

When cinema meets Chapel

The remarkable organ in Solihull School Chapel

Paul Hale

People sometimes ask me how it was that I became interested in both organ playing and organ building/design, and where my unashamed enjoyment of a fine cinema/theatre organ originated. They sometimes ask, too, where my singing and choir-training days began. The answer to all those questions is the same: in Solihull School Chapel.

How can this be? Well, Solihull School (of mid-16th century foundation like so many similar local grammar or independent schools) decided to build a new, modern chapel to celebrate its quatercentenary in 1960.

An Appeal for the new chapel was launched in 1954 and in 1957 an Old Silhillian architect, Mr C. Neville White, was commissioned to design a chapel to seat 400 boys. The budget was set at £42,000 for the building and its pews. Headmaster Harry Hitchens later wrote, 'By the time of the Consecration in June 1960, over £36,000 had been given or promised by some

1,600 friends of the School. In addition nearly £3,000 had been independently given or promised for the ecclesiastical furnishings and ornaments of the Chapel... At the beginning of 1961 some £5,000 still had to be raised to enable the Trustees to liquidate their obligations'. There, in a nutshell, one has the reason why there was no money for a new pipe organ: building the chapel had exhausted all available funds. Something second-hand would have to do.

David Turnbull (the young and vigorous Director of Music) had to come up with an inexpensive plan. In the late 1950s he had met the remarkable Ronald Oliver, who sang at the time in the choir at St Alban's, Birmingham – a wonderful Anglo-Catholic Pearson church where Solihull School organ pupils Paul Hale, John Butt, David Briggs and Roy Hayton were all later to be organist (as had been Roy Massey in the late 1950s). Oliver earned

a modest living divided between organ work (mainly installing second-hand instruments, often Comptons from cinemas) and teaching. In 1958 Oliver was engaged by the school to teach, to acquire organ parts, and to construct an organ impressive enough for the new chapel, albeit with a mere £1,100 to spend. It is worth noting that Coventry Cathedral's new organ (73 stops, built 1961/2) cost £30,000, so Oliver was working on only 1/27th of a realistic budget for a large new organ.

Oliver was fortunate that just at that time a Birmingham road scheme led to the demolition of Wycliffe Baptist Church (built 1859–61). A well-endowed chapel, it contained a fine two-manual organ from the Worcester organbuilder, John Nicholson. The school acquired the





organ, which gave Oliver some 1,400 pipes with which to begin work. At the same time (1959), Lord Rank offered the Compton organ from his Gaumont cinema in Worcester. This organ had been built in 1935; it contained ten ranks and a three-manual console with 'Rainbow' style illuminated surround. Unusually for Compton it contained an (excellent) French Horn stop. Its ten ranks were: Tuba (16ft), French Horn (8ft), Diapason (16ft – diaphone bass), Tibia Clausa (16ft – polyphone bass), Vox Humana (8ft), Clarinet (8ft), Gamba (16ft – Haskell bass), Violin (8ft), Violin Celeste (4ft), Flute (8ft). The Gaumont, which opened in October 1935, was a particularly large and opulent cinema, seating 1,700 patrons. The auditorium was in Art Deco style with seating arranged as a semi-stadium, with a raised section at the rear. The proscenium was 50 feet wide and 28 feet high and the cinema boasted a fully equipped stage 70 feet wide and 40 feet deep.

In September 1963 The Beatles gave a performance – now legendary – on its stage. The Rank Organisation closed the Gaumont on 4 May 1974; it was converted into a Top Rank Bingo Club, today operating as a Gala Bingo Club.

