

something old, something new

A NEW ORGAN FOR

Merton College, Oxford

from the USA



On entering Merton College Chapel, Oxford, one's first impression is of a spaciousness and grandeur unexpected in a college chapel, a nobility of design matched with elegant simplicity of ornament. However, this first impression is soon moderated – one might say marred – by the equally unexpected sight of an under-scaled pipe organ sitting uneasily in front of a portion of the west window. Only when the story behind the 1968 Walker organ is known does its appearance make sense; it made better sense before the painted *trompe l'oeil* panels were removed. The instrument – even in its early years – did not command particular respect among Oxford organists, though it is a pretty fair example of the neo-Baroque genre, as built in the UK during the 1960s and 70s.

The Walker arrived at Merton after a series of earlier organs. The largest of

these was a 35-stop 3-manual by William Hill & Sons, installed in 1860. This fine organ – which by all rights should still be there, for it would be adequate for today's needs – was designed by Dr L.C. Hayne (organist of The Queen's College from 1857), who was a close friend of Henry Walter Sargent, a Fellow of Merton. Sargent had introduced choral services to Merton chapel, and when in 1860 he was able to persuade the College to provide a new organ, he asked his organ-expert friend Dr Hayne to design it.

After Sargent's death in 1867 certain Evangelicals in the college began to object that the choral worship was too "High Church", so the services were suspended. The organ was sold in 1869 to the new Anglo-Catholic church of St Philip & St James, where it remained (rebuilt by J.W. Walker in 1964) until being removed to All Saints, Headington, in the 1980s.

A small 2-manual Hill was installed at Merton in 1872, being completely rebuilt in 1924 by Rushworth & Dreaper of Liverpool (who were popular in Oxford at this period, with major work also at New College, Keble and St Aldate's). It stood on the floor at the west end, its console reversed with the player facing east. This also ended up in Headington, at St Andrew's church, installed and rebuilt there by J.W. Walker in 1967. It remained there until 2009 when it was moved by F.H. Browne (of Canterbury) to St James's church, Hanslope, Buckinghamshire, in a project which also encompassed tonal enlargement and console modernisation. It was replaced at St Andrew's by an attractive and versatile new Kenneth Tickell instrument.

The tonal outcome of the 1924 Rushworth rebuild at Merton had proved numbingly dull; the bright

Merton College, Oxford, 1968 specification

GREAT ORGAN

Open Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Koppel Flute	4
Nazard	2 $\frac{2}{3}$
Blockflute	2
Tierce	1 $\frac{3}{5}$
Fourniture	15.19.22.26 IV
Dutch Trumpet (added 1970)	8

SWELL ORGAN

Spitz Flute	8
Chimney Flute	4
Principal	2
Larigot	1 $\frac{1}{3}$
Cymbel	29.33.36 III
Dulzian	8

