

London's best kept secret

Paul Hale writes about the new organ of St Etheldreda's Church, Ely Place, Holborn, London

Tucked away out of sight near the end of an elegant cul-de-sac just off Holborn Circus, a few yards from the City Temple and St Andrew's Church, hides the ancient church of St Etheldreda, Ely Place. Its most unexpected existence and spacious splendour is explained by its unique history. As the church is of such importance and yet so little-known I do not apologise for telling readers about it in some detail. St Etheldreda's excellent website tells of centuries of rich history, the church's life being intertwined with many famous historical figures. Here are some edited and condensed extracts:

St Etheldreda's Church was the town chapel of the Bishops of Ely from about 1250 to 1570. It is the oldest Catholic church in England and one of only two remaining buildings in London from the reign of Edward I. It was once one of the most influential places in London – akin to an independent state – with a palace and vast grounds. The Bishop of Ely's 'place' in London or 'Ely Place' as it is now called; the chapel took its name from one of England's most popular saints of the day, Etheldreda, and was built in 1290 by John De Kirkeby, Bishop of Ely and Treasurer of England under Edward I. Why did the Bishops of Ely come to London and particularly Holborn? First of all, a member of the diocese had bought a piece of property there with the idea of building a little oratory, but as it was necessary for Bishops to have a London residence when Parliament was called, the Bishop of Ely built himself a great palace.

Bishop John died, leaving his property together with its liberties to the successors of the See of Ely. The whole estate was administered by the See of Ely and was outside the jurisdiction of the City of

London. From 1316 were added a palace, orchards, vineyards, gardens and ploughlands until it encompassed an area of fifty-eight acres.

It is here at Ely House that Shakespeare has John O'Gaunt making one of the finest speeches in the English language. It is the oration in Richard II:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle, This Earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,? This other Eden, demi-Paradise,? This fortress built by Nature for herself Against infection and the hand of war,? This blessed plot, this Earth, this realm, this England.

It was at St Etheldreda's that the Black Prince, brother of John O'Gaunt, kept the Feast of Trinity in 1357 and ordered sixteen swans from the Thames to be sent to Ely House. Medieval chronicles talk about the cloister and the gardens of St Etheldreda's, saying how wonderful they were with their fields of saffron and strawberries, which are even mentioned in Shakespeare's Richard III.

In 1576, the Bishop of Ely granted a lease to Sir Christopher Hatton for £10, a few loads of hay and one red rose a year. Sir Christopher built Hatton House, a magnificent building, and took over most of the Ely lands and gardens. Of 'Hatton Garden' only the well-known street now remains. Ninety years later, the Great Fire of London swept through the City and destroyed everything in its path until it reached St Etheldreda's. The wind changed and the ancient church was saved. Sadly, over the next one hundred years the Bishops of Ely allowed Ely Place to deteriorate. The gardens were unkempt with rabbits running wild and the medieval palace was a palace no longer.

An Act of Parliament in 1772 enabled the Bishop to sell the decaying property to the Crown. The Crown in turn sold the freehold site to Charles Cole, architect and surveyor. He demolished every building but the chapel and on the vacant ground in 1775 built the present Ely Place. He modernised the chapel, bringing it into line with Georgian taste, and used it to serve as a place of Anglican worship for the residents of the neat terraces of the Georgian houses he had built. Despite his efforts, the underlying condition of St Etheldreda's continued to deteriorate. The opportunity for its restoration did not arise for a further twenty years; then the whole of Ely Place had to be sold to settle a lawsuit between Charles Cole's descendants.

In 1829, the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed and for the first time for 300 years it was no longer illegal for Catholics to have churches and say Mass. In June of 1835, three Italian priests arrived at Tilbury. They were members of the Institute of Charity, founded by Antonio Rosmini, later to become known as Rosminians. They introduced into England a new form of clerical dress, the Roman collar or 'dog' collar. Within a decade the Rosminians were largely to transform the shy face of English Catholicism such as was emerging after the Catholic Emancipation of 1829. These priests were to give it a bolder, more dramatic, dynamic and devotional aspect. The Society, consisting of both priests and lay brothers, is dedicated to universal charity and so is open, under Providence, to any work in the service of the Church.

