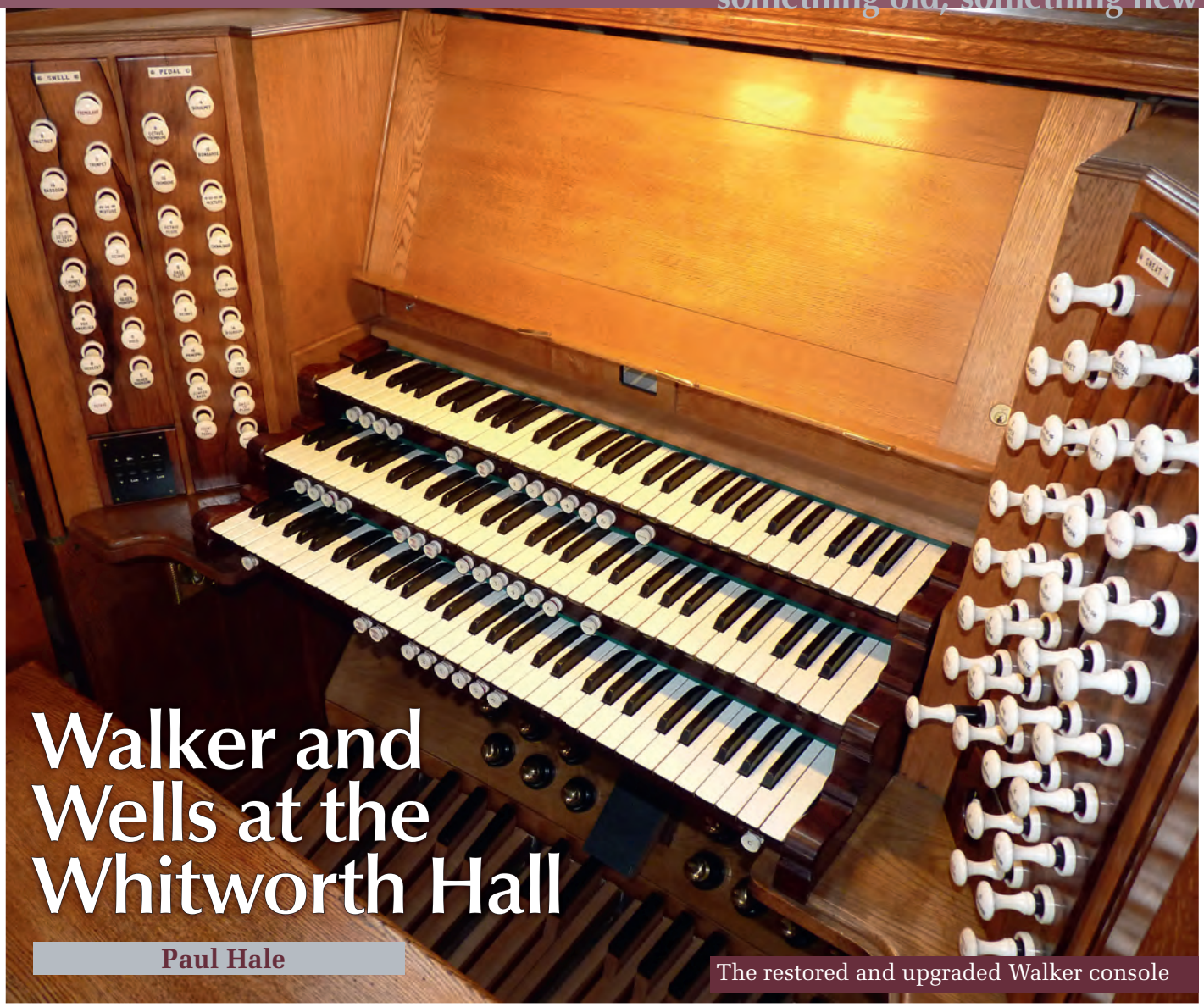


Walker and Wells at the Whitworth Hall

Paul Hale

The restored and upgraded Walker console

We pick up the Manchester University Whitworth Hall organ story from where I left off in the March issue. Readers will recall that the 1962/1969 Walker organ (a radical rebuild of a 1902 Henry Willis II) was in need of a full restoration.

The University was quite clear with its organ consultant (me) and organ-builder (David Wells): funds were available for "restoration and refurbishment" not for "development". This was on the one hand encouraging, for it offered the opportunity to render the organ reliable once more, but also a challenge, for as the sound of the organ appeared thin and dated – its tone no longer one appreciated widely by musicians or concert goers – we had hoped to improve it.

In the event we interpreted "restoration" as also applying to the tone of the organ, in the sense that a modest restoration of the organ's original pre-Walker, Willis II sonority, would be entirely justifiable and would render the instrument once again "fit for purpose".

