

# Suffolk Splendour

St Edmundsbury Cathedral organ – Paul Hale

I remember well the day in the summer of 1970 when a friend and I attended our first cathedral organ ‘opening’ recital. Given by none other than Dr Francis Jackson (whose 93rd birthday falls this year) it was on the 79-stop 6-division organ installed by the then Nicholson firm in the newly rebuilt, enlarged and beautified cathedral at St Edmundsbury, Suffolk. Abiding memories are few but clear: the playing was inspirational and the Trompeta Real was exciting although the rest of the organ made only a modest impact in the nave (and yet the BBC broadcast of this concert, a week or two later, made the organ sound magnificent; we had seen the microphones cunningly placed to hear that which failed to reach listeners in the nave).

Forty years on, the Cathedral is now complete but the organ needed fresh consideration, not only because it had never gained the beautiful cases designed for it by Cathedral architect, Stephen Dykes-Bower, but also because the 1970 layout failed to address the problem of tonal projection. Daily use had further necessitated an overhaul and a reconsideration of the specification was due to help solve this issue. The Revd Dr Nicholas Thistlethwaite was appointed consultant and eventually the contract was awarded to Harrison & Harrison, who completed what is effectively a new organ in time for the 2010 Advent season. This article will describe the new organ but first takes a concise look at the history of this wonderful building and its organs.

St Edmundsbury Cathedral was built as St James’s church within the precincts of St Edmundsbury Abbey, of which little but the magnificent gatehouse remains, facing the splendid Angel Hotel, a former



*Both cases of the magnificent St Edmundsbury Cathedral organ*

coaching inn. St James’s became a cathedral in 1914 with the founding of what is now the Diocese of St Edmundsbury & Ipswich (the first of the three dioceses given double names by a CofE anxious that some may not know where the cathedral cities are – the others being Ripon & Leeds and more recently Southwell & Nottingham). Its early organs need not concern us, for the story of the present instrument begins with one built

in the north transept by J.W. Walker, in 1860. This had three manuals, pedals and a modest stop-list; how much impact it could have had in such a grand nave is open to question. The organ achieved magnificence in 1914 when rebuilt as a four-manual 50-stop organ of true ‘cathedral’ stature by the biggest company in East Anglia, Norman & Beard. Structure, soundboards, tubular-pneumatic action, up-to-date console

and some nineteen stops (mainly reeds and the Solo organ) were new. To the right is its stop-list, not dissimilar to another transept instrument by the same company – in Bath Abbey.

This grand instrument served the Cathedral well, eventually being dismantled in 1963 and stored when an adventurous plan by architect Stephen Dykes-Bower greatly to augment and enhance the capability and capacity of the building began to be put into action. The first phase of this work gave the Cathedral a new West Porch and cloisters (1959–61); the second (1963–70) provided a new Quire, a Lady Chapel, St Edmund's Chapel and the Crossing, the whole enlivened by a bold mediævalist decorative scheme. Never one for holding back with a more cautious conservation-minded approach, Dykes-Bower planned lavish, multi-hued 'mediæval' colour everywhere – and applied it to many of the great buildings for which he was architect – the organ cases at Westminster Abbey and Great Yarmouth Parish Church being major examples. His plans for two cases at St Edmundsbury, however, did not find fruition in his lifetime, neither (among other projects) did the completion of the great central tower nor the cloisters.