A notable convert from the Anglican Church, Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Manning (1808–92), wished the Rosminians to serve in the slum

T.C. Lewis specification

GREAT ORGAN	
Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedact	8
Dulciana	8
Octave	4
Flauto Traverso	4
Flautino	2
Swell to Great (by pedal only – there was no other stop-control for this!)	
SWELL ORGAN	
Geigen Principal	8
Rohr-Flöte	8
Voile [sic] de Gambe (bass grooved into Rohrflöte)	8
Voix Céleste	8
Geigen Principal	4
Trumpet	8
Tremulant	
Swell Octave	
PEDAL ORGAN	
Sub-Bass	16
(borrowed from Great Bourdon)	
‘Pedal Octave’ (this was a pedal which engaged the Sub-Bass at 8ft pitch, regardless of whether or not the stop was drawn)	
Swell to Pedal (by stop-key)	
Great to Pedal (by pedal only – there was no other stop-control for this!)	
Compass 58/30 notes	
Flat, straight pedalboard	
Stop control by tablets either side of the keyboards	
Three toe levers to Swell and three to Great	
Electric blower – originally hand-blown from the gallery	
Balanced Swell pedal	
Four reservoirs, which filled the areas below impost level in both cases	

areas of Holborn. Father William Lockhart (1820–92) was chosen for this task. Fr Lockhart was another Oxford convert and friend of the man who was to become the other great English Cardinal, John Newman (1801–90); it was Lockhart’s conversion in 1843/4 that finally convinced Newman that he too should become a Catholic. In December 1873, Lockhart learned that the ancient Chapel of St Etheldreda’s was about to be sold by auction. For the modest bid of £5,400 St Etheldreda’s was acquired by the Rosminians. Five years after the auction, Father Lockhart completed the restoration of the Upper Church and on June 23rd 1878 Solemn High Mass was celebrated for the first time for over 200 years.

St Etheldreda’s was soon a thriving community, as it still is, despite serious damage in World War II. It remains to this day under Rosminian direction.

Of early organs in St Etheldreda’s details are scant, though the January 1914 *Organist and Choirmaster* is said to have mentioned an organ by Snetzler dated 1750. During the restoration of the church, J.F. Bentley, the architect of Westminster Cathedral, designed the magnificent choir screen with its wrought iron grilles and gate. The slender and shallow screen incorporates a confessional, the organ and a choir gallery. Bentley regularly worked with the organbuilder T.C. Lewis, most notably at Westminster Cathedral in the first decade of the twentieth century, where they installed a twin-cased Apse organ with no pipes showing – a development on what they had installed at Ely Place some ten years earlier. The Apse organ had a strange stop list: Great 8.8.8.4.4.2.8, Swell 8.8.8.8.8.[sic], Pedal 32.16.8. For Ely Place a somewhat more orthodox

scheme was carried out (under a ‘Lewis & Co’ nameplate, and a construction date of around 1897). The Lewis trademark spotted metal pipes were much in evidence, especially in the case pipes, with their typical Lewis ‘French’ mouths. The stop list can be seen to the left.

This instrument was squeezed into a pair of matching cases facing one another across the length of the screen. Typical of Bentley was a carved oak screen on the north side, behind which stood the swell-box. The console was placed in the middle, player facing East, with the choir and conductor arranged either side.

The original electric action (driven by batteries) was replaced by Willis in 1960, with help from the organist and his wife! After this the instrument was cared for by the Willis tuner, Arthur Seare, who achieved posthumous fame through falling to his death while tuning the Willis Grand



St Etheldreda's Bentley case containing the Lewis organ

Organ at Westminster Cathedral which he had nursed with devotion for many years. The Lewis was then overhauled in 1986 by Mander, who replaced magnets, switchgear, some wiring and the blower. Mander struggled to make the organ reliable for the following reasons:

1 because of the extraordinarily tight layout of the organ within the cases, access was at best perilous and at worst impossible. The basses of many stops could not be reached, neither could many under-actions nor any stop-actions.

