

Dennis Thurlow – master voicer

Paul Hale

So many great organ craftsmen remain anonymous – like Sir Christopher Wren, their monument is their work. Famous heads of firms, such as Father Willis, William Hill, J.J. Binns, Arthur Harrison, Henry Willis III, John Compton, Noel Mander, John Norman, Peter Collins, Kenneth Tickell and William Drake became known as individuals, closely connected with their renowned instruments. But what of the men (and occasionally women) behind the scenes who actually did – and do – most of the work? They remain in the shadows. The occasional exception is the outstanding artist whose skill with pipes brings his name into the public domain. Among the voicers who became household names in the British organ world, the two most prominent were W.C. Jones and Dennis Thurlow – working in styles poles apart and yet, interestingly, coming together after Jones's death, as we shall see. The subject of this article is the late, great, Dennis Thurlow, whose fame was established in the heady days of J.W. Walker's huge output in the late 1950s and 1960s, his voicing and scaling being influenced by Ralph Downes. His reputation was later consolidated as co-owner and Tonal Director of Nicholson & Co. for the second half of his working life. Dennis died on 12 October 2018, aged 90, and more than deserves an article in celebration of his work.

Dennis Thurlow, born in 1928, was an apprentice at J.W. Walker & Sons in the early days of World War 2. He was trained by the Walker voicer, Fred Eagle, and was soon out tuning organs such as St George's Chapel Windsor (then a Walker/



Rothwell with two consoles), St Margaret's Westminster, and the many Christian Scientist churches around London which had Walker organs. Called up for National Service in 1945, Dennis spent three years in the army and, based at Lübeck in Germany, tuned several organs there, where he learnt much about North German tonal production, including the use of un-nicked, open foot pipes. On returning to Walkers in 1948 he was soon involved with voicers Walter Goodey, Cecil Way and Arthur Jones in the tonal finishing of some significant and increasingly progressive organs, such as St Gabriel's Cricklewood (for Geraint Jones, 1949), and St Mary's University Church in Oxford (for John Webster, also 1949). Webster commissioned a rebuild by Walker for his college – University College – where Dennis began to refine his

early attempts at low-pressure 'neo-Baroque' voicing, in 1955. He worked closely with Ralph Downes on the organ of the London (Brompton) Oratory (1952–4) and the organ in Buckfast Abbey (1952–61) and for ever afterward declared just how much he owed to Downes. Downes had a similar respect for Thurlow, who was one of the dedicatees of Downes' fascinating book *Baroque Tricks* (Positif Press, 1983).

The company's work in Dennis' years with J.W. Walker varied from the traditionally smooth romantic to the neo-baroque, giving Dennis the most complete training imaginable as a flue voicer (he did less work with reeds). The organs he considered the most important and successful of those on which he worked were York Minster (1960), Ampleforth Abbey (1961), Whitworth Hall (Manchester University, 1963), Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral (1967), All Saint's Clifton (Bristol, 1967), Paisley Abbey (1968) and Blackburn Cathedral (1969). A long list of significant smaller Walker organs (new or rebuilds) with the 'Thurlow sound' could be made, and every *OR* reader will probably have come across one of them.

In addition to all this, Walter Goodey and Dennis totally transformed the tonal character of Walker's range of small extension organs – the Walker *Positif*, turning them from dull but worthy little instruments into bright and vivacious organs which happily found a place in dozens of new churches – many of them Roman Catholic.

Kenneth Shenton, writing about the Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral installation, has this tale



to tell:

The then Cathedral Organist, Terence Duffy, vividly remembers Dennis Thurlow working away, clad in his overcoat, all wrapped up in a huge polythene bag to offset the extreme cold, as many of the windows were not yet in place. In addition, the Doberman guard dogs, upset by the strange noises emanating from the instrument, howled like the hounds of the Baskervilles. Working late one night, Thurlow got the fright of his life when coming across a white-clad ghostly figure, in reality the Sister Sacristan.

