offices and the firm's archive store. At the rear of the factory, rising to the full height of the building, is a large enough space to erect one or two organs as they are made or restored. Off to one side of this room are two voicing rooms and the pipe-making department; on the other side is another large roller door through which a completed organ, once packed up, is dispatched. In at one end – out at the other, indeed.

The current management aims to steer the company into an era where its 15 craftsmen (divided into project teams) ▶

▶ Mike Longstaff adjusts valves in an Open Wood chest of the 1885 William Denman organ in York



Nicholson & Co. Ltd – how it all began



▲ The firm's founder, John Nicholson, and (rt) the original workshop in Palace Yard, Worcester

John Nicholson (1815-95) came from a family of organ builders in the Rochdale area. His father's commissions included a new organ for what was then the Countess of Huntingdon's Methodist Chapel in Worcester, which was completed in 1840. Spotting an opportunity, John stayed on in Worcester, set up his own firm in 1841 and was soon extremely busy.

Early notable John Nicholson instruments were installed at the Worcester Public Hall (1844, III/56), which was acclaimed by Clutton & Niland (*The British Organ*) as the finest English organ of the day (not least because of its 12-stop Pedal organ), at Gloucester Shire Hall (1849, III/36, listed in Hopkins & Rimbault, again because of its complete Pedal organ), Great Malvern Priory (1850/1862/1880, IV/47), and Manchester Cathedral (1860, III/42; now in Portsmouth Cathedral where it was installed by Nicholson & Co. in 1994).

Nicholson's ability to build effective, musical and reliable church organs for a modest price rapidly enabled his firm to supply hundreds of churches, from the south coast of England to the north of Scotland, as well as for clients in such far-off countries as China, Australia and New Zealand. Edward Elgar's father played one in St George's Catholic Church in Worcester – the first organ the young Edward played, and where he in turn later became organist.

From 1903-16 the company was in the charge of Arthur Whinfield, a renowned photographer who brought many technical innovations to the firm's work, such as pneumatic action and his own patent stop controls. The company developed a smooth Edwardian tonal style, leading to fine instruments such as the Birmingham &

Midland Institute (rebuilt 1924), Birmingham Oratory (1909), Leominster Priory (1924) and St Francis, Bournville (1933).

Stanley Lambert took over in 1935 and ran the firm for nearly 40 years, for a time in association with J.W. Walker, with whom the company shared various skills (such as effective Haskell basses) and design ideas (such as console equipment, including a patent for double-touch cancelling on stop-knobs). Highlights of this period include the large instruments in All Saints', Cheltenham (1952), Birmingham Central Hall (1955), Bristol University (1963), and St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham (1968, since replaced). In 1956 Lambert led the move of the company from its original home in Palace Yard, Worcester to a new home in converted premises on Quest Hills Road, Malvern.

A new era dawned in 1974, when Robert Kitchener, Raymond Todd and the celebrated voicer Dennis Thurlow took over the firm. Work over the next two decades featured much neo-classical voicing, in instruments such as St Barnabas, Oxford (1976), St Mary, Warwick (1980) and Our Lady, Slough (1988); there were major rebuilds such as Newcastle Cathedral (1981), St Laurence, Ludlow (1985

▼ The present workshop, just outside Malvern



and later), Birmingham Oratory (1987) and St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham (1992). In addition, many countryside church organs were restored, and several historic instruments such as the Forster & Andrews in West Bromwich Town Hall (1984) – a particular favourite of Dennis Thurlow.

From 1994-2018 the firm thrived under the tenure of Andrew Moyes, supported by Guy Russell (who had worked for many years with Dennis Thurlow) as tonal director, with many technical innovations and a gradual return to a less neo-classical, more 'English' tonal style in significant new instruments such as Southwell Minster (1995/6), Uppingham School (2007), Llandaff Cathedral (2010/13), and Holy Trinity Cathedral, Auckland, New Zealand (2016/7), Llandaff and Auckland being the largest projects in the firm's history. Significant rebuilds included those of Portsmouth Cathedral (1994), St Woolos Cathedral (1997), Christchurch Priory (1999, with subsequent additions), Great Malvern Priory (2004), Bridlington Priory (2005), Belmont Abbey (2010) and St Michael, Cornhill (also 2010). Among sensitive restorations, that of the Father Willis organ in St Peter's College, Oxford (2003), the 1861 Gray & Davison in Usk parish church (2006), the 1911 Norman & Beard in St Mary, Rye (2009), and the 1877 Hill now in St Barnabas, Ealing (2011) are notable. In 2003 the firm moved to new modern premises, planned by Andrew Moyes, just outside Malvern.

Since 2018 Nicholson & Co. has been under the leadership of Andrew Caskie, a chartered engineer and former pupil of the late David Sanger (and currently one of the organists at Malvern Priory). Caskie is a former chairman of the Scottish Federation of Organists organ advisory team and was director of music at Palmerston Place Church in Edinburgh. He is supported by head voicer James Atherton, who joined Nicholson & Co. in 2005 as a tuner and voicer working under Guy Russell, having begun his career in organ building with David Wells in Liverpool. With this leadership, the 18-strong Nicholson team seeks to maintain the ethos and character of the firm's founder and his instruments, allied to modern organ-building methods and museum-standard conservation techniques.