2 the soundboards were baked and split, leading to 'runnings' between the pipes and the constant problem of stop-sliders sticking, so stops were either on or off or partly on.

3 the larger bass pipes were collapsing under their own weight leading to notes off, speech defects, and pipes leaning on one another.

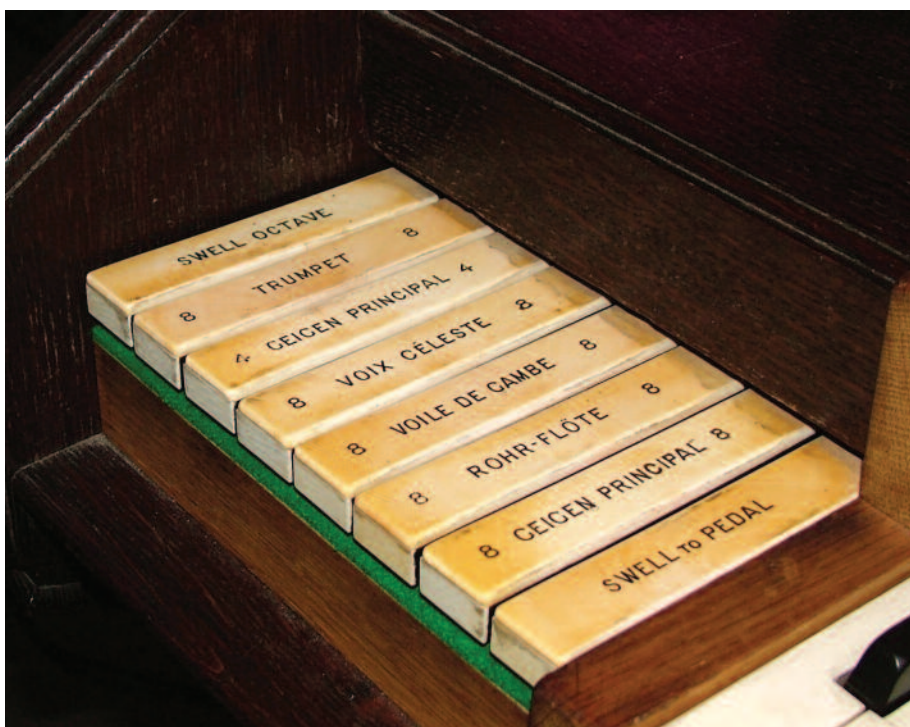
4 the wind supply was somewhat unreliable, prone to being unsteady, and the blower was slightly under-powered for full organ, so the wind reservoirs would 'bottom-out' under full demand, the pitch consequently sagging.

5 with age the regulation of the pipe speech and volume had really suffered, so ranks were uneven within themselves in volume, tone and speech. Some stops were worse than others: the reed and strings were bad, the Diapasons bad in the bass; only the flutes generally still spoke well.

6 more and more parts were simply wearing out with age.

Some of these matters could have been addressed if the organ had been fully restored; however, the fundamental problem remained the layout – the tightest and most contorted imaginable – and without an improvement to that (which was impossible) it was considered by all concerned that the organ would never be reliable or adequately maintained.