Leaving Walkers in the early 1970s Dennis set himself up as a voicer/organ-builder, recording engineer (he had long been a member of Ruislip Gramophone Society and now set up Radnor Recordings) and designer of solid-state systems, based at the new Pennells & Sharpe factory at Brandon, next door to where J.W. Walker then moved when bought by Robert Pennells. As a freelance voicer Dennis had helped complete the huge Laycock & Bannister rebuild at Bridlington Priory (where he married the organist's daughter!), the Nicholson rebuild at St Edmundsbury Cathedral, and the large Cousans rebuild at Grantham parish church. His independence

did not last long, for in 1974 he and Raymond Todd (a Rushworth & Dreaper-trained organ-builder of 27-years' experience who had later worked for Walker and HNB) bought out the long-established organ-builders Laycock & Bannister, of Keighley. Later in 1974, Stanley Lambert, the owner of Nicholson & Co, offered them his firm, as he wished to retire. Nicholson & Co. was thus acquired and remained Dennis' base for the rest of his working life – from 1974 to 1998. In 1978 Cousans of Lincoln also came under the Thurlow / Todd umbrella following the sudden death of its then owner, J.A. Robinson, a former Harrison & Harrison man.

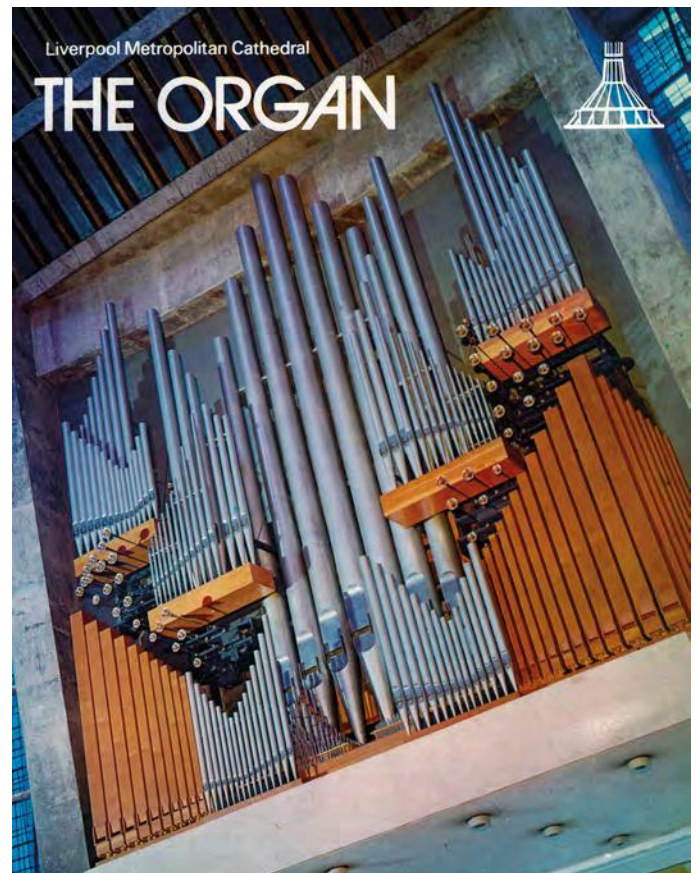
Dennis brought W.C. Jones' former apprentice, Arthur Jones, who had become a leading reed voicer at Walkers, into the fold and initially settled

him at Lincoln to run Cousans and voice reeds. Later moving to Malvern (where he lived in a caravan) Arthur Jones was very proud of using W.C. Jones's tools and his voicing machine, set up in the reed voicing room at Nicholson & Co. Arthur's last work there was voicing the reeds for the new Southwell Minster organ in 1993.

Dennis brought Guy Russell (another Walker-trained voicer) into the firm and the two of them worked together until Dennis' partial retirement in 1998. Guy recalls working in his first year (1967) as a Walker apprentice with Dennis Thurlow and Ralph Downes at Trinity College, Dublin:

I arrived a day late due to thick fog in Dublin. I entered the chapel with some trepidation but both Dennis and Mr Downes were fine about things and seemed almost pleased to see me! The job went well. I found that I could assist in many ways even though I was only a very green apprentice.

