



Then and Now

Paul Hale

The 1978 Nicholson console, refurbished and upgraded with new keys, 2013

In the world of organ projects it is not often that consultants have the chance to return to an instrument and reconsider their decisions taken decades in the past. It's an area of work which organ consultants and organ builders only tend to find themselves occupying once they've reached their '60s or beyond. However, this happened to me recently when I was invited to give advice concerning an organ into whose tonal remodelling in the 1970s I had some input: the current musicians at the church (the talented Nicholas Johnson and Joe Cooper) were not aware of my earlier involvement, as it happens, when they made the request.

In my youth three organs dominated my daily life in 1960s Solihull – the exciting Nicholson in Solihull School Chapel (which was being built whilst I was a pupil, thus triggering a hopelessly addictive fascination with organ

innards and tonal design), a delightful small 1951 HN&B in St Francis of Assisi Church, Solihull (now removed to St Tudy, Cornwall, and St Francis church demolished; see NPOR K00777), and the Rushworth & Dreaper in J.L. Pearson's sublime Birmingham masterpiece, St. Alban's church, Highgate. One organ which did *not* feature on my "itching to play this one" list was the stultifyingly dull 1936 Hill, Norman & Beard rebuild in St Alphege – Solihull's parish church, a red sandstone building whose acoustic is as dry as its spire is lofty.

Something of a mongrel of an instrument, whose finest feature was arguably its Swarbrick case (from St Martin in the Bull Ring, Birmingham), the organ was electrified by HN&B in 1936 with an attached stop-key console, yet remained entombed in its south transept chamber. Its tone was

eased only modestly into the nave by a small Gothic arch facing the south aisle, pierced in 1936, with dummy pipes concealing the old Great Trumpet, revoiced on heavy wind as a Tromba/Trombone unit. The Great stood behind the north-facing historic case with the Swell, elevated, behind, the Choir, placed in a box in 1936, being squeezed beneath the Swell; the pedal stood against the east wall of the chamber and was comprised entirely of wooden pipes.

In the 1936 specification, notice the Swell Piccolo and 12.15 Mixture: all but inaudible when the powerful 1936 16/8/4 reed unit (on the same heavy pressure as the Tromba unit) was brought into use. The tone of the Great was completely lacking in character or any vestige of brightness, its low Mixture soon breaking back an octave to 8.12.15 and then to a growling 1.5.8. The Pedal was

1936 Specification:

GREAT ORGAN

| | | | |
|---|------------------|-----|---|
| 1 | Open Diapason 1 | 8 | |
| 2 | Open Diapason 2 | 8 | |
| 3 | Stopped Diapason | 8 | |
| 4 | Principal | 4 | |
| 5 | Flauto Traverso | 4 | |
| 6 | Fifteenth | 2 | |
| 7 | Mixture 15.19.22 | III | |
| 8 | Tromba | 8 | A |