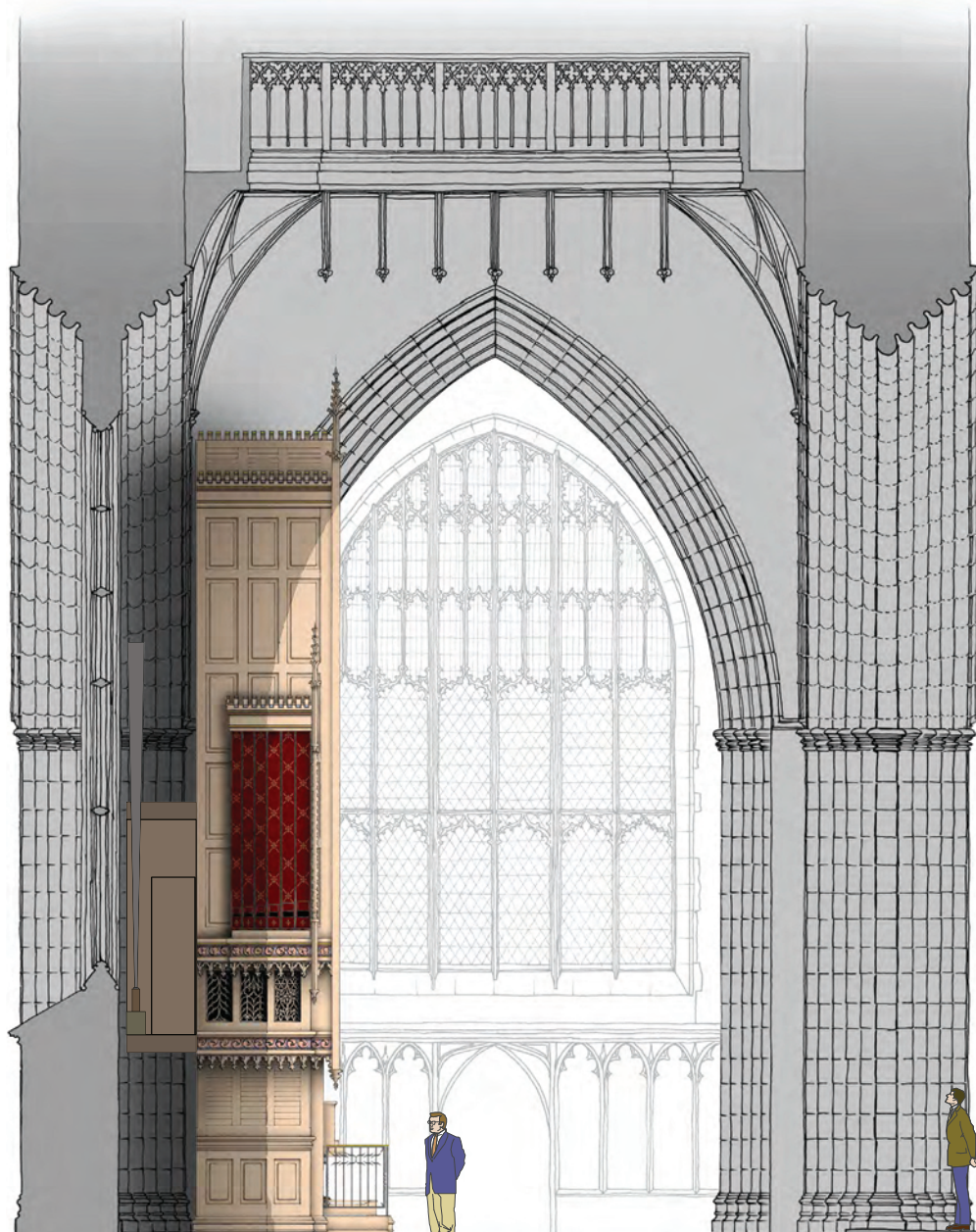
PEDAL ORGAN

Sub Bass	16
Flute	8
Gemshorn	4
Mixture	15.19.22 III
Fagotto	16
Schalmei	8
Tremulant (to Great and Swell)	

Couplers (by hitch-down pedals)
Swell to Great
Great to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Three composition pedals to Great & Pedal
Three composition pedals to Swell

Left: Side Elevation (looking North)

Right: The case in 2009 with the window revealed



vivacious tones of the 1968 Walker, which replaced it, must have appeared truly refreshing after the monochrome sounds that had prevailed for nearly half a century. The Walker organ was designed in accordance with the tenets of the "Organ Reform Movement", by Cecil Clutton and the University Organist (a popular and influential organ teacher), John Webster. Webster was organist of the University Church and of University

Merton College, Oxford, specification

GREAT ORGAN

Bourdon	16
Open Diapason I	8
Open Diapason I	8
Harmonic Flute	8
Chimney Flute	8
Principal	4
Spire Flute	4
Nazard	2 ² / ₃
Fifteenth	2
Recorder	2
Tierce	1 ³ / ₅
Mixture	19.22.26.29 IV
Trumpet	8
Tremulant	

SWELL ORGAN

Open Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedeckt	8
Salicional	8
Voix Celeste (FF)	8
Principal	4
Nason Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture	15.19.22.26 IV
Hautboy	8
Vox Humana	8
Double Trumpet	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	

CHOIR ORGAN (ALL ENCLOSED)

Geigen Diapason	8
Geigen Celeste (FF)	8
Gedackt	8
Gemshorn	4
Open Flute	4
Doublet	2
Sesquialtera	12.17 II
Mixture	22.26.29 III
Corno di Bassetto	8
Tremulant	
Major Trumpet	8

PEDAL ORGAN

Open Diapason	16
Subbass	16
Bourdon (Great)	16
Principal	8
Bass Flute	8
Fifteenth	4
Trombone	16
Trumpet	8
Zimbelstern	





College – for both of which he designed Walker organs. The stop list of the 1968 Walker is on the previous page.

This organ exhibits two dominant characteristics, both of which suggested to the College musicians of today that it is no longer fit for purpose.

1 Its tonal scheme is designed for the playing of Baroque organ music and little else: there are no sonorities appropriate for nineteenth-century music or for much twentieth century music; neither is the organ at all suitable for choral accompaniment, for instead of a well-developed Swell organ it has a diminutive *Brustwerk* and scarcely any stop controls. In addition, its pipe-scales are slender and give the pipes no breadth of tone and little warmth, the “Dutch Trumpet”

being a strident example of this thinness.

2 In the 1960s J.W. Walker were at the forefront of experimenting with twentieth-century materials and space-saving wind systems in the construction of organs. This organ is entirely of its time and full of these somewhat experimental ideas. Some of them have stood the test of time; others have not.

