



William Hill at home

The organ in St James's Church, Spilsby, Lincolnshire

Paul Hale

This will not be a long article, neither is the organ a large one, but it is something of a forgotten gem by one of our leading organ-builders, in the church where he was baptised. Its recent restoration has been a cause of local celebration and the organ itself deserves a heightened national reputation, hence this article.

William Hill (1789–1870) was born and brought up in Spilsby, 12 miles inland from Skegness on the north-east coast of Lincolnshire. Though frequently considered an organ-building contemporary of Henry ('Father') Willis, it is worth noting that Fr Willis was not born until 1821; his father, also called Henry, was born in 1792, three years after William

Hill's birth, and he died two years after William, thus placing Hill in the same generation as Fr Willis's father. There are still Hills in the area around Spilsby: perhaps descended from a branch of William's family?

William Hill became one of this country's most significant organ-builders, working with Thomas Elliott from 1825, whose

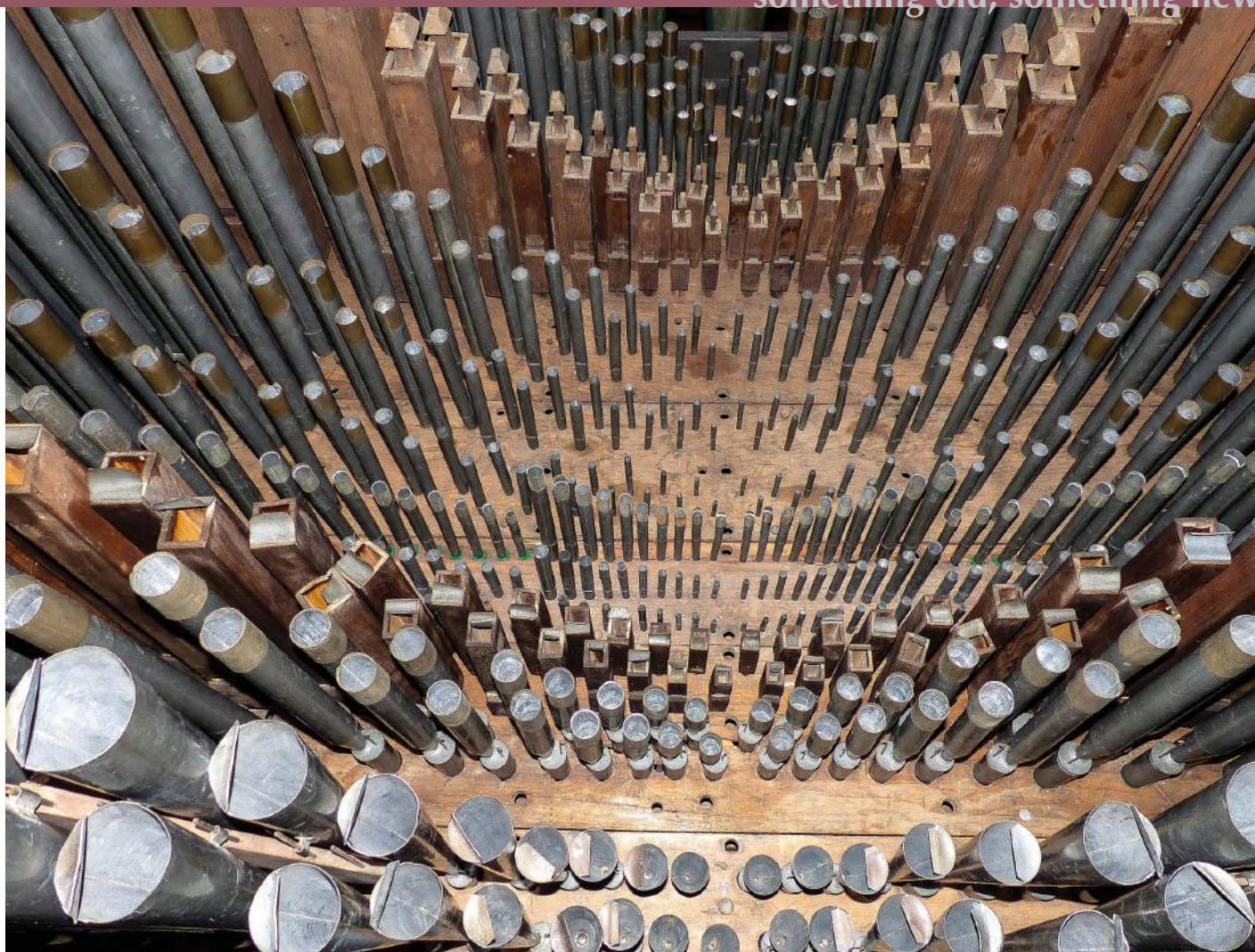


firm (latterly called 'Elliot and Hill') he inherited in 1832, having married Thomas's daughter, Mary, in 1818. He set up in business with Frederick Davison in 1837, though the partnership lasted only one year, as Davison left to join John Gray, who in 1835 had taken on Henry Willis as an articulated apprentice; they founded the successful and busy firm of Gray & Davison.