◁ work on two main strands at the same time – new organs and historical restorations. Straightforward ‘rebuilt’ also continue to feature, as does basic overhaul work, but the desire is quite clear – to divide the factory’s output at any one time into the two dominant strands of new and restorative work. So it is that at present the company currently has three organs going through the workshops – two historic restorations and a new organ.

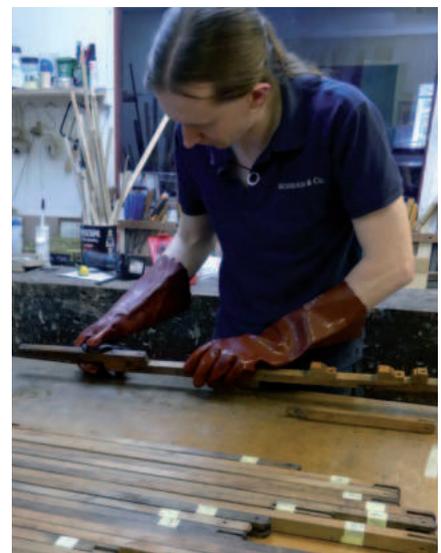
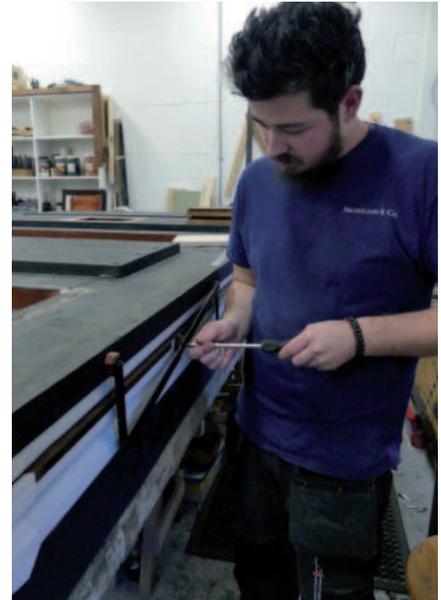
The smaller restoration is of the beautifully encased 1871 J.W. Walker organ which stands at the west end of the church

of St Michael and All Angels, Moccas, near Hereford. In January 2020 Nicholson & Co. began work on its comprehensive historical restoration, during which almost every part of the instrument is being returned to its 1871 condition. The exquisite casework decoration is to be restored by the International Fine Arts Conservation Studios (Bristol), and the ‘Bailey’s Patent’ water engine is to be restored to working condition, with a new recirculating system, by James Richardson-Jones of the Duplex Pipe Organ & Blower Co. On my visit to the workshops earlier this year, before the

lockdown, it was a pleasure to observe every tiny part of this beautiful organ being carefully restored or conserved, using appropriate materials.

Exactly the same approach is being applied to the second, larger restoration project in hand. This involves removing the instrument from St Michael-le-Belfry church, York, and installing it in St Lawrence’s church, one mile south. This organ was built in 1885 by the York organ builder William Denman and was to be one of the largest instruments of his career, housed in richly carved oak casework ▷

▼ Work on the York instrument continues: (clockwise, from top right) Darren Bingham repairs splits in casework panelling; Csaba Farkas fits counterbalances to a restored reservoir; David Roskelly works on mechanical stop action; the empty case, with front pipes in the background; assistant foreman Tim Bennett assesses an Open Wood ventril





▲ Restoring an 1871 J.W. Walker organ for a Herefordshire church: (clockwise, from top left) Luke Morton leathers hydraulic pumping feeders; head voicer James Atherton regulates the speech of a Principal 4ft; Kelvin Kent restores a combination pedal; foreman Kevin Davies at work on a double-rise reservoir; Wesley Gibbard restores the keyboards

◀ enclosing it on all sides. Tonal alterations were undertaken by John Jackson in 1975 (neo-classical replacement ranks in the fashion of the time). The organ's condition declined to the point that it became unplayable in the mid-1990s; the church recently obtained permission to rehouse it elsewhere. In December 2019, work commenced on a full historical restoration, returning the organ in every way (with the sole exception of the balanced Swell pedal) to its 1885 condition as left by Denman. The tonal modifications are being reversed by making new pipework, copied from surviving Denman examples elsewhere.

The soundboards and actions (mechanical to manuals, pneumatic to pedals) are being restored without alteration. The appearance of the case woodwork was marred by an attempt at liming the oak many years ago; the liming has been cleaned off and the oak is being restored and refinished to its original lustre. As there are large cracks, owing to shrinkage (St Michael-le-Belfry is well-heated), a lengthy task involves cutting small pieces of perfectly matched oak, glueing them into the case panels and carvings, trimming and finishing them to match. Upon completion of the restoration, the organ will be installed in the spacious

north transept of St Lawrence's, the first organ of real quality in this large church's 136-year life.