In 1970 Nicholsons rebuilt the Walker/N&B organ with constrained funds and no cases, within the chamber Dykes-Bower had allowed for it in a 'Truro Cathedral' position. Dykes-Bower must have had encouragement in his organ schemes from his brothers, Michael (an eminent ophthalmic surgeon and talented pianist/singer) and John (Organist of St Paul's Cathedral 1936–67 – ironically one building where neo-mediævalists would have had no place at all). Dykes-Bower trained other fine architects, who

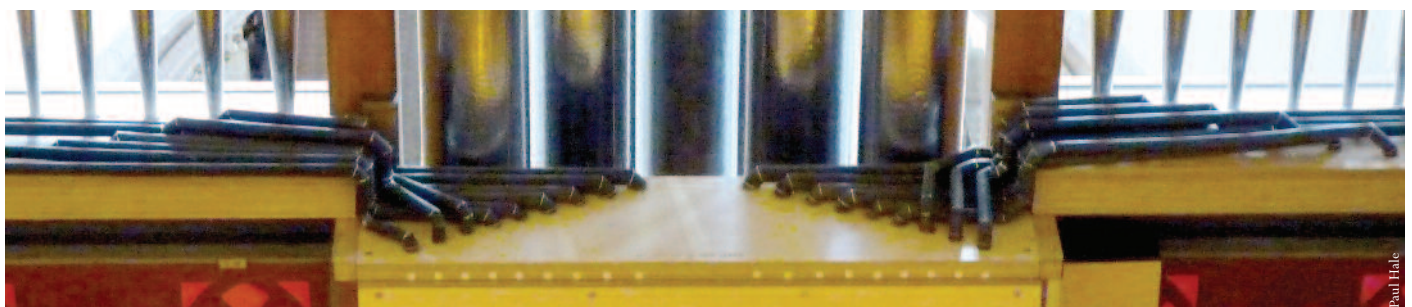
inspired by his ethos, carried on in a not dissimilar style. Alan Rome, who died in January this year, was one such, responsible for the 1974 organ case at Wells Cathedral, and the charming 'chaire' case at Bath Abbey. Rome became architect to St Edmundsbury in 1988, on his mentor's retirement. Under him the Cathedral Centre and Song School were built (1988–90).

St Edmundsbury had been Stephen Dykes-Bower's 'Great Work'; he poured his heart and soul into it and at his death in 1994 his heart remained there – the Cathedral proved the major benefactor of his Will. With this large sum of money (£2m) the Dean & Chapter set out to accomplish all that Dykes-Bower had planned – and more, for the role of cathedrals and their outreach had grown apace since his 1950s designs and concepts. In 1997 the Millennium Commission granted the Cathedral £5.15m so that the Central Tower could be built and the remaining projects completed, to the designs of Hugh Mathew and Warwick Pethers of the Gothic Design Practice – both previously colleagues of Dykes-Bower. The climax of the whole project has been to conceive and install a new cathedral organ, fit for the glorious building in which it stands.

Canon Thistlethwaite said on the organ's completion recently that the day was particularly happy as it concluded a twenty-one year project for him. For some sixteen of those years cathedral organist, James Thomas, has been driving the project with never-flagging enthusiasm and drive. It is in no small measure due to the experience and wisdom of the one, combined with the energy and determination of the other, that such a thoroughly comprehensive

## 1914 specification

PEDAL	
Harmonic Bass	32
Open Diapason (wood)	16
Open Diapason (metal)	16
Violone	16
Bourdon	16
Echo Bass	16
Principal	8
Bass Flute	8
Trombone	16
GREAT	
Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason I	8
Open Diapason II	8
Open Diapason III	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Corno Flute	8
Octave Diapason	4
Principal	4
Hohl Flute	4
Quint Flute	3
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 17.19.b21.22	IV
Tromba	8
Clarion	4
SWELL	
Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Violoncello	8
Rohr Gedact	8
Echo Gamba	8
Celeste	8
Rohr Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 15.19.22	III
Oboe	8
Contra Fagotto	16
Horn	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	
CHOIR	
Geigen Principal	8
Wald Flute	8
Dulciana	8
Viola	4
Flute a Cheminée	4
Flageolet	2
Vox Humana	8
Tremulant	
SOLO	
Hohl Flute	8
Harmonic Claribel	8
Viol d'Orchestre	8
Clarinet	8
Orchestral Oboe	8
Tuba	8
Tremulant	



*Clever conveyancing*





Chancel case

organ does not have to project around quite so vast a pier supporting the north-west corner of the central tower. Also, the St Edmundsbury organ's daily task is to accompany the Office sung by the excellent cathedral choirs in the Quire, so it cannot all be arranged to speak west only.