Only two years after striking out on his own, William was commissioned by his family church, St James's, Spilsby, to make a small organ for their west gallery. It was a one-manual instrument, installed in 1840, a significant year for the young firm as it also built one of its most renowned instruments, that in St Peter's, Cornhill, in the City of London. This was an enormous two-manual of 40 speaking stops and was the first 19th-century British organ made with 8ft C as its bottom note rather than 10²/₃ft G, which had been the norm for many years.

Hill's firm enlarged the Spilsby organ to two manuals (by adding a Swell) in 1866. Among their other numerous contracts that year were organs in the Chapel Royal (St James' Palace) and St Magnus the Martyr, London Bridge. In 1879, following the Victorian rebuilding of the church, the Hill company moved the instrument to its present position on the south side of the chancel, where a spacious area had been provided for it. It is likely that the Great Trumpet was added at that time, on a 'clamp' slide. A Pedal Octave Coupler also appeared; the pedal compass was then only 25 notes (CC-c). In that year also they carried out much significant work elsewhere, such as building a fine

Top left: console
Bottom left: Spilsby case and choir stalls
Top right: Spilsby Great pipework, restored



4-manual organ for All Saints', Leamington Spa.

In 1855 Hill's younger son, Thomas, had joined the firm, taking over the reins in 1870 after William's death. One of William Hill's grandsons, Thomas's son Alfred, died (aged four) in 1860. During the 1879 work at Spilsby a fine stained-glass window was placed in the south nave aisle in their memory, donated by Thomas. The inscription at the base of the window reads: 'To the glory of God and in memory of Wm Hill, born Spilsby Nov 7 1789, died Dec 19 1870, this window is placed by his son Thomas A.D. 1879. Also in memory of Alfred Thorold Hill, son of the last, born May 25 1856, died July 15 1860.' It forms a rare – perhaps unique – stained-glass memorial to an organ-builder; I would be interested to learn if any of our readers know of another.

In 1926 the old mechanical action would have been in need

of restoration. In the event it was replaced by Cousans, Sons & Co. (as they traded from 1890 to 1949), then a busy and well-respected Lincoln firm, which fitted a charge-pneumatic note action to the Great and Swell, refashioning the upper part of the console with angled jambs but keeping the 1866 Hill stop-knobs. A new radiating and concave 30-note pedalboard was fitted and the Pedal Octave Coupler was removed. Octave and Sub Octave couplers were added to the Swell. In 1950 the Cousans firm cleaned the organ, revoiced the reeds (this work probably being undertaken by the renowned W.C. Jones, who fitted loads to many of the tongues), and slightly lowered the pitch. An electric blower (of Cousans manufacture) was added, the original feeders and hand-blowing handle were retained: they are still in place. At some stage the Tierce rank (17th) in the Great Mixture was removed and

the tip holes leathered over.

During the 1950s or early 1960s the organ returned to the Hill firm (by then 'Hill, Norman & Beard') for routine maintenance. In the 1970s the lever swell pedal (the slots for which remain visible on the kneeboard) was replaced by a central balanced swell pedal of HNB design. The organ then came into the care of Aistrup & Hind of Horncastle (Lincs.), possibly through the late Terence Aistrup's connection with HNB, of whom he had been an employee. A long-desired Pedal Bourdon was added by Aistrup & Hind and the pneumatic motors to the external under-actions on each soundboard were releathered.