It is well recorded that Mr Downes could be hard going to work with and would quite often



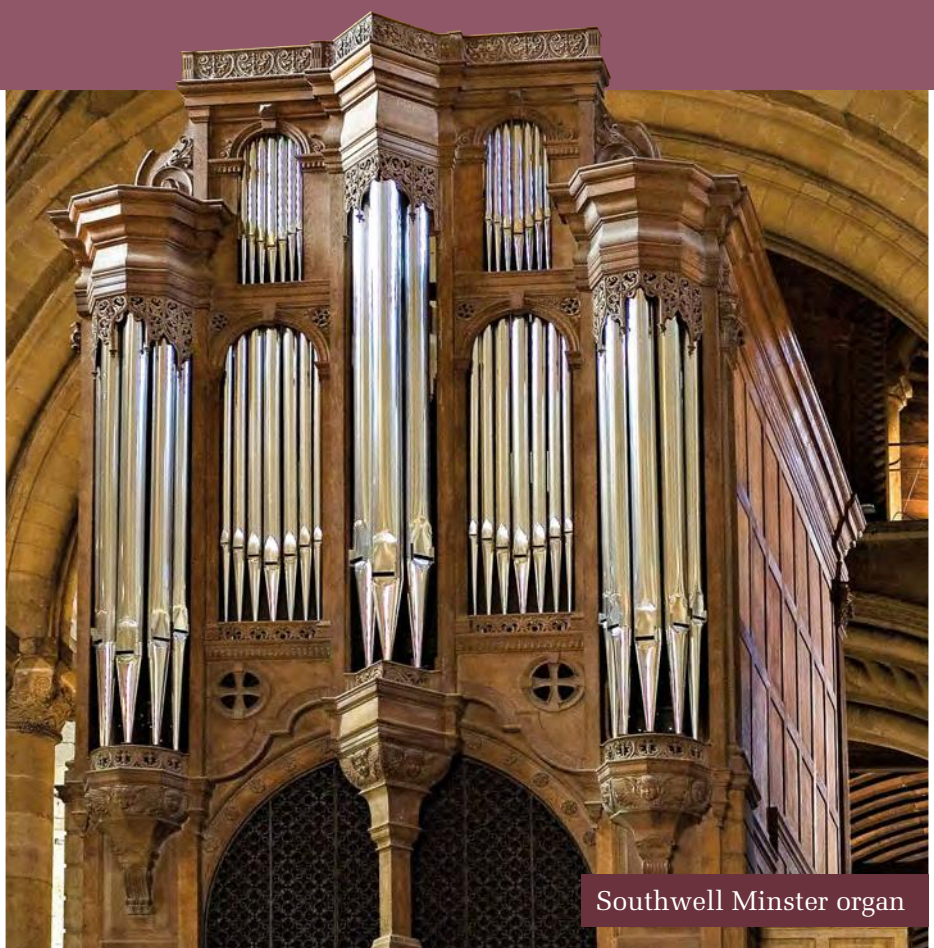
change his mind about things and fiddle to the nth degree. I was in the job with Dennis when Downes wanted us to tweak some pipework which to my ears sounded fine and Dennis was very pleased with. DFT (as he was often known), although very friendly with Mr Downes, was starting to lose patience. I was passing the pipes from the soundboard to Dennis who did what was required, handed them back and I reinserted them.

Dennis gave me one of his impish smiles, winked and whispered 'watch this'. From then on, every pipe that I handed to him was gently tapped a few times on the side of the foot with his chisel and reinserted. When they had all been 'adjusted' Ralph Downes thought they were marvellous and praised Dennis to the hilt for his skill.

Working with Dennis was not always sweetness and light. Guy recalls one character-building event before starting full-time at Nicholson's:

I worked as a sub-contractor under Dennis on a few jobs. He had quite a reputation for losing his temper although I only suffered this once. I was in Glasgow [Wellington Parish Church, 1977] doing the finishing for Nicholson. He would come for a few days then disappear for a few. Although all was going well he decided to shout and bawl at me in front of the organist (one of his less attractive traits, normally reserved for apprentices). I just kept my cool, packed my tools and said goodbye to the lady organist. In a matter of seconds Dennis had calmed down and apologised. He even made me a cup of tea! We never had a bad word after that and he was to become a good friend and colleague.