Alongside all the 19th-century components spread around the workshops are unmistakable signs of a brand new instrument being started: a new reservoir awaiting leathering and some shiny spotted metal being made up into a 4ft Octave, of generous scale. This is the beginning of a new 53-stop organ for Radley College, near Oxford, an independent boys' boarding school founded in 1847. Known for its high standard of music, the College regularly attracts as music scholars choristers

from Oxford University's Christ Church, Magdalen and New College, thus ensuring a steady supply of highly trained and fully motivated musical pupils. The entire school gathers daily in the school chapel to worship, their hearty hymn-singing being truly impressive. Recent and planned increases in the school roll have led to a major project, now under way, to extend the lofty chapel, designed by Sir Thomas Jackson in 1893, with a new east end and additional seating.

The chapel's first organ was built by Telford of Dublin in 1848 and was initially housed in the former chapel. When installed in the present building in 1895, it was located in the west gallery by Charles Martin (of Oxford) in a splendid oak case by Jackson and enlarged to five manuals, with 60 speaking stops. Pressure from rising school numbers led to the gallery being needed for seating, so this organ was replaced in 1938 with a largely new instrument by Rushworth & Dreaper which had to struggle to be heard from two specially built chambers behind side walls at either end of the chapel. This organ was in turn replaced with a new tracker-action instrument by Hill, Norman & Beard in 1979, in a chamber off the enlarged west gallery. Sadly, this proved tonally inadequate from the outset and was quickly supplemented with some of the remaining R&D material in the south-east chamber.

A new extension to the chapel, so that congregations of around 800 can

gather every day, has made the need for a replacement instrument imperative. The new Nicholson organ will, once again, be sited in the centre of the west gallery, within a new oak case conceived and drawn by Michael Lane, Nicholson's experienced designer, inspired by Thomas Jackson's work, though not a slavish copy. The organ will have three manuals and 53 stops, with mechanical action to the manuals and electro-pneumatic action to the Pedal Organ. The tonal scheme emphasises sonority along with rich choruses and many 'colour stops'; it will represent the first fully-new scheme scaled and voiced by James Atherton in his role as head voicer. The largest pedal pipework (including two 32ft ranks) will be located in the chamber where the present organ is situated, behind a new oak screen with tracery to match the adjacent windows. Installation is planned for autumn 2021.

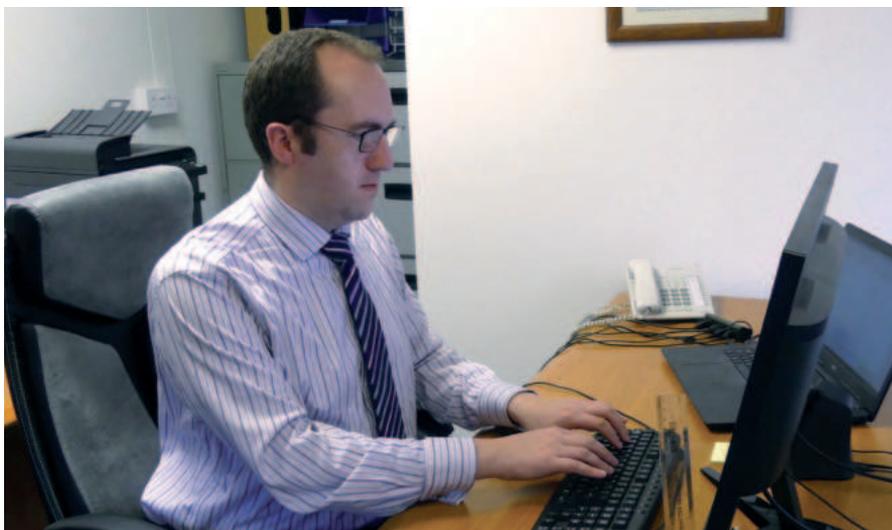
While working on these three projects, the firm has been responding to an unprecedented number of invitations to tender. The projects confirmed for 2021 and 2022 concentrate on restoration work: principal among them is a highly significant contract of international importance – Manchester Town Hall. Nicholson & Co. have won a joint contract with Flentrop Orgelbouw of the Netherlands to reconstruct this large 1877/1893 Cavallé-Coll organ back to its 1893 state, removing the later additions and actions.

Such interesting work as the firm has in

▼ (from top) designer Mike Lane sets out the new organ for Radley College; pipe maker Richard Sanders cuts out a new Octave 4ft



▼ Managing director Andrew Caskie in his office



hand – in addition to the two very large new organs made in recent years for Llandaff and Auckland (NZ) cathedrals – not only ensures that the company prospers, but also creates a notably cheerful and positive environment and workforce, where staff training is of foremost importance, with younger team members being trained by 'old hands' in the metal shop, voicing rooms and electrical department as well as by the general organ builders. It's a stimulating place to visit: I look forward with relish to my next spin in the delightful countryside surrounding the workshops – an area many of whose churches have resounded to the tone of Nicholson organs since John Nicholson set up shop in Worcester all those years ago. ■

Paul Hale has been writing about the organ for many years, while working as a cathedral organist, recitalist, teacher and organ consultant.