The pressing needs, however, were:

a radical attention to the Walker wind system;

b soundboard restoration (the new soundboards that we'd hoped to build – to cope with modern heating – would have put the project over the fixed budget);

c replacement of many note magnets;

d restoration of the console, with new electrical contacts, an upgraded piston system, refurbished keys and pedals, and repolished casework;

e Roosevelt and underaction pneumatic motors releathered;

f all pipework cleaned and restored (especially split wooden pipes and the collapsing Orchestral Trumpet), with stoppers, feet and tuning devices repaired.

Today's safety regulations demanded a raft of access and lighting measures to be undertaken, including the installation of an escape route down through the organ from a room above and behind the Orchestral Trumpet – which stands on the roof of the swell box!

Though these tasks are standard enough, there was one of overriding importance: addressing the weaknesses of the wind system. J.W.

Walker Ltd was among the very first British companies to experiment with *Schwimmers* – a floating "pan" usually fixed to the bottom-board of a slider chest, sprung by various means and with an internal valve to regulate the ingress of wind according to demand. Virtually all their new organs and rebuilt instruments from the start of the 1960s were fitted with these, often in addition to small single-rise reservoirs as initial "breakdown" devices or to supply wind-hungry stops or operate major wind-valves. In the 1960s Nicholsons also experimented, in a more limited way, as did, unsuccessfully, a few other companies who in later years proclaim proudly that they "never use them". The first company to get the technology right was Degens & Rippin, basing their devices (as did Peter Collins) on the successful Rieger pattern. Even they needed dampers to prevent occasional oscillation; these were either of a friction type or "Kinetrol" fluid dampers – still used for such purposes, and also for a mechanical coupler beam or floating backfall beam. Walkers and Nicholsons went on to make successful designs, as did a few of the next generation of companies, such as Kenneth Tickell.

Few organ-builders will disagree that the early Walker Schwimmers were not a complete success. Apart from the fact that fan tremulants or, on some units, powerful magnets, had to be employed to "tremulate" the wind, there were always problems with the springs and valves, which meant that the wind pressure was not quite constant – the Schwimmer could return to a slightly different pressure every time playing ceased. This is the main reason why so many 1960s Walker organs – almost all of them fine instruments – have tuning issues, rarely sounding in tune.

The Whitworth Hall organ was a classic example of this problem, which was made worse by the fact that every soundboard had a separate Schwimmer for bass and treble, each one of which could (and did!) settle at a different pressure. The result on the tuning and tone can be imagined. In addition, the rest of the system had the particularly haphazard appearance of a collection of reservoirs and Schwimmers connected up on site as could best be contrived, with little attention being given to planning and drawing out the trunk runs first. David Wells had lifted up the entire Swell department some years previously (it had stood too close to the Great), which added not a little to the amount of trunking and alterations.

The Walker Schwimmers proved impossible to restore in a manner which would have ensured a stable wind system, so they have been replaced by new P&S Schwimmers – their modern equivalent/successors. Wind trunking has been re-planned and as much flexible trunking as possible has been replaced with plywood or zinc. Traditional reservoirs have been releathered where necessary. The result is remarkable – an organ whose pipework immediately sounds stable and in tune with itself. A real transformation – albeit one helped by the old Willis soundboards now being wind-tight again and delivering the required air to each pipe.

The sound of the organ would, however, have remained excessively "thin" had we not addressed the lack of sonority at 8ft (and 4ft pitch) on Great and Swell. There were extraordinarily brilliant mixtures sitting on top of the slenderest of foundations – and in a building which needs bass and tenor registers to work

hard to make any impression at all. Walkers had removed virtually all of the Willis foundation stops; we considered that a restoration of the organ should include a restoration of its sound – some of it to a pre-Walker ethos.

So it was that the Great has regained an Open Diapason no.1 (new pipes from 4ft C) and a 4ft Octave (the Walker Octave, a softer stop, being renamed Principal). With some rebalancing of the 2ft Super Octave, the Great now has a perfectly balanced chorus with much more sonorous 8ft tone and 4ft tone, big enough to help pull the chorus together around it. This was achieved by losing the Nazard, and (there are always compromises) by making the Trumpet 8ft and Bombarde 16ft a single rank. The new pipes here, and in the other departments, were made by Terry Shires of Leeds.

The Swell was particularly thin in tone – it looked like a Ralph Downes department, with its Quintaton, tapered ranks and open shallot reeds; but in reality it had none of the warmth that his designs usually have and was instead a desiccated and totally un-lovely affair. We have taken something of a "Willis" approach here. Thus the Gemshorns at 8ft and 4ft have been replaced with new Geigen Diapasons at 8ft and 4ft, a vintage Viola 8ft has replaced the 16ft Quintaton, the very poor Trumpet has been replaced by a new Willis-scaled rank, and a Fr. Willis Hautboy of particularly beautiful tone has replaced the unpleasantly revoiced previous Bassoon/Hautboy rank, from 8ft C up. The Swell now is traditional in its basis but still has the Walker revoiced flutes and their strong, principal-toned Sesquialtera and bright Mixture.