All of this Nicholsons knew back in 1970; they doubtless hoped that the fiery Trompeta Real would help lead the congregation. It certainly did, but it was hardly a stop one could use all the time; indeed the cathedral organists and congregations came to dislike it intensely, so it has departed down the road and is awaiting installation, so one gathers, in that other large 4-manual organ in the city – at St Mary's. For those who may know Beverley but have not yet visited St Edmundsbury, St Mary's is to the Cathedral much the same as St Mary's Beverley is to the Minster – a building so huge and splendid that it is often mistaken by the arriving visitor for its more important relative close by. Before leaving the Trompeta it is worth recording that just as Walkers and HNB made a small number of such excitingly 'neo-Spanish' solo reeds over twenty years or so from the late 1950s, so did Nicholsons. They made three known to me (any more out there?) – one for St Edmundsbury,

organ scheme has been carried out – surpassing by a fair margin that which might have been imagined achievable.

The organ is structurally and mechanically new. Twenty-three ranks of pipes are new; about forty-one ranks are old, completely refreshed and worked seamlessly into the tonal scheme. Helpfully, Harrison & Harrison was armed with the knowledge of what had

failed to produce sufficient tonal projection into the nave from the surprisingly unhelpful position high up above the north side of the Quire. I surmise that Dykes-Bower considered this position adequate for that is where the Father Willis organ in his favourite cathedral – J.L. Pearson's masterpiece at Truro – is placed. The acoustics at Truro are much more helpful and there the

## Harrison & Harrison specification

PEDAL	CHOIR	GREAT	SWELL	SOLO
Contra Bass 32	Open Diapason 8	Double Open Diapason 16 *	Bourdon 16	Quintaton 8
Open Wood 16	Stopped Flute 8	Open Diapason no.1 8 *	Open Diapason 8	Viol d'Orchestre 8
Open Diapason 16 *	Principal 4	Open Diapason no.2 8 *	Lieblisch Gedackt 8	Viole Céleste 8
Violone 16 *	Nason Flute 4 *	Stopped Diapason (wood) 8 *	Echo Gamba 8	Harmonic Flute 8 *
Sub Bass 16	Nazard 2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Principal 4 *	Voix Céleste 8	Flauto Traverso 4 *
Echo Bourdon 16	Fifteenth 2	Chimney Flute 4	Principal 4	Clarinet 8
Principal 8	Flautino 2 *	Twelfth 2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub>	Flute 4	Vox Humana 8 *
Bass Flute 8	Tierce 1 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>5</sub>	Fifteenth 2	Fifteenth 2	XVIII Tremulant
Fifteenth 4	Sifflöte 1	Mixture V	Sesquialtera II	Tuba 8 *
Mixture IV	Cremona 8 *	Trombone 16 *	Mixture IV	Orchestral Trumpet 8 *
Double Trombone 32	V Tremulant	Trumpet 8 *	Oboe 8	XIX Octave
Ophicleide 16 *	VI Swell to Choir	Clarion 4 *	XIII Tremulant	XX Sub Octave
Trombone 16 *	VII Solo to Choir	VIII Reeds on Pedal	Contra Fagotto 16 *	XI Unison Off
Fagotto 16 *		IX Reeds on Choir	Cornopean 8	
I Choir to Pedal		X Choir to Great	Clarion 4 *	
II Great to Pedal		XI Swell to Great		
III Swell to Pedal		XII Solo to Great	XIV Octave	
IV Solo to Pedal			XV Sub Octave	
			XVI Unison Off	
			XVII Solo to Swell	

### Accessories

Two general pistons general cancel  
Two general coupler pistons  
Eight foot pistons to the Pedal Organ  
Eight pistons to the Choir Organ  
Eight pistons to the Great Organ