In 1960 Ronald Oliver also acquired the 1936 Compton (3 manuals, 6 ranks) in the Bedford/Curzon cinema in Liverpool. Designed by Ernest Shennan and built in 1936, the Curzon was one of the few cinemas where 3D films could be seen. The auditorium had 1,750 seats, the organ chamber was behind the screen, and the orchestra pit featured the handsome console of the Compton organ that incorporated an early example of their electronic 'Melotone' unit. Ronald Oliver must have rescued the organ just in time, for the Curzon closed on 20 August 1960 after which the building was reconstructed into a row of shops, which remain to this day. This Compton contained the following ranks: Tuba (16ft), Trumpet (8ft), Diapason (16ft – Haskell bass), Tibia Clausa (16ft – polyphone bass),

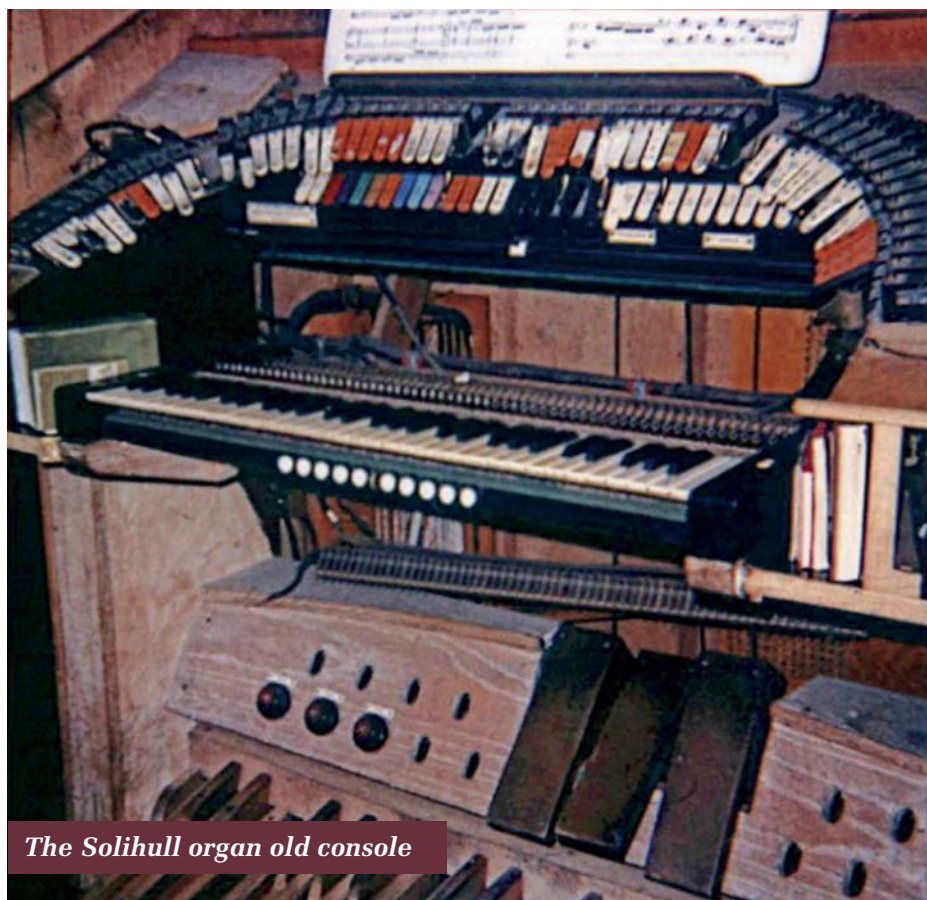
Viola (8ft), Flute (8ft). Oliver also acquired a cinema organ or at least some ranks and chests by Conacher of Huddersfield – provenance so far untraced.

Bernard Hales (at the school from 1957 to 1966) recalls:

He [Ronald Oliver] toured the country in a horsebox/pantechinon (in which I think he may also have lived for part of the time!) and collected the parts he required from the different sites.

I was one of the boys who responded to his call for volunteers to help in preparing the parts for assembly as an accepted alternative activity on 'games' afternoons. His request was welcomed by such as me who had an aversion for games but an aptitude for practical work. Nevertheless, we became so hooked on the job we would spend lots of time after school as well.