The Positive flue chorus was previously, frankly, an unbalanced mess. Nothing really "went" with anything else and the whole was supported by a single 8ft Bourdon. There was no 2ft Principal so the Cymbale screamed away three octaves higher than the 4ft Principal, and the Crumhorn – the old Willis Corno di Bassetto revoiced with open shallots – was as rough as Joe Grundy's scrumpy. The 1ft has been replaced by a bright new 2ft Principal and the Cymbale somewhat calmed. The 8ft Bourdon was happily supplemented at 8ft pitch by the redundant Gemshorn and Quintaton from the Swell, the Crumhorn was revoiced to a pleasant tone, all the pipework gone over on the voicing machine, and the whole ensemble regulated and rebalanced. Another transformation has been the result, with the Principal chorus

Top left: Swell pipework – Willis, Walker and Wells
Bottom: The case as recast by Walker

Whitworth Hall specification (52 speaking stops)

GREAT ORGAN	
Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason I	8
Open Diapason II	8
Spitzflute	8
Octave	4
Principal	4
Koppel Flute	4
Super Octave	2
Mixture 19.22.26.29	IV
Bombarde	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4
SWELL ORGAN	
Geigen Diapason	8
Gedeckt	8
Viola	8
Vox Angelica (t.c.)	8
Geigen Principal	4
Chimney Flute	4
Octave	2
Sesquialtera 12.17	II
Mixture 22.26.29	III
Bassoon	16
Trumpet	8
Hautboy	8
Tremulant	
Octave	
POSITIVE ORGAN	
Gemshorn	8
Bourdon	8
Quintaton	8
Principal	4
Rohr Flute	4
Nazard	$2^2/_3$
Octave	2
Block Flute	2
Tierce	$1^3/_5$
Larigot	$1^1/_3$
Cymbale 26.29.33.36	IV
Crumhorn	8
Tremulant	
Trumpet (Great)	8
Clarion (Great)	4
Orchestral Trumpet	8
Sub Octave [added]	
PEDAL ORGAN	
Contra Bass	32
Open Wood	16
Principal	16
Bourdon	16
Octave	8
Gemshorn (Positive)	8
Bass Flute	8
Choral Bass	4
Mixture 19.22.26.29	IV
Trombone	16
Bombarde (Great)	16
Octave Trombone	8
Schalmey	4

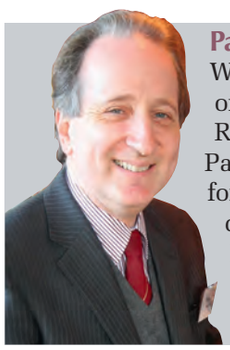
now being complete from 8ft to Cymbale with no gaps, the cornet decomposée ranks now properly balanced (though the 2ft Blockflute, being excessively large in scale, struggles to fit in, or to be tuneable). The 8ft warmth of the department is greatly enhanced by the two stops moved from the Swell. With these two ranks present the range of solo colours on this department is widely enriched, as are the coupled "fonds" of the entire organ. Indeed, with the Diapasons once again restored to Great and Swell, and a beautiful Hautboy, the "fonds" are a joy to experience, filling the hall with a broad wash of tone for the first time in decades.

The Walker Orchestral Trumpet, which has its bells soldered-on rather than naturally formed, was badly collapsed and had been turned round to face the back wall in an attempt to moderate its impact! The rank has been beautifully restored in the DWOB metal shop, and revoiced. It now stands proudly facing down the hall again, from its elevated position, speaking out once more in brilliantly imperial fashion.

The Pedal lost the derived Swell 16ft Quintaton and in its place gained an 8ft Gemshorn derivation from the Positive. The console is smart once again and proudly retains its entire Walker feel and appearance. Its piston system is up to date but also unfussy.

David Wells' team has done a truly fine job, and gone the extra mile – such was their determination to get the best out of this organ. I hope that it will inspire organ students at the University, impress musicians in the city, and delight graduands at the numerous graduation ceremonies each year at which it is given a thorough outing by University Organist, James Garratt.

Footnote: I have a large archive of organ-builders' specification leaflets, which prove invaluable for historical research both for articles and organ consultation projects. There are, of course, gaps in my collection, which I should like to fill. If any reader is ever wondering where to dispose of their collection of specification leaflets etc, perhaps they'd kindly consider passing it on to me? It will find productive use!



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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 AIOA and has designed many new and restored organs 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