SWELL ORGAN

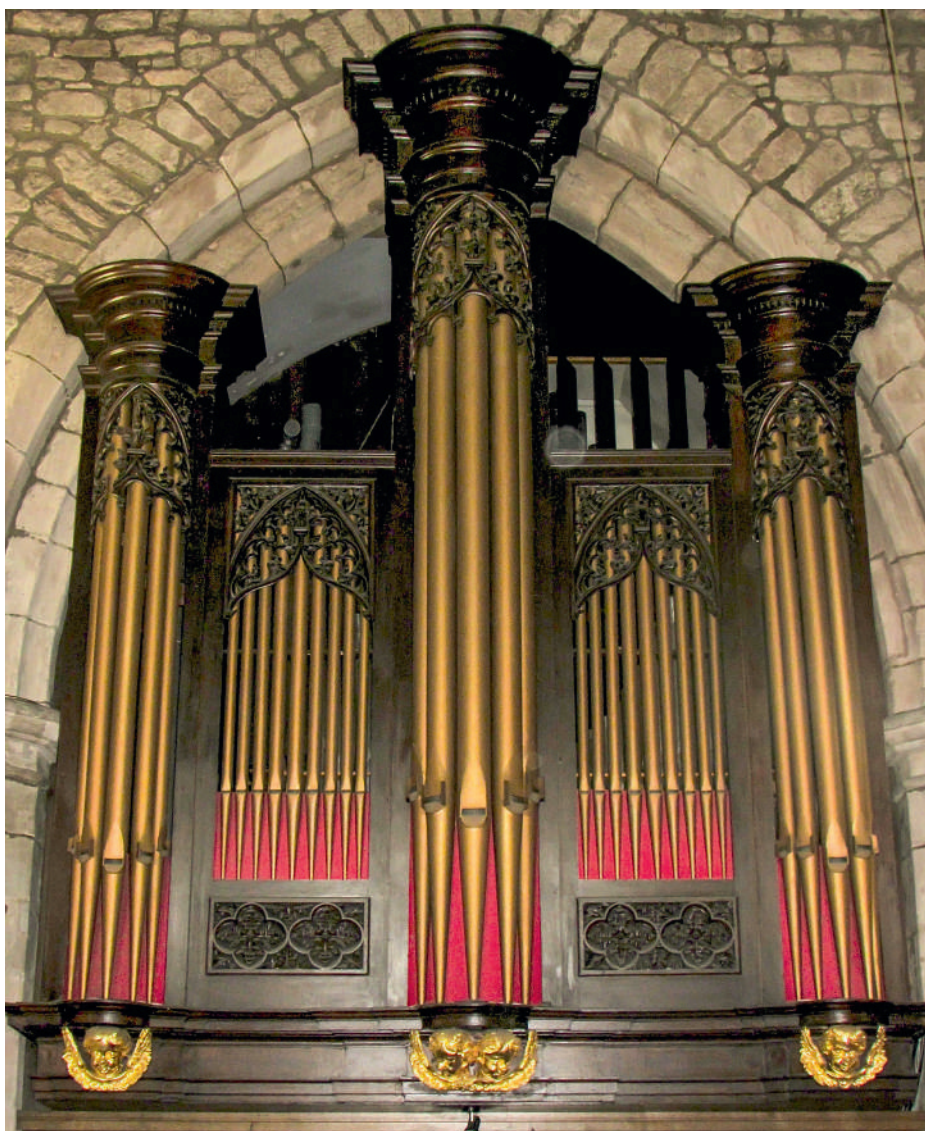
| | | | |
|----|---------------------|-----|---|
| 9 | Bourdon | 16 | B |
| 10 | Open Diapason | 8 | |
| 11 | Hohl Flute | 8 | |
| 12 | Viole d'Orchestre | 8 | |
| 13 | Salicional | 8 | |
| 14 | Voix Celeste (t.c.) | 8 | |
| 15 | Principal | 4 | |
| 16 | Lieblich Flute | 4 | |
| 17 | Piccolo | 2 | |
| 18 | Mixture 12.15 | III | |
| 19 | Oboe | 8 | |
| 20 | Double Trumpet | 16 | C |
| 21 | Trumpet | 8 | C |
| 22 | Clarion | 4 | C |

CHOIR ORGAN (ENCLOSED EXCEPT TROMBA)

| | | | |
|----|----------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|
| 23 | Echo Dulciana (t.c.) | 16 | |
| 24 | Echo Diapason | 8 | |
| 25 | Lieblich Gedact | 8 | |
| 26 | Gamba | 8 | |
| 27 | Wald Flute | 4 | |
| 28 | Nazard | 2 ² / ₃ | |
| 29 | Clarinet | 8 | played 25&28 |
| 30 | Orchestral Oboe | 8 | |
| 31 | Tromba | 8 | A |

PEDAL ORGAN

| | | | |
|----|----------------|----|---------|
| 32 | Harmonic Bass | 32 | D |
| 33 | Open Diapason | 16 | E, wood |
| 34 | Bourdon | 16 | D |
| 35 | Echo Bourdon | 16 | B |
| 36 | Octave | 8 | E, wood |
| 37 | Bass Flute | 8 | D |
| 38 | Octave Flute | 4 | D |
| 39 | Trombone | 16 | A |
| 40 | Double Trumpet | 16 | C |



St Alphege organ case

entirely wood and woof and the Choir need not have been there – it was all “echo” stops with a bizarre stop-list and a “synthetic Clarinet” with no pipes, which drew simply the 8ft Lieblich and the tiny stopped Nazard!

Nevertheless, the organ was jealously guarded by the organist and choirmaster, Colin Mann, no mean musician, who had previously been assistant organist at Hereford Cathedral.

As the 1970s approached this organ merited mechanical and electrical work and was clearly in need of a complete rethink tonally – if only to get some tone down the church. I well recall sitting one day, in the mid 1970s, at the bar of Solihull’s renowned and comfortable old coaching inn, The

George, conveniently opposite the church, with Colin Mann’s successor Peter Gregory, planning the tonal scheme for the rebuild, which was to be carried out by Nicholson’s. Peter was building up a large and very accomplished church choir – which he maintained successfully for decades – and naturally he desired an organ fit for its accompaniment and for the leading of congregational singing.

Apart from a complete mechanical and electrical overhaul with a new stop-knob console, a revised tonal scheme was considered vital. The three tasks for the organ were standard for an Anglican church with a commitment to good music: congregational accompaniment, choral accompaniment, and the

stylish performance of a wide range of organ music. A study of the 1978 stop list will see how we set about achieving this, strictly within the confines of the number of slides on the soundboards and existing unit chests.