The organ was to be installed in a reasonably spacious but awkwardly-shaped chamber at the west end of



the north aisle, at Choir Gallery level, with openings east into the chapel and south across the gallery so that the Chapel Choir could hear the organ clearly.

Ronald Oliver assembled the Nicholson organ first, converting the tracker mechanism to electro-pneumatic (with new underactions using compound magnets). The Great was ready in time for the visit of Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Kent in October 1960, following which the Swell was installed. Fitted with a shutter front employing an individual pneumatic motor and return-spring to each shutter, it and the Great were winded from Compton regulators. These were fed from the ex-Gaumont organ's Discus blower. The blower motor also ran a DC generator for the low-voltage action generator.

The instrument was played as a two-manual (plus Solo Tuba on the third manual), using the Gaumont organ console with its illuminated surround replaced by oak ply panels; this was placed on the upper level of the gallery, between the choir stalls, the player's back to the west window.

A few Compton ranks had also been incorporated: the Swell strings, 8ft flute and Trumpet (on a pressure of about 7ins), the Tuba and the sole Pedal stop (the polyphone bass of the Tibia rank). The rest remained in storage.

The full scheme that Oliver envisaged was really large – a four-manual organ of no fewer than 86 stops. He planned a largely 'straight' Great and Swell based on the Nicholson Great and Swell, with the Choir, Solo and Pedal organs being of 'unit' construction and consisting almost entirely of Compton cinema ranks. The total number of ranks (including Mixtures) would have been far fewer – 46).

Sadly, it all proved too much for Ronald Oliver, who left the school with the organ incomplete. As a 12-year-old I joined Solihull School and its Chapel Choir a couple of years later, in 1964, when John Flower, the inspirational Organist & Choirmaster, had managed to find a small local firm (long since defunct) to attempt to complete Oliver's scheme – only slightly reduced. They piled Compton pipes and chests into the chamber and I began to hear the heady tones of a French Horn, Vox Humana, Diaphone, Haskell bass and keen strings. They took two manuals away to refurbish, so the console we were left with was reduced to one manual – the Great – to which the Swell and the Solo Tuba could be coupled (see my 1966 console photo herewith). Again the project faltered and this time Nicholson & Co. was called in to build a smaller organ using the best of the material.

The 'new' organ was built in 1966 using the Great and Swell of the Wycliffe Baptist Church Nicholson, along with pipework and chests from the 1930s Compton cinema organs. Nicholsons added a Positif (new Stinkens pipework and a new Nicholson soundboard) and a new mahogany console (re-using Compton keys).

Whilst building this organ, Nicholson took away a mass of Compton materials stored by Ronald Oliver.

Solihull specification

GREAT ORGAN (wind pressure 3 inches)			rank	make
1	Bourdon	16	C	H
2	Open Diapason No. 1	8		o/nN
3	Open Diapason No. 2	8		C/oN
4	Claribel Flute	8		oN
5	Gamba	8		C/H
6	Principal	4		oN
7	Flute [open wood]	4		oN
8	Twelfth	2 ² / ₃		oN
9	Fifteenth	2		oN
10	Mixture (19.22.26.29)	IV		rN
11	Trumpet	8		J
SWELL ORGAN (wind pressure 3½ inches)				
12	Open Diapason	8		oN
13	Stopped Diapason	8		H
14	Salicional	8		C
15	Voix Celeste (t.c.)	8		oN?
16	Principal	4		oN
17	Fifteenth	2		oN
18	Mixture (15.19.22.26)	IV		oN/nN
19	Contra Fagotto	16	A	nN/Con
20	Trumpet	8		C
21	Hautboy	8		L
22	Clarion	4	A	Con
	Tremulant			
POSITIF ORGAN (wind pressure 3 inches)				
23	Viola	8		nN/S
24	Gedeckt	8		S
25	Gemshorn	4		S
26	Chimney Flute	4		W
27	Nazard	2 ² / ₃		S
28	Piccolo	2		S
29	Tierce	1 ³ / ₅		S
30	Larigot	1 ¹ / ₃		S
	Tremulant			
SOLO ORGAN(ENCLOSED) (wind pressure 5 inches)				
31	Flute [open metal]	4		S
32	Clarinet	8		C
33	Orchestral Oboe	8		HNB?
	Tremulant			
(unenclosed) (wind pressure 10ins)				
34	Tuba	8	B	nN
35	Octave Tuba	4	B	nN
PEDAL ORGAN				
(wind pressures: part flues 4½ inches; part flues & reed rank 5½ inches)				
36	Major Bass	16		C
37	Violone [haskelled bass]	16		nN/C
38	Bourdon	16	C	H
39	Principal	8	D	H
40	Bass Flute	8	C	H
41	Fifteenth	4	D	H
42	Octave Flute	4	C	H
43	Trombone	16	E	C
44	Fagotto	16	A	nN/Con
45	Clarion	8	E	C