Tonally the sound left much to be desired, both in stop-list and voicing. The scale and voicing treatment of some of the ranks led to a lack of blend: the Swell Virole and Celeste were very small



Original Lewis stop-tabs



Photo of East end with part of new console

Späth specification

GREAT ORGAN

Bourdon	16	(ext. Rohrflöte)
Principal	8	(case pipes)
Rohrflöte	8	
Viola da Gamba	8	
Octave	4	(case pipes)
Holzflöte	4	(open)
Quinte	2 $\frac{2}{3}$	
Superoctave	2	
Tierce	1 $\frac{3}{5}$	
Mixtur III	2, 1 $\frac{1}{3}$, 1	
Trompete	8	
Swell to Great		

SWELL ORGAN

Bourdon	8	
Salicional	8	(C–A from Bourdon)
Unda maris	8	(from C ¹³)
Fugara	4	
Traversflöte	4	(harmonic)
Flageolet	2	
Mixtur III	1 $\frac{1}{3}$, 1, $\frac{2}{3}$	
Oboe	8	
Tremulant		

PEDAL ORGAN

Subbass	16	(wood)
Octavbass	8	(case pipes)
Bourdonbass	8	(ext. Subbass)
Choralbass	4	(case pipes)
Posaune	16	(wood)
Great to Pedal		
Swell to Pedal		

Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled
Generals on Swell toe pistons

Compass 58/30 notes

Straight, concave pedalboard

Stop and coupler control by knobs either side of the keyboards

Comprehensive combination system of divisionals (8 to each), reversibles, generals (8) and a stepper, with 256 memory levels for the generals and eight for the divisionals

scale and of the 'scratchy' variety – they blended with nothing; the Great Open Diapason and Principal were of quite large scale but had been softened: they were fluty and dull; the Great Dulciana was so soft and so slow in speech as to be of no use for anything. The 2ft Flautino was neither a Fifteenth nor a Piccolo – just an unhappy compromise of little use. The Trumpet was brassy and irregular and could not do double-duty as an Oboe or Trumpet, as a solitary Swell reed needs to.

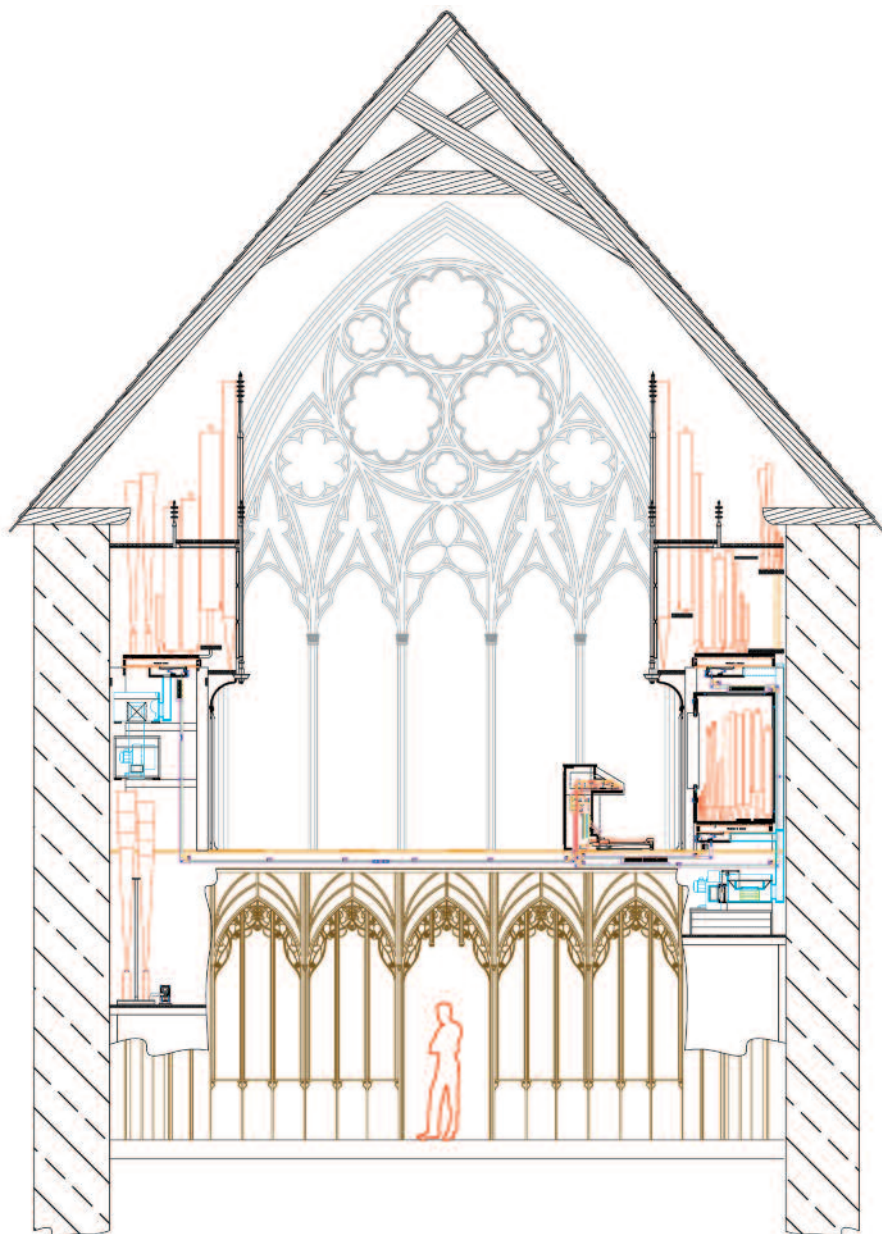
By the early years of the present century it was clear to the long-time Rector, Fr Kit Cunningham, that the sensible course of action was replacement with a new pipe organ designed for the church's specific needs (the accompaniment of a small professional choir in a wide range of mass settings and other works, all embellishing the traditional Latin Mass

