

St Matthew's Northampton

A monumental organ revived – Paul Hale

The golden age for piano building is generally considered to be the twenty years or so running up to the First World War. Lucky the player to have a Bechstein, Steinway or Blüthner from this period, for quality of design, materials, execution and voicing has never been bettered. Much the same may be observed of certain UK organbuilders. The period 1890–1915 was a fascinating

one: the Hill and Willis firms had already done much of their most famous work (though they both produced iconic instruments right at the end of the century); Harrison & Harrison had just reached the national forefront; and two long-established firms came to prominence just at this time, finding a new confidence in their own style – Norman & Beard of Norwich and J.W.

Walker (JWW) of London. Over the years each had developed its own tonal specialities, mechanisms and console designs and was able to use the highest quality of materials superbly crafted, owing to low labour costs, efficient factory techniques, and the ready availability of first-class timber and other raw materials imported from around the British Empire.

As Walkers came into their own at this time, they found themselves winning a number of major contracts within little more than a decade. The cathedrals of Bristol, York and Rochester all employed JWW comprehensively to reconstruct and modernise three very different yet unsatisfactory organs: this they did, triumphantly, turning each into a reliable modern instrument. At the same time, they won a following in large fashionable parish churches, thus landing lucrative contracts for brand new three- or four-manual organs at St Mary's Portsea (1889), Holy Trinity Sloane St, London (1891), St Matthew's Northampton (1895) and St Margaret's Westminster (1897). All these organs share common Walker characteristics – typically their famous Wald Flutes on the Great, their characteristic 'pepper-pot' chorus reeds, their use of two or three-rank flue trebles (or indeed entire ranks) in their Clarions, their preference for three varied Open Diapasons on the Great and two on the Swell, rather keen strings, creamy Harmonic Flutes, a 32ft Open Wood on the Pedal where space allowed, a fine Tuba and well-voiced imitative reeds, with the Orchestral Oboe a particular speciality.

The vast neo-gothic church of St Matthew, Northampton, designed by Matthew Holding in the 13th-century French Gothic style rather reminiscent of the work of J.L. Pearson, though sadly



General view of the organ at St Matthew's



The Great Reeds with 'pepper-pot' tops

— and to the detriment of the acoustic — without one of his lovely stone vaults, arose in an affluent area of the town, just off the Kettering Road. The organ was the gift of Mary Ann Phipps, in memory of her husband, Pickering Phipps MP (1827–1890), local brewer and Mayor of Northampton: the church is his memorial. The Phipps and Walker families were related by marriage; the family name is now indeed Phipps-Walker. The new Walker organ was completed in 1895, nominally to the design of the organist of St Paul's cathedral, Sir George Martin. Martin was a frequent consultant for such projects in the 1890s and 1900s, though my observation of his work suggests that all he ever did was suggest a few firms, agree whatever stop-list the favoured company quoted for, and go back to London with a fat fee (for Tonbridge School in 1909 it was no less than 4% of the contract price!). So it appears to have been at St Matthew's, where the stop-list is pure JWW, though Martin is said to have encouraged as large a scheme as possible as money appeared to be no object!

The organ was built with mechanical (pneumatic lever) and tubular pneumatic action. Its novelty lies in its layout, which remains unique. The architect had the rare wisdom (perhaps

prompted by the donor) to ask Walkers how much space was needed for an organ chamber. The result was a spacious area some 40ft high and two bays deep at the south-east end of the church, just beyond the south transept. Holding was clearly prepared to accommodate his influential patron. Walkers then took the most unusual step of angling the instrument so that the main frame with console, bellows, action, Great, Swell and Solo is at 45°, pointing obliquely north-west across the church, the console being elevated with a view both to west and east. I imagine the idea was to ensure that the organ did not simply speak across the chancel — as in so many churches — to accompany the choir, but also down the nave to lead the congregation. The Swell is behind the Great, with the Solo box above the Swell box, the Tuba standing in front; the Choir is to the east of the Great, being thus nearest to the choir stalls. The Pedal ranks (all independent except for the 32ft Open Wood) fit in various places, many areas being triangular owing to the odd position of the organ within the chamber. There is a paucity of casework as the true front of the organ is quite narrow and is mainly hidden behind stone pillars and arches. Facing into the south transept is a row of 16ft metal basses with other pipes visible higher up — hardly a sight as

attractive as the rest of the church. In the event, it was just as well that the organ attempted partly to reach down the nave, for its odd position and the lack of a nave stone vault result in the tone being surprisingly reticent down the church, despite its generous scales, weighty pressures and considerable power at the console.

