

# Out of sight, out of mind

The Compton organ in the Fyvie Hall, University of Westminster, Regent Street, London

Paul Hale

Occasionally one comes across a forgotten organ. One such recently came into my orbit when I was invited by the University of Westminster to survey an instrument in its Fyvie Hall on Regent Street, in the heart of London.

Entering the “Arts and Crafts” hall no organ is visible. However, just inside the door is an oak-panelled enclosure – perhaps a chair store? No – it’s a pipe organ.

The Fyvie Hall contains an instrument by the John Compton Organ Company Ltd, job number A260 in the Compton Order Book. The gift of Lord Blanesburgh, it was made in Compton’s “Minerva” Works, on Chase Road, Park Royal, London, during September 1934, and installed shortly afterward in an enclosure behind oak panelling at the rear of the hall. Above the enclosure is a double set of eight shutters (four each side, controlled by the player) through which the sound emerges. The detached console is placed on a wheeled platform which is connected to the organ by a large multi-plug/socket arrangement, enabling the console to be disconnected and stored in the passage behind the organ, where it has now lived, mute and gathering dust, for decades.

Comptons specialised in placing organs in unusual and often disadvantageous positions, very many of them during the 1920s and 1930s being installed out of sight in cinemas. The Fyvie Hall instrument, like the majority of Comptons, was designed as an “extension” organ where a small number of ranks of pipes are electrically switched to create a larger number of stops at



Top: Hidden pipes  
Bottom: Pipes revealed







## Specification

GREAT ORGAN (61 NOTES)			RANK	
1	Contra Salicional (t.c.)	16	A	[85 pipe rank]
2	Diapason	8	B	[73 pipe rank]
3	Hohl Flute	8	C	[85 pipe rank]
4	Salicional	8	A	
5	Octave	4	B	
6	Salicet	4	A	
7	Twelfth	2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>5</sub>	A	
8	Fifteenth	2	A	
	Swell to Great			
SWELL ORGAN (61 NOTES)				
9	Hohl Flute	8	C	
10	Salicional	8	A	
11	Flute	4	C	
12	Salicet	4	A	
13	Echo Cymbale	III	A	
14	Contra Tromba	16	D	[73 pipe rank]
15	Tromba Minor	8	D	
16	Octave Tromba Tremulant	4	D	[top 12 from B]
PEDAL ORGAN (32 NOTES)				
17	Sub Bass	16	C	
18	Flute	8	C	
19	Salicional	8	A	
20	Tromba Bass	16	D	
21	Trumpet	8	D	
	Great to Pedal			
	Swell to Pedal			

4 thumb pistons to the Great [plus Pedal on 2<sup>nd</sup> touch]  
 4 thumb pistons to the Swell [plus Pedal on 2<sup>nd</sup> touch]  
 Reversible thumb piston to Great to Pedal  
 Reversible thumb piston to Swell to Pedal  
 General cancel  
 Balanced swell pedal to whole organ  
 Knee swell pedal  
 Balanced *crescendo* pedal  
 Ventsils to ranks A–D and to Sub Bass and Tromba bass chests  
 “Cancellers” switch  
 Voltmeter  
 Master switch to piston action  
 Watkins & Watson “Discus” blower and generator





**Far top left:** Salicional rank  
**Far bottom left:** Interior chest tubing to pneumatics  
**Far top right:** Electromagnets to operate pipes  
**Far bottom right:** Swell shutters in roof of enclosure – one side  
**Top left:** Interior chest pneumatics  
**Bottom left:** Knee swell, very rare  
**Top right:** Piston selector board

different pitches.

It is a fascinating and clever little organ, scarcely used in living memory and ripe for a conservative restoration. As an untouched Compton from their busiest and probably best period – the early 1930s – it is good to be able to reveal this hidden treasure to *Organists' Review* readers.

Model organs were produced by Compton Organs in their "Miniatura" series; the Fyvie Hall instrument is based on one of these, with the addition of a 73-pipe 16ft Tromba rank. The other ranks are an 8ft Open Diapason of 73 pipes, a 16ft Hohl Flute rank of 85 pipes and an 8ft Salicional rank of 85 pipes. These stand on a common chest, each pipe being controlled by an individual pneumatic valve operated by an electromagnet.

Wind is supplied by a "Discus" via one small wind regulator, and the low-voltage current is supplied by a DC generator connected by a belt to the drive-shaft between the blower fan and its electric motor. This was the typical Compton arrangement, though not many generators remain, most having been replaced with modern transformer-rectifiers.