for which the church is renowned) and laid out so that maintenance access would be possible in the future. Provincial Superior of the Rosminians is Fr David Myers, who had caused in 2006 to be installed in his Cardiff church (St Peter's, Roath) a new organ by Späth Orgelbau of Rapperswil (Switzerland). The success of this instrument encouraged him to recommend a new organ for St Etheldreda's from the same company.

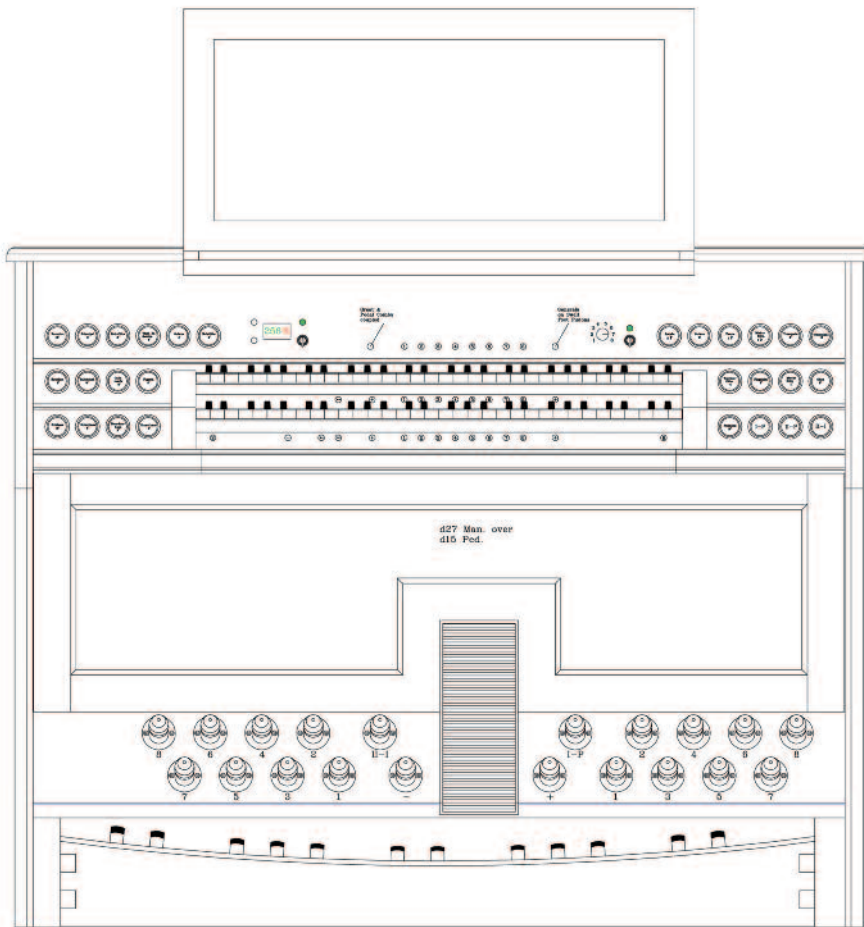
In conjunction with Ely Place musicians, Simon Lloyd and Stuart Kale, Späth conceived a colourful two-manual scheme which places the Swell beneath the Great on the North side, the Pedal filling the South case. The console is situated on the North side (the player's