Observe that the Great has received a much more effective Mixture, the Swell has gained a big Mixture and the Choir has gained a tight but effective chorus, of which the 2ft Octave is a vital element – the often-found 2ft Blockflute never binds a Mixture to lower pitches. In addition there is a narrow-scale Sesquialtera on the Choir and wide-scale flute mutations on the Swell, thus serving German and French repertoire. The Pedal 16ft Open became metal from 8ft C and provided the needed 8/4 pitches of

Principal tone. The Great gained a new chorus reed on the vacant slide left by the 1936 removal of the Trumpet to its unit chest, and the Trumpet/Tromba was revoiced again, with open shallots, as a fresh-toned, powerful Bombarde. The only loss was the Swell Lieblich Bourdon, on whose unit chest was placed the Oboe so that it could usefully draw on the Choir as well as the Swell, enabling it to be accompanied on the Swell. The Choir gained a Cremona in place of an acid-toned Orchestral Oboe, and it also lost its 1936 swell-box (more like a rabbit hutch, squashed under the Swell), to the considerable improvement of its tonal projection. Dennis Thurlow carried out the voicing in his usual vigorous style.

So the question is, how does it stack up, 40 years on? The current musicians feel that the scheme is fine as it is, although the Thurlow mixtures have recently been somewhat rebalanced, and they would like a manual 16ft flue back, if one can be contrived, along with a more “English” Great Trumpet. Though the work made the organ twice as effective in the nave and hugely more versatile as a vehicle for performance, it is still deemed not loud enough in the nave, so a nave Diapason chorus 8/4/2 is planned, situated in the arch facing down the south aisle. The Bombarde will be masked by this, which, given its notably ferocious output, is no bad thing!

What would one change, 40 years on? Well, the Great reed would blend better as a normal English Trumpet and the Choir

Cymbel would be better named Sharp Mixture. And yes, a Great 16ft flue would be a benefit, though there is no room for one. Of the rest, it all still does what it was planned to do. Only one stop was not voiced as we had envisaged, and that was a question of “what’s in a name?”. The Choir 4ft Spitzflute we had imagined as a beautiful tapered flute; in the event it was voiced with low mouths as a



Nave Case

Spitzprinzipal – as Denis Thurlow, Downes-inspired, generally did. Guy Russell, Nicholson’s current Tonal Director, has now revoiced it with higher, arched mouths; it sounds simply beautiful and is much more useful.

These days it is considered good practice not to turn a “16.8.8.8.4.2.8.8.8” type Choir organ into an “8.4.2.1¹/₃.II.III.8.8.8” “Positive” type department, and in general I agree with that. However, all I can say is: at St Alphege it worked then, and it works now.



1978 Specification:

GREAT ORGAN

| | | | |
|---|---------------------------|---|--------|
| 1 | Open Diapason No.1 | 8 | |
| 2 | Open Diapason No.2 | 8 | |
| 3 | Stopt Diapason | 8 | |
| 4 | Principal | 4 | |
| 5 | Harmonic Flute | 4 | |
| 6 | Fifteenth | 2 | |
| 7 | Fourniture 15.19.22.26 IV | | recast |
| 8 | Trompette | 8 | new |

SWELL ORGAN

| | | | |
|----|--------------------------|-------------------------------|-----|
| 9 | Open Diapason | 8 | |
| 10 | Hohl Flute | 8 | |
| 11 | Salicional | 8 | |
| 12 | Voix Celeste (t.c.) | 8 | |
| 13 | Principal | 4 | |
| 14 | Lieblich Flute | 4 | |
| 15 | Nasard | 2 ² / ₃ | |
| 16 | Piccolo | 2 | |
| 17 | Tierce | 1 ¹ / ₃ | new |
| 18 | Plein Jeu 19.22.26.29 IV | | new |
| 19 | Oboe | 8 | B |
| | Tremulant | | |
| 20 | Double Trumpet | 16 | C |
| 21 | Trumpet | 8 | C |
| 22 | Clarion | 4 | C |

CHOIR ORGAN (UNENCLOSED)

| | | | |
|----|--------------------|-------------------------------|-------------|
| 23 | Gedackt | 8 second-hand | |
| 24 | Spitz Flute | 4 | new |
| 25 | Octave | 2 | new |
| 26 | Larigot | 1 ¹ / ₃ | new |
| 27 | Sesquialtera 12.17 | II | new |
| 28 | Cymbal 26.29.33 | III | new |
| 29 | Cremona | 8 second-hand | |
| | Tremulant | | |
| 30 | Oboe | 8 | B |
| 31 | Bombarde | 8 | A, revoiced |

PEDAL ORGAN

| | | | |
|----|----------------|----|-----------------------------------|
| 32 | Resultant Bass | 32 | D |
| 33 | Open Diapason | 16 | E, replaced with metal from 8ft C |
| 34 | Bourdon | 16 | D |
| 35 | Octave | 8 | E, metal |
| 36 | Bass Flute | 8 | D |
| 37 | Fifteenth | 4 | E, metal |
| 38 | Octave Flute | 4 | D |
| 39 | Bombarde | 16 | A, revoiced |
| 40 | Double Trumpet | 16 | C |
| 41 | Trumpet | 8 | C |
| 42 | Clarion | 4 | C |



Paul Hale is Cathedral Organist at Southwell and a professional organ consultant.

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