The console uses Compton stop-keys rather than knobs, as was standard for these models. It has combination pistons adjustable at a typical Compton selector panel (with "neutral" position), a balanced swell pedal to the shutters, a general crescendo pedal to the stops, and, most unusually, a knee-swell lever, too. There is a locking fall to close the console and the bench has hinged blocks on its legs to adjust its height for players

of different size.

To save space, the 316 pipes are ingeniously closely-planted on a single wind chest with internal divisions between each of the four ranks, based on the type used in these "Miniatura" organs. The large bass pipes are dealt with in several typical Compton ways: the basses of the Flute rank are of stopped wooden pipes, lying on their sides at the back of the organ. Each is fitted with a valve and a small fine-tuning tube, enabling it to play two notes (though not at the same time). Thus only six such pipes are needed for the bottom octave. The Diapason bass is made of "Haskelled" pipes, open metal pipes down which a re-entrant tube is suspended. This puts the pitch of the pipe down an octave but maintains the "open" tone of



the rank without the need for the 8ft pipes otherwise required. The Salicional rank has stoppered pipes in the bass (of small scale), cleverly designed and voiced to sound as alike as possible to the open metal pipes in the treble of the rank. The Tromba rank does have true 16ft pipes at the bass, but they are “knuckled”, and thus again take up only about 6ft height. These Tromba basses stand behind the organ on two chests on the floor. Metal pipes are of “plain” and “spotted” metal, with zinc in the bass octaves.

Also on the floor is the wind regulator with its Compton internal springs, connected through the back of the organ to the blower in the passage behind. Above the blower, on the wall behind the organ, are mounted cabinets containing the electro-mechanical relays which operate the pipes; these are akin to an automatic telephone exchange and are of exclusive Compton design and manufacture. The wind regulator feeds wind to the main chest, to the rear bass chests, and to the two rows of pneumatic “motors” at the top of the organ which are connected to the eight roof shutters. When the player uses swell pedal at the console, electrical connections are made which open the shutters, one by one. They are returned to the closed position by springs and there is a pneumatic damper to each shutter to prevent it banging. The enclosure of the entire organ is typical of Compton’s work and found at its most common in their cinema organs.

The console is connected to the organ by a thick multi-core cable containing approximately 200 wires, contained in a flexible metal outer sheathing of the type Compton regularly used. As the console had to be made detachable from the organ, this main cable is interrupted by a large multi plug/socket arrangement of some 230 pins, one end being secured to the left hand side of the organ, the other being at the end of the console cable itself. It has something of



**Top:** Console  
**Bottom:** Great organ stop keys and swell pedal indicators  
**Right:** Diapason rank  
**Far right:** Tromba rank





the appearance of a 1930s trouser-press, with similar locking screws; I have never seen the like before!

The John Compton Organ Company flourished from the early 1920s until the Second World War, rather lost its way in the 1950s and sold out to Rushworth & Dreaper in the early 1960s. It was at its busiest in the 1930s, adopting the most modern factory techniques for standardisation and mass-production. Many new Comptons were installed in cinemas in the 1920s and 1930s, some in churches and chapels, and quite a few in homes. They also rebuilt many older organs, fitting them with their electric action and modern consoles.

Despite this industriousness, not very many Comptons remain unaltered, un-modernised, and

in their original homes (virtually all their cinema organs have been removed and rebuilt in new homes, the 5-manual in the Odeon, Leicester Square being a notable exception). Hardly any have been so little played that their mechanism, wiring, blower and pipes can readily be restored to “as new” condition. And of these there is possibly not one with the “knee swell” device they fitted to the Fyvie Hall organ. All this makes the 1934 Fyvie Hall Compton a rare and precious survivor, an instrument which typifies its era in:

- (a) musical style,
- (b) high quality of construction,
- (c) high quality of materials,
- (d) ingenuity of mechanism,
- (e) excellence of engineering,
- (f) its compact size.

In addition, the detachable console

with huge multi-plug may be a unique survivor, as may be the knee swell.

Other than some work to the mains electrical supply, nothing has been altered in the organ or console, which remains as a somewhat battered but eminently restorable instrument. The console has not been treated well but the insides of the organ are in remarkably good condition for their age. It would be a delight to hear this organ back in use and one hopes the University will do just that. Meanwhile, when wandering up Regent Street and passing the University’s main building (almost opposite Margaret Street), spare a thought for the venerable Compton slumbering within – or even better, spare a few thousand pounds towards its restoration.



**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)