At Nicholson's, Thurlow & Todd modernised the firm by introducing some of the structural and tonal characteristics they had been used to at J.W. Walker. For a time, Kenneth Jones was also a Director, in charge



Southwell Minster organ

of design (whilst establishing his own distinguished company in Ireland from 1973) and Jeffrey Heard moved from Walkers to head up their electrical department. Dennis' tonal style was, though still rooted in the neo-classical, much broader than that – 'he can do anything with a pipe' was often said about him, and rightly so. His habit with old pipes was generally to brighten them up and louden them, and as he didn't like open flutes, he would often replace them with stopped ranks. Big, bright Mixtures were a trademark, as were fluty but quite lean cornets *décomposées* on his Positives, based on a huge-scale metal Gedackt. A striking example of the Thurlow Nicholson style of the late 1970s is the large double organ the firm built in 1979–80 to Andrew Fletcher's tonal design in St Mary's Collegiate Church, Warwick, strongly influenced by the 1968 Grant, Degens & Bradbeer in the chapel of New College, Oxford, on which Fletcher had played his Finals recital.

In addition to his classical leanings, Thurlow loved the occasional grand 'romantic' expression of his style and revelled in the major 1987 rebuild at the Birmingham Oratory (an organ

which has delighted many) and in 1981 at Newcastle Cathedral (an organ which has delighted rather fewer). Guy Russell notes:

Dennis had started to realise that the 'neo-baroque' style of organ was not always the most suitable tonal concept for Anglican worship. Styles were changing and so was DFT. Gradually the style of Nicholson voicing evolved into a bright English tonality. He still had his moments and one of his usual questions was 'Won't the mixtures go any louder?' I learned a lot from Dennis, not just about voicing per se, but tonal concept and balances between stops and departments within the organ. He was always happy to pass on his thoughts and occasionally asked my opinion on tonal matters. He knew that we had similar tonal thoughts and would often just let me get on with things which was rather a compliment, in a roundabout way.

Despite his penchant for revoicing, Dennis Thurlow always recognised when things needed to be 'left alone' which is why the Nicholson firm is also celebrated for numerous scrupulous restoration/conservation projects on organs large and small. In

his book *Pipes & Actions* (Lincoln, 1995), Laurence Elvin highlights Dennis' enthusiasm when restoring in 1984 the 1878 Forster & Andrews 4-manual in West Bromwich Town Hall. There, he discovered that Schulze's former voicer Vogel had been responsible for the pipe scales and mouths (wide ones!) which Dennis noted were the same as in the famous Schulze in Doncaster parish church (now 'Minster'), on which Dennis had worked for Walkers in 1960. Not a pipe was altered!

It was well-known that before J.W. Walker & Sons closed their operation in Ruislip and were bought up by Robert Pennells, the Directors enjoyed the use of fast luxurious company cars. This penchant remained with Dennis and with Raymond Todd at Nicholsons, as Guy Russell can attest:

For a time both Dennis and Raymond Todd had stupidly fast cars made by Lancia. Dennis loved to scare people with his driving. His favourite trick was to pretend to fall asleep while doing a hundred plus on the motorway. I was tipped off about this beforehand and he tried it twice with me before realising that he was wasting his time. Once Dennis took a Nicholson director, Bob Kitchener, to an inspection in Birmingham. Apparently, he did all he could to scare Bob, but with little of the desired effect. When they had completed the job, Bob asked to drive the car back to Malvern. He drove quite sedately down the motorway and when they came to the roundabout at the then end of the M5 Bob drove around

it the wrong way on purpose. Dennis never again drove badly with Bob in the car!

Many people will have their own memories of working with Dennis Thurlow, among them Dr Roy Massey, who undertook projects with him for three decades. Roy recalls the occasional telephone call from Dennis – deep in the bowels of an organ – when regulating a stop that he felt had come up really well; Birmingham Oratory and Ludlow parish church, for example. 'Just listen to this, Roy', Dennis would say, before sounding a pipe or two down the phone. He also recalls Dennis' famous 19.22.26.29 *Plein Jeu* Mixtures transforming such organs as St Augustine's Edgbaston, and remembers how many charming little country parish churches in the diocese of Hereford were nicely restored and refreshed by Nicholsons during the 1970s and 1980s – even if Dennis did at the time have a penchant for stripping organ cases back to the bare pine (as at Bishop's Frome in 1976 and Bromyard in 1978).