St Matthew's became a gloriously artistic church, particularly under the Revd Walter Hussey, later Dean of Chichester, commissioning major works of art and music from Henry Moore, Graham Sutherland, Britten (*Rejoice in the Lamb*), McCabe, Leighton, Tippett, Berkeley, Tavener, Howells and others. Its choir was famed and the church produced a stream of cathedral organists including Denys Pouncey, Alec Wyton, Robert Joyce, John Bertalot, Michael Nicholas and Stephen Cleobury. After seventy years heavy use the organ needed restoration work so in 1971 Walkers electrified the actions and provided a new console — not necessarily the priorities one would adopt thirty-five years later, but doubtless a logical course at the time. Mercifully no tonal changes were made. In 1980 a new blowing plant was installed, replacing the previous equipment dating from the 1920s; tuning slides were fitted to the pipework in 1982, to protect it from damage. In 1990



Console at St Matthew's, as remade in 2006

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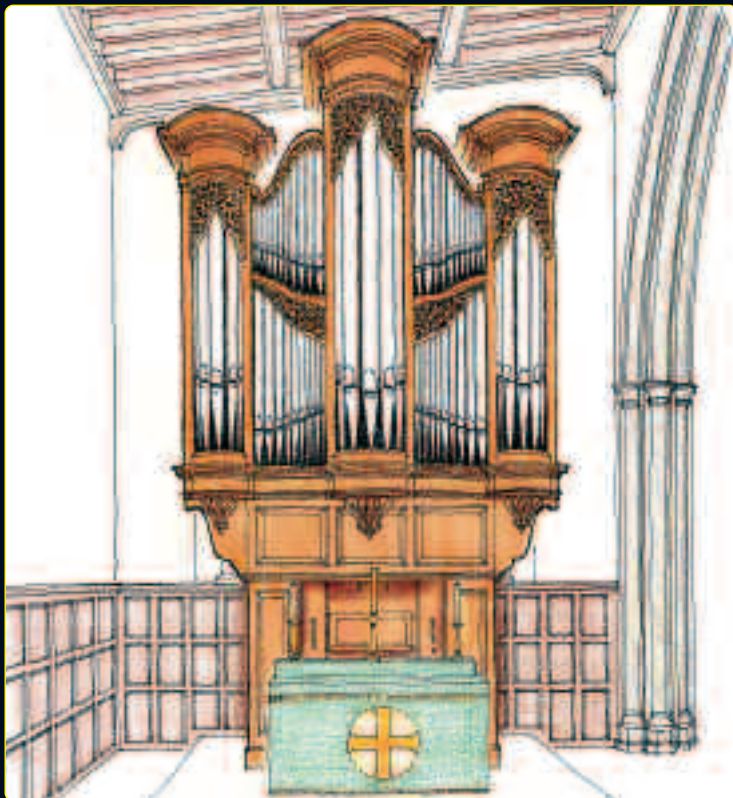
St. Giles Cripplegate is one of the last medieval churches still standing in the City of London. It contrasts with the modern Barbican development around it and stands close to remains of the Roman London Wall. John Milton was a congregant and is buried there. It is also the home of St. Giles International Organ School.

On a west gallery stands an organ built by Noel Mander incorporating casework and some pipework from the Jordan and Bridge organ of 1733, from St. Luke's Old Street. The new organ will be installed in the Lady Chapel to accompany services held there; it will also be used by the Organ School for teaching and practice. The console is being designed to facilitate playing by visually and physically impaired organists.



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MANDER ORGANS

St Matthew's, Northampton, specification

PEDAL ORGAN		CHOIR ORGAN		GREAT ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN		SOLO ORGAN (enclosed)										
1	Double Open Diapason (ext no. 2)	32		9	Lieblich Bourdon	16		16	Double Open Diapason	16		29	Contra Gamba	16		44	Harmonic Flute	8
2	Open Diapason (wood)	16		10	Gamba	8		17	Open Diapason (Large)	8		30	Open Diapason	8		45	Harmonic Flute	4
3	Violone (metal)	16		11	Lieblich Gedact	8		18	Open Diapason (Medium)	8		31	Stopped Diapason	8		46	Harmonic Piccolo	2
4	Bourdon	16		12	Dulciana	8		19	Open Diapason (Small)	8		32	Violin Diapason	8		47	Clarinet	8
5	Principal	8		13	Dulciana Principal	4		20	Wald Flute	8		33	Echo Gamba	8		48	Orchestral Oboe	8
6	Flute	8		14	Lieblich Flute	4		21	Principal	4		34	Vox Angelica (TC)	8			Tremulant	
7	Contra Trombone (ext no. 8)	32		15	Harmonic Gemshorn	2		22	Wald Flute	4		35	Principal	4		49	Tuba (unenclosed)	8
8	Trombone	16			Swell to Choir			23	Twelfth	2 ² / ₃		36	Flute	4				
	Great to Pedal							24	Fifteenth	2		37	Fifteenth	2				
	Swell to Pedal							25	Mixture	III		38	Mixture	III				
	Choir to Pedal							26	Double Trumpet	16		39	Contra Fagotto	16				
	Solo to Pedal							27	Trumpet	8		40	Horn	8				
								28	Clarion	4		41	Clarion	4				
									Swell to Great			42	Oboe	8				
									Choir to Great			43	Vox Humana	8				
									Solo to Great				Tremulant					
													Octave					
													Sub Octave					