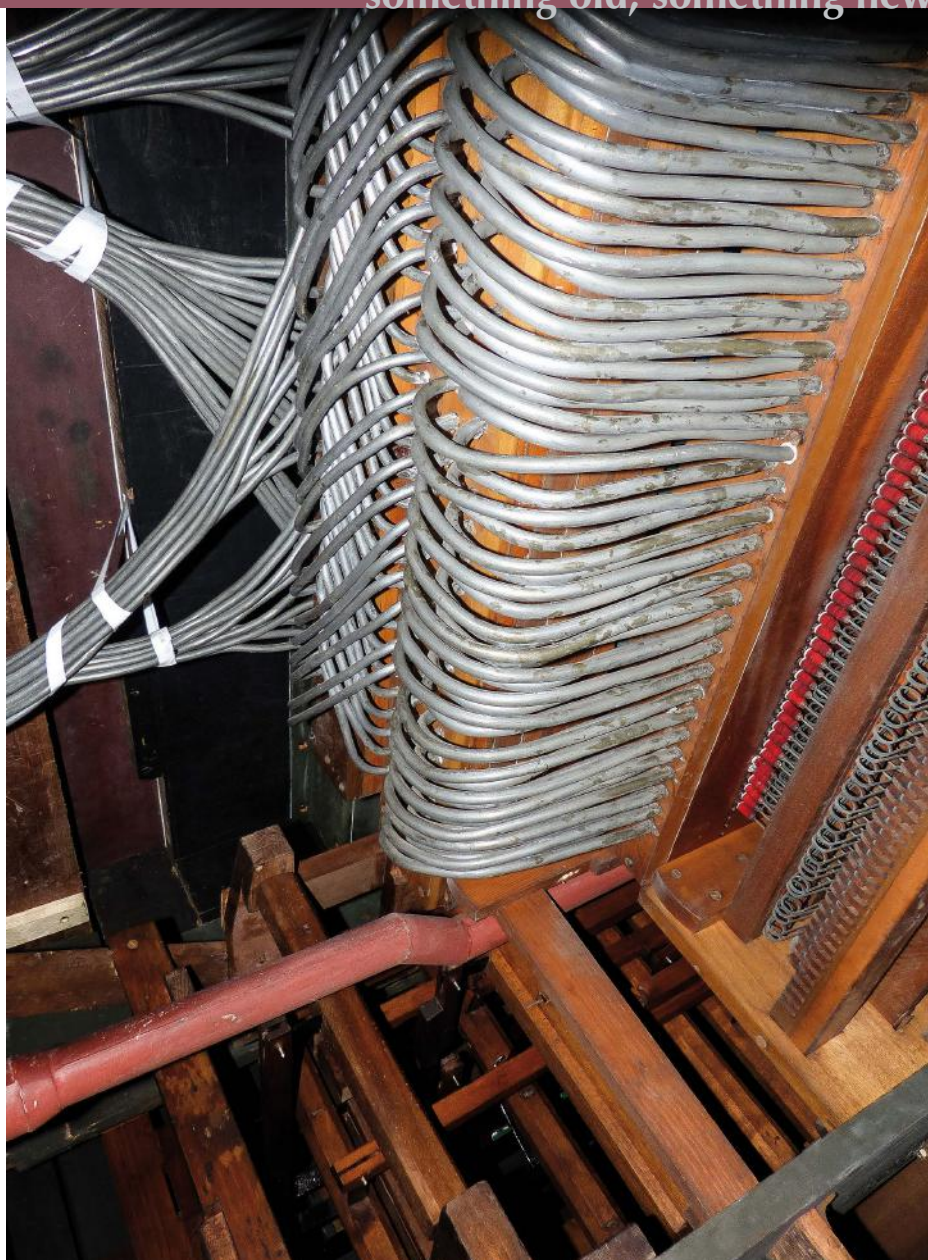
In recent years the instrument became due for a complete restoration along conservation lines. A generous bequest by a previous organist provided the funds and the work was carried out during 2016/17 by Chris Hind and colleagues. It was decided to



Specification

PEDAL ORGAN		SWELL ORGAN	
1	Open Diapason	16	14 Lieblich Bourdon
2	Bourdon	8	15 Open Diapason
	Great to Pedal	8	16 Stopped Diapason
	Swell to Pedal	4	17 Principal
GREAT ORGAN		2	18 Piccolo
3	Open Diapason	II	19 Mixture 19.22
4	Stopped Diapason Treble	8	20 Horn
5	Stopped Diapason Bass	8	21 Oboe
6	Dulciana (t.c.)	4	22 Clarion
7	Principal		Tremulant
8	Wald Flute		Octave
9	Twelfth		Sub Octave
10	Fifteenth		
11	Mixture 17.19.22		3 composition pedals to the Great
12	Clarinet (t.c.)		3 composition pedals to the Swell
13	Trumpet		Balanced swell pedal
	Swell to Great		KC blower

reinstate the Tierce rank in the Great Mixture, which has revitalised the chorus to a marked extent. The reservoir has been releathered, the responsive and beautifully-made Cousans tubular-pneumatic key action has been retained and restored, new lead tubing replacing swathes of red plastic tubing previously introduced. The soundboards have received a top overhaul, the mechanical action has been completely refurbished, the reeds have been restored by Goetze & Gwynn, the blower has been rebuilt, the swell box and its mechanism repaired, the Open Wood been fitted with better tuning shades, the console cleaned and restored, the side panelling remade, and a very dirty organ completely cleaned, from top to bottom.



The result is a truly delightful instrument, with an excellent (pneumatic) key action and warm, clear voicing which projects well into the spacious church. A fine Diapason chorus, attractive and varied flutes, prompt and well-balanced reeds – it's all there.

So, when next you plan a visit to sunny Skegness, do contact the friendly folk at St James's Spilsby.

Have a look at the Hill memorial window and enjoy some time on this delightful instrument, a worthy testimonial to the skill of Spilsby-born William Hill, and indeed to the diligence of Chris Hind, who has so scrupulously restored it.

Top left: Spilsby Swell pipework restored

Left: nameplate

Middle: Spilsby Swell reeds and shutters restored

Top right: Spilsby keyactions behind the console



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