



The Pedal soundboard

# Turning the corner

A Mander rebuild at Bishop's Stortford

Paul Hale

The Oxford Movement had a lot to answer for, most of it positive. For church musicians and liturgists it was a wonderful thing: three-decker pulpits and box pews dominating the nave were swept away, chancels were restored to their medieval splendour, altars were re-established in elaborate elevated sanctuaries, robed choirs found a happy place in new chancel choir stalls, *Hymns Ancient & Modern* arrived, and the wheezing west gallery organ or church band was replaced by a spanking new Hill/Willis/Walker behind one side of the choir in a chancel chamber. The organ led the

choir's singing and the choir led the congregation – everyone was happy with the new arrangement.

All this lasted remarkably well for about a century; then the cracks began to appear as nave altars multiplied and chancel choirs diminished. The organ, marooned in its chancel chamber, began not to be fit for purpose. How can such an instrument lead hearty congregational singing in the nave, especially if the church choir has become diminished and thus enfeebled – or, worse, swept away by a misguided evangelical incumbent, full of the joys of *Mission Praise*?

There are various answers to this problem, all of which have been tried from the 1960s onwards. Maurice Forsyth-Grant was perhaps the most vocal organ-builder publicly to despise (not too harsh a word for his views) the Victorian organ – especially in its entombment in the chancel – and propose that church organs should be 'classical', in the nave, and ideally at the west end. He achieved that early on with an effective instrument at Faringdon, near Oxford, with the enthusiastic backing of David Lumsden (then the Diocesan Organ Adviser for Oxford); the GDB *magnum opus*



for Dr Lumsden at New College was born shortly afterwards. But rare is the English church with a west end suitable for an organ, and even more rare is the Diocesan Advisory Committee which allows the construction of an organ against a Norman west wall, or in front of an elegant tower arch, or obscuring a notable west window.

The next place where organs have been re-situated is within the nave, even if not centrally at the west end. At the east end of a north or south aisle, or half way down an aisle, or at the west end of an aisle: all these have become quite commonplace for small- or medium-sized organs in recent years. Most readers will know of such examples and will appreciate how effective they can be.

But what of an organ too large to move into such a position? Well, if there is only one tonal exit from the organ – across the chancel – the situation is a real challenge. But if there is also an arch facing down the nave aisle, then there are often opportunities which can be embraced, with a bit of imagination and some hard cash. In recent times several organs have been rebuilt in order to place the Great Organ in a position where its tone reaches directly down the nave to lead singing. If the Swell Organ can be fitted with an additional set of shutters on the side of the box also facing down the nave, so much the better, though this cannot be successfully accomplished with many soundboard layouts which have either the basses at the sides, or, in the case of Hill organs, the basses in the middle running down into C and C sharp sides – one side would be louder than the other in the nave. If there is a Choir Organ this can be left speaking across the chancel and one has to accept that its tone might sound rather remote compared with the Great and Swell in their new positions. To accomplish such a scheme successfully often means starting again with the building-frame and altering the wind system.

The swell box may adapt or need replacing. The Great soundboard needs to be as close as possible to the arch in order for it to speak out clearly into the nave, and as low as possible, too, so that the sound is not trapped behind the arch.

One such scheme – turning the organ ‘around the corner’ – has just been most successfully carried out by Mander Organs at St Michael’s,

Bishop’s Stortford, a church with a long and distinguished music tradition and a fine choir. The instrument was originally built in 1888 by Alfred Kirkland, and installed in a chamber on the south side of the Chancel, with all three manual departments speaking north across the chancel, though there was a row of front pipes (basses of the Choir Open



David Lipson

The organ cases





The console

Diapason) filling the arch at the head of the south aisle. In 1940 J.W. Walker carried out one of their typically thorough rebuilds, electrifying the actions, installing a detached console and making tonal alterations. The Choir soundboard was turned around and moved behind the west-facing arch at this point, mainly to make room for additional wind regulators for the heavier pressures needed

for the major reed unit, drawstop machines and under-actions. Bishop & Son (Ipswich branch) overhauled the organ in 1985 with some tonal alterations typical of the time, and Nicholsons carried out further modest works and voicing improvements in 1997. The Village Workshop carried out yet more work – tonal and mechanical – in the years following 2002 when they took over the instrument's

## Specification

### GREAT

Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason no.1	8
Open Diapason no.2	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Octave	4
Open Flute	4
Twelfth	2 $\frac{2}{3}$
Fifteenth	2
Tierce	1 $\frac{1}{5}$
Mixture 15.19.22.26	IV
Trumpet	8
Tremulant	
Posaune (Choir)	8

### SWELL

Open Diapason	8
Gedeckt Flute	8
Salicional	8
Vox Angelica (t.c.)	8
Principal	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 22.26.29.33	IV
Contra Fagotto	16
Cornopean	8
Oboe	8
Tremulant	

### CHOIR

Open Diapason	8
Lieblisch Gedeckt	8
Viola da Gamba	8
Gemshorn	4
Stopped Flute	4
Nazard	2 $\frac{2}{3}$
Fifteenth	2
Blockflute	2
Tierce	1 $\frac{1}{5}$
Mixture 19.22.26	III
Corno di Bassetto	8
Tremulant	
Posaune	8

### PEDAL

Acoustic Bass (ext.)	32
Open Wood	16
Open Diapason (Great)	16
Bourdon	16
Principal	8
Bass Flute (ext.)	8
Fifteenth (ext.)	4
Octave Flute (ext.)	4
Ophicleide	16
Fagotto (Swell)	16

maintenance. At this point the organ had 42 speaking stops.

Despite all this work, the organ sounded unbalanced and from the nave disappointingly lacking in

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real impact. The organist, Robert Stokely, was determined to bring about a transformation, and when Mander Organs proposed building an organ based on the old pipework but otherwise new and completely reconfigured, he and the PCC jumped at the chance. After a very successful fundraising campaign the organ was built, being completed at Easter this year. The new layout places the Great just behind the west-facing south aisle arch, the Choir under the original arch into the chancel, the Swell in the centre of the chamber with independent sets of shutters facing north and west, and the Pedal running along the south wall of the chamber. The solo reed stands in front (west) of the elevated Swell and thus speaks straight into the nave,

over the top of the Great, which has gained a fine new chorus Trumpet. The Walker console has been rebuilt and refitted. The tonal scheme has been tidied up, the second Great Diapason and Choir Diapason exchanging places so the front pipes in both cases remain as part of their original ranks. The Pedal has a fine new spotted-metal Principal/Fifteenth; upperwork and mutations have been rescaled and revoiced, and the whole instrument immaculately regulated to pull it all together. The result was spectacularly demonstrated in an opening recital by Simon Johnson of St Paul's Cathedral, on 16 April.

For congregational accompaniment and general impact in the nave the organ more than adequately fulfils its

purpose. But adherents of Oxford Movement principles would be just as pleased: with two sets of shutters the Swell speaks equally effectively north or west (and the west shutters can be switched to closed position when the organ is being used to accompany a choir in the chancel) and the large Choir Organ acts in the chancel as a choral accompaniment Great, as well as projecting down the nave remarkably well, doubtless because of its forward position.

So, just as the Bishop's Stortford organ has turned the corner, one might hope that organ design has done the same thing, and that more churches will seek this manner of enabling their organs to be perfectly fit for purpose as they look forward to a nave-centred future.



**Paul Hale is a professional organ consultant, recitalist and choral conductor.**

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, 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](http://www.PaulHale.org)

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