Eight pistons to the Swell Organ  
Six pistons to the Solo Organ  
Combination couplers: Great & Pedal pistons  
Generals on Swell foot pistons  
Manuals I & II Exchange

Reversible pistons: I–IV, VI, VII, X–XII, XVII  
Reversible foot pistons: I, II, III, VI, VI;  
Eight pistons and 128 general memory levels  
Stepper, operating general pistons in sequence

Expression pedals; Swell (Transept), Swell (Quire), and Solo  
The manual compass is 61 notes; the Pedal 32 notes.  
The actions are electro-pneumatic.





*Cove under Transept case*

one for St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham (removed by Walkers when their organ replaced the Nicholson), and one at Roy Massey's behest for St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham, where I'm happy to say it still exists, as an alternative to the enclosed Tuba.

Back to the new organ. The layout of the organ is simple, most of the pipework being helpfully on one level. Projecting into the arch facing into the North transept is the Great flue soundboard. Behind that is a spacious passageboard with the Great reeds behind it, then a further passageboard with the Pedal upperwork and reeds on a soundboard behind it. Behind them is a spacious swell-box for the Swell, the soundboard layout (on four soundboards) allowing for shutter fronts facing both West out into the transept and also South across the Quire. In the arches between the Swell box and the Quire stand the Choir organ and the two loud Solo reeds, on two levels. The Solo swell-box is north of the Great and Pedal reeds, its shutters facing into the chamber, angled towards the transept opening. The large Pedal flues mainly stand in the angle between the two swell boxes, the bass of the 32ft reed arising behind the Swell box and being mitred over and along its top. This bottom octave is cleverly scaled to match the Great Trombone (from which it is extended), increasing markedly in scale as it descends until true Double Ophicleide splendour is reached near the bottom end. A number of single-rise reservoirs stand under the soundboards which they feed, resulting in short trunk runs and a neat, spacious, accessible layout. The new fully-equipped standard Harrison & Harrison console stands in the same 'swallow's nest' console gallery high above the

choir as did its Nicholson predecessor.

Tonally the instrument can clearly 'do' everything. More than many eclectically-specified organs it now speaks with a remarkable unity of voicing style, allowing blend between even the most unlikely registers, and balance between all departments. The rich, full-toned Great – speaking boldly into the north transept – is founded on a new family of 16.8.8.8.4 flues, the older upperwork

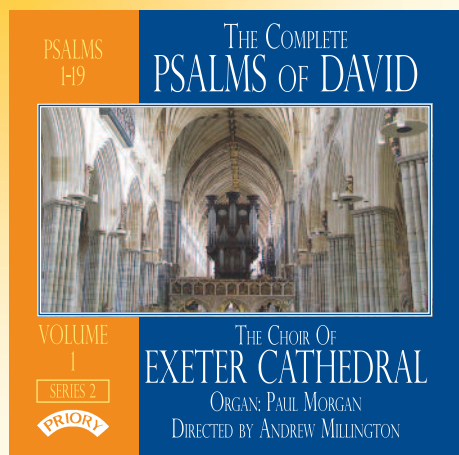
sitting politely on top and the powerfully sonorous new reeds dominating the ensemble. Magnificent though this is, to my ears it lacks a clearer, somewhat higher-pitched second Mixture to lift the flues past the reeds in the *tutti*, but then I always like two Great mixtures! The Swell speaks admirably to the Quire or westwards; its full-voiced pipes – the flues and Cornopean all old – get out well in both directions (there is a separate