back being to the North case) and the trackers run under the gallery floor, North and South of the console. Each case contains a blower and wind regulator (two in the North case). The new tonal scheme is found on the left.

The Lewis was taken out and stored, the gallery refurbished and the Späth organ installed over the winter/spring of 2008/9. Despite being tonally larger than the Lewis it had to fit the Bentley cases. Whereas the Swell fitted neatly into the lower half of the North case (with shutters facing South and East), the Great and Pedal had to accommodate both an awkward shape and roof trusses. The bass of the Pedal Posaune is situated in the screen on the south side (on electric



Elevation drawing of the new internal layout



Späth workshop drawing of the new console

action to ensure prompt repetition – not always managed with tubed-off or conveyed-off reed basses), and the Great Mixtur and Trompette are cleverly elevated above the Great soundboard against the North wall, thus allowing more ready tuning access on that side. The Swell speaks through elegant Bentley-esque piercings in the oak panelling which look as if they had always been there. Tuning access to the Swell is gained by removing the panelling on the south face and hinging the (quite small) shutter-front out of the way – an ingenious solution.

The pipework is of 75% tin for the

Principals and strings, 40% tin for the two 8ft manual flutes and the two mutations, which stops are scaled and voiced quite flutily. The front pipes are 85% tin, with French mouths which echo Lewis's work and yet are typical also of Späth. Wooden pipe bodies are made of particularly close-grain spruce, an example of the fine timbers readily available to Späth in their part of Switzerland.

Care has been taken not to adopt the small scales which a chapel-sized church and diminutive organ cases might suggest. Instead, pipes have been scaled generously and voiced with a warm 'vocal' sound

to ensure beauty of tone, easy speech and perfect blend within the organ or with the choir. The tone does indeed bloom beautifully in the warm acoustic; inevitably some stops (such as the treble of the Great 4ft flute) find a particular resonance within the church and need to be used with discretion. The Principal choruses are quite wonderful – rich and warm yet clear and precise; a sound to which one could listen for hours. The key action is agreeable, the Great being firmer than the Swell; the coupled weight is tolerable though perhaps a touch heavier than one might like for toccata playing. The Swell-box is effective; it needs to be, given the player's close proximity and the vital role of the Swell as the church choir's accompanimental division.

A look inside reveals first-rate craftsmanship throughout, combined with real attention to detail and excellence of finish. All actions and pipework can be reached for tuning and maintenance, though space remains at a premium. The low-level console shows the hours of design work which went into its layout, rendering it as 'standard' as possible to British players without losing the Späth house-style.

The organ's tonal resources will enrich the fine musical tradition at St Etheldreda's; readers are encouraged to hear it by attending the superb sung Mass on Sundays at 11am for which the church is renowned (see their comprehensive website).

The organ was blessed and heard publicly for the first time at the Easter Vigil 2009; music included the Vienne *Messe Solennelle* and the Demessieux *Te Deum*. Dame Gillian Weir performed the inaugural recital (as she did on the Cardiff Späth) on 5 June; one hopes a regular recital series will be instituted.

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