In later years I came across ranks of these pipes at St Chad's RC Cathedral, Birmingham (the 1968 Nicholson rebuild which preceded the current Walker organ), St Edmundsbury Cathedral (the 1970 Nicholson rebuild which preceded the current Harrison & Harrison organ), and at Ledbury parish church (Nicholson 1970 rebuild: the Pedal Trombone – originally a Compton Tuba bass – which was removed by Percy Daniels in their 2000 rebuild).

Dedicated on 15 January 1967, this was the organ on which I learnt, as did John Butt, David Briggs. Iain

Simcock, Laurence Cummings, Christopher Monks, Jonathan Clarke and a steady stream of other aspirational young organists. Nowhere else, I imagine, has such an amalgamation of cinema and church organ pipework helped to train two organ scholars of King's College (Cambridge), one of New College, one of Trinity College and two of Christ Church (Oxford)!

By 2007 – after 40 years of daily hammering – the Compton pneumatics and wind system had worn out, the 1861 slider soundboards were split because of the chapel's fierce heating system, the 1966 electrical transmission was unreliable and the console was in need of refurbishment. Nicholson and I (with Peter Irving, the distinguished School Organist since 1984) drew up a scheme of work, which provided new slider soundboards for Great and Swell, complete restorations of all remaining soundboards and chests, a re-made wind system, some tonal revisions, new electrical systems and wiring, and a refurbished console with new keys and an updated combination system. The Positif was moved to a position above the Great, where it speaks west into the chapel better, which created more room for the Pedal ranks, which were augmented. The Compton Tuba was replaced with a more fiery and prompt rank and the monstrous Compton Pedal reeds revoiced on a lower wind pressure.

Some fine historic pipework by Hill became available just at the right time (Nicholsons were able



The present console

to acquire some ranks from the old Worcester Cathedral organ). Suitable Hill ranks were installed as the Great/Pedal Bourdon, the Pedal Principal/Fifteenth rank, the Swell Stopped Diapason treble and the Great Gamba (the Compton bass remains). A Walker 1964 Chimney Flute (ex-Uppingham School Chapel) was used as the Positif 4ft flute, and a spotted metal Lewis & Co. Oboe (ex-Ampleforth College Music School, c.1900) was added to the Swell.

In the stop-list on page 37 sources of the pipework are: c.1861 Nicholson (oN), 2008 Nicholson (nN), 1990s Nicholson (rN), Compton (ex cinema; C), Conacher (ex cinema; Con), 1966 Stinkens

(S), Henry Jones (1886, St Mary's Moseley; J), Hill Norman & Beard (origin unknown; HNB), Hill (ex Worcester Cathedral; H), Walker (1964, Uppingham School Chapel; W), Lewis & Co (c.1900, Ampleforth College Music School; L).

This successful rebuild at Solihull School was opened on a hot night in the summer of 2008 by Old Silhillian David Briggs, and is in daily use accompanying the superb chapel choir. It will, one hopes, inspire the next several generations of aspiring young organists. But they will almost certainly be unaware that, beneath the bonnet, the remnants of two cinema organs remain to delight them.



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