*Close up of the Transept case*



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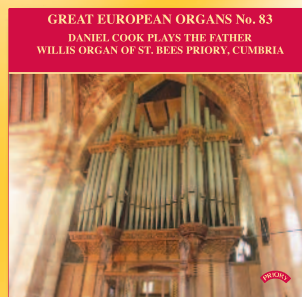
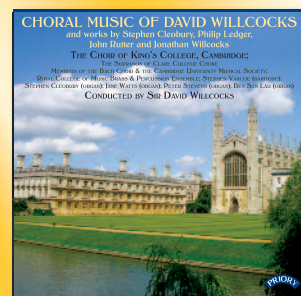
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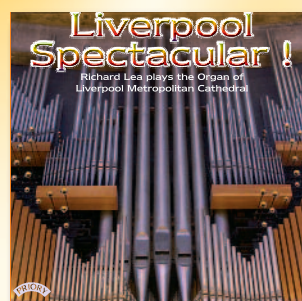
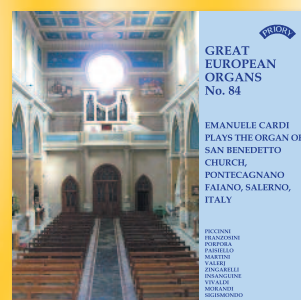
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*The Great and Pedal soundboard*

swell pedal for each shutter-front). To a conventional stop-list is helpfully added a principal-scale Sesquialtera 12.17.

The 1970 Nicholson had a Choir and a Positive; the Harrison now successfully combines features of both in an excellent Choir Organ with Diapason and flute choruses (the latter up to 'cornet décomposée') and a civilised but full-throated Cremona. The Solo Organ is modest in size (alas, the Orchestral Oboe – something of an endangered species – has disappeared) but is full of useful colours, which combine into a myriad of piquancies. Outside the box stand two Herculean heavy-pressure Harrison solo reeds – the so-called 'Orchestral Trumpet' and Tuba. Why 'so-called'? Well, here and at Cirencester parish church, Harrison has installed a rank which is to all intents and purposes a bright Tuba – very close to a Willis Tuba. These are fine stops – magnificent indeed – but they are certainly not Trumpets and make only a modest contrast with the rounder but still far from over-smooth Tubas. I suspect both clients were expecting something more akin to the blazingly fiery Harrison Orchestral Trumpets at Westminster Abbey and Newcastle City Hall. This was an interesting decision by Harrison – perhaps the company endeavouring to distance itself from the 'tearing calico'

tone of the 1960s rash of Trompetas.

The Pedal does what a Pedal should – it provides a bass at any level from hushed *pianissimo* to triple *forte*, and offers too a full principal chorus for contrapuntal use. I wholeheartedly approve of the provision of three 16ft reeds (two derived from the manuals). In practice, variety of volume at 16ft pitch is much more useful in Pedal reeds than having a family of 8ft & 4ft reeds – after all, for *cantus firmus* solo use there are reeds on all four manuals which can be coupled down.

I have left until last any mention of the two cases because comment is frankly superfluous. My guess is that readers will (wisely) spend more time marvelling at these gloriously colourful works of art than they will actually spend reading my article, so I'll leave you to it – save to say that the detailed decorative scheme was worked up by John Bucknall, whose previous exquisite conception is the decoration of the Drake organ in the crypt of the Palace of Westminster – a jewel-like object surely known to all IAO members (if not, buy John Norman's super new book on organ cases: *The Box of Whistles*).

Finally, in the last issue I offered a comparison between this new Harrison & Harrison and the new Nicholson at Llandaff. The wonderful thing to be able wholeheartedly to report is that

both organs are of the very highest rank in concept, design, materials (acres of spotted metal and polished poplar in them both), construction, voicing and finish. In terms of quality there's nothing between them. In terms of concept, too, both signify a relaxed return to the basically 'Romantic' cathedral organ – repertoire-informed, of course, but still essentially an accompanimental organ for the full range of cathedral services.

'Which cathedral next?' – perhaps you are wondering. Well, keep your eyes on Manchester over the next couple of years, for something's stirring in those parts...

*Paul Hale is cathedral organist at Southwell, has been Editor of Organists' Review, and is heavily involved UK-wide as an independent organ consultant.*