The Merton organ could not satisfactorily embrace the choral accompanimental role for which it is now daily needed; in addition it is mechanically tired and at the end of the design lifespan of many of its components. That this can be stated despite some restorative work being carried out in 2001 shows that the basic design tenets of the organ are at the root of the problem.

The College began contemplating a new organ and in 2009 invited the writer to act as consultant for the project. Merton considered that the relationship of the organ to the west window is a most important part of the appearance of the Ante-chapel. A completely different case design – floor standing – could make the west wall look ‘right’, perhaps allowing the upper lights of the great west window to rise above it, the remaining medieval stained glass once again being in view.

The concept evolved during 2009/2010 for a three-manual instrument of about 45 stops, ideal for accompanying the choir and playing the organ solo repertoire convincingly and musically. Lest it be considered that an organ of this size would be too loud for the chapel one needs to remember that the Ante-chapel and the body of the Chapel are similar in size and cubic capacity to the Crossing and Quire of many a cathedral. Most cathedral organs (of 55-70 stops) are designed to sound best in the Quire, which is where the daily services take place. The Merton organ should be considered in similar terms – as indeed it was back in 1860 when choral services were previously introduced.

Merton organist Benjamin Nicholas and Chaplain Dr Simon Jones visited many organs, far and wide. Tenders were then sought from a selection of those companies considered to have sufficient experience in large tracker organs which display inspired case designs, have superb mechanical actions, and are voiced to blend with the chapel choir yet work in a solo capacity. A short-list of four companies included one British, one Swiss, one Canadian and one North American. After an exhaustive process of evaluation, the proposals of Dobson Organ Builders (Lake City, Iowa, USA) were accepted.

Dobson Pipe Organ Builders was founded in 1974 by Lynn Dobson, the firm’s President and Artistic Director, who has a background in art and design. In the firm’s 38 years, it has constructed about 85 new organs and completed 30 or so projects involving older instruments. The construction of

artistically-designed instruments that support church music has always been a high priority for Dobson, and the company is known for producing organs which blend with choirs. Success in this challenging field has led to commissions from individuals, educational and public institutions. Recently Dobson has been selected to build large new instruments for Washington National Cathedral and the Church of St Thomas, 5th Avenue (New York City), both of which institutions have choir schools, daily choral services – and discerning British choir directors. Merton is confident that the new organ will fulfil its brief with enormous distinction and will look absolutely stunning; indeed it was Lynn Dobson's breath-taking medievalist case design which proved a dominant factor in the college choosing his company.

The organ is now in the early weeks of construction. On its completion I

will write again about this landmark instrument and include photographs of what promises to be the most beautiful and striking organ case in Oxford. In the meanwhile, here is Lynn Dobson's colour rendition of the front of the case, along with the

stop-list (which coincidentally but interestingly has the same number of stops as the 1968 New College Grant, Degens & Bradbeer).

Paul Hale is Director of Music at Southwell Cathedral, Nottinghamshire

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 Association of Independent Organ Advisers and has designed new and restored organs for cathedrals, churches, concert halls and universities throughout the UK. He is a diploma examiner for the RCO, Chairman of the RSCM in his area, and has been awarded honorary fellowships by the GCM and the RSCM for his contribution to church music. More information is available at www.PaulHale.org



Damascene moment

I have been fortunate to have had great teachers – to all of whom I owe a great debt of gratitude – so it is difficult to choose a single Damascene moment. I have narrowed it down to three events that remain with me to this day and have informed my own teaching and playing...

When I was eighteen I took part in a masterclass with Gillian Weir in Birmingham. A subsequent lesson with her in Manchester Cathedral on *Les corps glorieux* marked the start of a fascination with Messiaen's music that culminated in a performance of his complete organ works in 2008.

Playing Bach to Michael Radulescu in Vienna was a huge inspiration that awoke in me an interest in historical sources and number, symbolism and proportion in Bach's music.

I studied with David Sanger in my early twenties. David was for me exactly the right teacher at the right time. Early on there was a moment when he spoke in very straightforward terms about the fundamentals of



Henry Fairs is Head of Organ Studies at the Birmingham Conservatoire and organist to the University of Birmingham. Since winning first prize at the Odense International Organ Competition, his concert career has taken him to the major European centres of organ music and to America, performing solo recitals and concertos on both historic and modern instruments. He enjoys playing and teaching a broad, eclectic repertoire with a strong focus on historically informed practice and techniques and their relevance and application today

organ playing. This had a profound effect as it enabled me simultaneously to completely re-evaluate my playing and to understand more clearly previous teacher's comments. I am certain that, were it not for David's teaching, I wouldn't be teaching and playing today.