Dr Massey writes:

My last association with Dennis was in 1993 when he created a new organ for Lugwardine Parish Church in Herefordshire to a multum in parvo specification I had thought-up while mowing the lawn one evening. Our collaboration was great fun and he produced a little masterpiece with a lovely case, a tracker action to die for and a bright ensemble which filled a rather dull building with cheerful music. In later years this organ has become known and loved by many as it is used extensively as a teaching and practice instrument for the Diocese of Hereford Organists' Training Scheme. I also had the great privilege of playing the opening recitals on Dennis's major rebuilds at the Birmingham Oratory, Stratford-on-Avon Parish Church, Solihull Parish Church, Ludlow Parish Church and Birmingham Cathedral. I



Lugwardine Parish Church

also opened his new instruments at St Mary's, Warwick and Southwell Minster where he created two masterpieces, though very different from each other. The firm of Nicholson had been loved and well respected in the Midlands for generations, but under Thurlow and Todd it achieved progress towards real greatness in the higher echelons of British organ building, a process which has continued with conspicuous success to the present day.

As a boy at Solihull School in the 1960s, I had been brought up with a Stanley Lambert era Nicholson. I first worked with the firm under Dennis and Raymond Todd in 1981 on the Nicholson rebuilding of the Willis/Hill at Cranbrook parish church in Kent, where Dennis's tonal work transformed what had become a disappointingly dull instrument into something of colour, vivacity and projection. Two years earlier the contract for rebuilding the fine Binns in Tonbridge School Chapel had not been awarded to Nicholson & Co. (it went to Noel Mander) because Dennis appeared to have no empathy for Binns and wished to revoice completely all the flues – even changing many of the languids. This was a side of Dennis which worried conservationists: he was definitely an interventionist who would not baulk at revoicing any pipe that came his way if he felt it needed it. That generally involved sharpening the upper lip to an acute angle and opening-up the foot-hole. The latter is reversible, but the former is not – more cautious voicers would not have chosen this route, but probably produced less characterful organs!

He worked real magic on two cathedral projects in which I was involved – the complete rebuilding of St Philip's Cathedral organ, Birmingham, in 1992 and the scaling and voicing of the new Nicholson organ in Southwell Cathedral in 1995/6 (along with Guy Russell). St Philip's was reorganised so that the Great and Solo speak down the nave,



Paul Hale, Roy Massey, Marcus Huxley and Dennis Thurlow at the re-opening of the organ in St Philip's Cathedral, Birmingham, in 1993.

the Choir across the chancel and the Swell in both directions, and the tonal scheme was improved. Dennis managed once more to make a fine but somewhat dull instrument into something far more interesting and effective but without losing the very real charm of the Schwarbrick/G.P. England pipework, nor altering the fabulous W.C. Jones voicing of the Solo Organ.

Quite a different task awaited him at Southwell where a new organ was built, though using as its basis some fine Nicholson choruses and flutes from the 1868 organ formerly in St Peter's, Malvern Wells. He based the tone of the organ on these ranks (which was the concept for the instrument) and, with Guy Russell, scaled/voiced all the new stops to complement and extend this sound. The organ is enormously successful and as versatile as any 51-stop instrument could possibly be.

One tale concerning this organ illustrates Dennis' passion to get things 'right' and also to please the client: the Mounted Cornet V, once installed, voiced and regulated, turned out to have been made to the wrong scales and was far too small-scaled and Diapason-like. Nothing daunted, Dennis started cutting down the bottom notes (tenor C) until they reached the tone I had

envisaged – this transposed the C pipes up to F! The entire stop and its 'mounting block' was sent back to the works for cutting down, re-racking and a new 20 bottom notes were made. It ended up a wonderful stop, thanks to Dennis accepting that things weren't right and needed to be.

A sufferer of type-2 diabetes for many years, Dennis drove himself hard and generally ignored doctors' orders. The outcome was a gradual loss of vision in his final two decades, which he bore with fortitude. Nonetheless he lived contentedly into his ninety-first year.

Let the final word belong to another of Dennis's Walker apprentices, Keith Bance, who became a renowned voicer himself, recently retired:

I owe everything voicing-wise to Dennis (and reed voicer Arthur Jones). He was known throughout the trade for his style and sound. A well-known organ adviser once said to me 'I don't want a Dennis Thurlow mixture!' This said everything to me. His un-nicked, open foot voicing was unique.