Accessories

Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled
 Generals on Swell toe pistons
 8 thumb pistons to Swell and to Great,
 5 to Choir and to Solo
 reversible thumb pistons to all inter-departmental couplers

8 toe pistons to Pedal and to Swell
 reversible toe pistons to Great to Pedal, Swell to Great,
 32ft flue, 32ft reed
 8 general thumb pistons
 setter

general cancel
 multiple levels to divisionals and generals
 adjustable bench

the Solo Organ actions, reservoirs and tremulant were overhauled and releathered. All this work was undertaken by Harrison & Harrison. During 2005/6, a complete restoration has been executed by Harrison's, working with locally-based Kenneth Tickell & Co. The cost is over £300,000 and the church is still appealing for funds.

The approach this time has been to restore fully the soundboards and numerous reservoirs (adding a static reservoir near the 1980 blower); to fit new, better electro-pneumatic actions and all new electrics; to re-design the shutter fronts; and to remake the 1971 console into something which, whilst it offers normal modern controls, has the look and feel of a period Walker console. Its drawstops, jambs, pistons and composition pedals are new, thus a resemblance to the 1907 Walker Bristol Cathedral console is not coincidental. Tonally the only change has been to extend the Pedal Trombone down to 32ft pitch and to move the original rank from 16ft upwards to a position behind the west front from where its tone can more readily be heard. The new Contra Trombone is full length down to bottom E and employs wooden shallots, blocks and boots for sonority. It matches very smoothly into the long brass shallots of the Walker reed. The Harrison voicers

have worked hard to rediscover the essential character of each stop, carrying out several weeks of thorough tonal regulation to great effect.

The organ impresses at once with the sheer quality and musicality of its tone and with its remarkable blend. I believe that this latter quality has been rediscovered by Harrison's as the organ has had some distinctly rough edges for years, now miraculously blended away. There is power, but controlled power – nothing hectors, not even the splendidly full-toned Large Open Diapason. The choruses are quite refined, the Great upperwork tapering off (more than I expected) until the sophisticated reeds – not rendered too dark by their 'pepper-pot' tops – come into their own, the Clarion (with its 4ft & 2ft flues from tenor G sharp going like the clappers) compensating for the lack of punch in the Mixture. The Swell chorus follows much the same lines except that the upperwork has been kept up rather more. The Choir is silvery and very beautiful; the Solo possesses voluptuous harmonic flutes which really bounce off the vaulted chamber ceiling, well-voiced imitative reeds and a sonorous though tasteful Tuba. The small reeds in the Swell are equally excellent and the whole is completed with a pair of classic Walker Wald Flutes on the Great, and a combination of weight and punch from

the Pedal flues, the Trombone being just large enough (at both pitches) to do its job.

The console is elegant and comfortable, distinctly Walker in appearance, though the composition pedals protrude too far forward and were caught whilst playing by each of the three of us who tried the organ on the day of my visit. Though there are now general pistons and numerous memory levels, there is no Stepper and there remain no Solo to Choir, Solo to Swell nor Solo octave couplers... exactly as built by JWW.

The musical tradition of St Matthew's is in the safe and committed hands of the incumbent, the Revd Nicholas Setterfield, who has personally driven the organ project, and the energetic new organist, Sebastian Thomson, who is determined to build on past strengths to generate an enhanced musical tradition for the future. The organ is at the centre of all this and may be heard in all its splendour in the opening concert, which is to be given by David Briggs on 18 November at 7.30pm. This is part of a series of concerts featuring the organ, details of which may be found on the church's website.

Next time: David Wells' restoration of the famous Hill at Arundel Cathedral.

photographs on previous spread by Paul Hale