

# THE BINNS ORGAN OF TONBRIDGE SCHOOL CHAPEL

Paul Hale

I signed off my previous article by lamenting the demise of Mander Organs. Only a couple of weeks after publication came the welcome and completely unexpected news that F.H. Browne & Sons (Organ Builders) Ltd had bought the trading name and intellectual property rights of Mander Organs Ltd, and that they would be trading as Mander Organs from 1 October. We await a bright future for the company and wish them well.

As it happens, my article in this issue also involves a Mander organ, though writing it was triggered by a less happy event – the sudden and complete destruction by fire of the historic organ in Nantes Cathedral. This catastrophe brought vividly back to my mind the similar fate suffered by the wonderful instrument – now largely forgotten – in Tonbridge School Chapel in Kent, where I held my first post after Oxford, as Assistant Director of Music. This is its story.

Tonbridge School is a large (mainly boarding) independent school for boys, founded in 1553 by Sir Andrew Judde, a member of the Worshipful Company of Skinners, which has managed its affairs ever since. When Dr Herbert Brewer left the Tonbridge staff in 1898 to become Organist & Master of the Choristers at Gloucester Cathedral, H.C. Stewart (later Organist & *Informator Choristarum* at Magdalen College, Oxford) was appointed Music Master & Organist in his stead. The first scheme for an organ in the Chapel (a fine building holding 600, consecrated in 1904, finished in 1909) was produced by Stewart and sent to the School Governors at Skinners' Hall, where

it seems largely to have been ignored.

Eventually Sir George Martin (1844–1916) was invited to become Adviser. A highly respected musician, Martin was born in 1844, becoming Master of the Choristers at St Paul's Cathedral in 1875, Sub-Organist in 1876 and finally Organist and Director of Music in 1888. On 31 March 1909 Sir George submitted his proposed specification. He recommended that four companies be approached to compete: J.W. Walker & Son, Lewis & Co., Harrison & Harrison, Norman & Beard, commenting that 'the last firm I have found to be very reasonable considering the excellent quality of their work.' Here is Martin's specification:

## GREAT ORGAN CC TO C (61 NOTES)

Double Open Diapason	16	metal
Open Diapason (large)	8	metal
Open Diapason (medium)	8	metal
Claribel Flute	8	wood
Principal	4	metal
Hohl Flöte	4	wood
Twelfth	2½	metal
Fifteenth	2	metal
Tromba	8	metal
(heavy pressure, harmonic trebles)		

## SWELL ORGAN CC TO C (61 NOTES)

Contra Gamba	16	wood & metal
Open Diapason	8	wood & metal
Rohr Flöte	8	wood & metal
Echo Gamba	8	metal
Voix Celeste	8	metal
Gemshorn	4	metal
Mixture 15.19.22	III	metal
Cornopean	8	metal
(heavy pressure, harmonic trebles)		
Oboe	8	metal
Tremulant		

## CHOIR ORGAN CC TO C. (61 NOTES) (to be enclosed in a separate swell box)

Gamba	8	metal
Lieblich Gedact	8	wood & metal
Dulciana	8	metal
Flauto Traverso	4	metal
Piccolo	2	metal
Clarinet	8	metal

## PEDAL ORGAN CCTO G. (32 NOTES)

Open Diapason	16	wood
Violone (1–24, Gt 16ft)	16	metal
Bourdon	16	wood
Octave (ext 16ft)	8	wood
Bass Flute (ext 16ft)	8	wood
Ophecleide [sic]	16	metal
(heavy pressure. Prepared for)		

## COUPLERS

Swell Octave (pneumatic)	
Swell Sub Octave (pneumatic)	
Swell Unison Off (pneumatic)	
Swell to Great (pneumatic)	
Choir to Great (pneumatic)	
Swell to Choir (pneumatic)	
Great to Pedal (mechanical)	
Swell to Pedal (mechanical)	
Choir to Pedal (mechanical)	

## ACCESSORIES

4 thumb pistons to Great	
4 thumb pistons to Swell	
3 thumb pistons to Choir	
4 composition pedals to Pedal Organ	
4 composition pedals to Swell (duplicate of thumb pistons)	
1 reversible pedal for Great to Pedal	
1 stop connecting Great Pistons to Pedal Combinations	
"Swell Pedal & Choir Pedal not balanced" [later deleted]	

Estimates were duly obtained from the organ builders named by Sir George, and also from the builder of the organ at the Northampton (Polytechnic) Institute. This builder was James Jepson Binns of Bramley, Leeds. Messrs Walker estimated £1,950, Harrison & Harrison £1,500, Lewis & Co. £1,370, Norman & Beard £1,235, and Binns £1,075. Martin wrote to the school Governors (The Skinners' Company): 'It will, I am sure, be clear to your committee that it is impossible to expect Binns to build as good an organ for £1,075 as Walker does for £1,950, so the question is whether Binns can build an organ sufficiently good for the purpose required. Unfortunately, I had no personal experience of Binns' work – at the same time, many friends of mine occupying important musical positions speak

most highly of his work. Since receiving these estimates, I have been to the Northampton Institute and carefully examined the Binns organ there, as I knew it was considered a fair specimen of the work of this firm. I am happy to say that the instrument responded admirably to all the tests I applied to it. Therefore, notwithstanding the smallness of the price named by Mr Binns, I am able to say that he can build an organ which will satisfy all your requirements at the Tonbridge School, and I think you can safely accept his estimate.'

On 12 June the Governors accepted Binns' tender and an estimate of £110 for the blowing apparatus, which was at first an electric motor working the feeders through crank gear. William Campbell-Jones (1862–1951 – the architect of the Chapel) was to design an organ case; the cabinet work was carried out by Mr J.P. White for £650. The organ was quickly built, being ready in the Spring of 1909, at which time a tuning contract (for £8 per annum) was entered into with Binns.

The organ was built exactly to Martin's specification. So closely did Binns adhere to it that he had to provide two tremulants to the Swell – one to the low wind and one to the heavy, so that the Cornopean would be affected. A tremulant was also applied to the Choir organ. 'Swell to Great' drew in octave and sub octave pitches as well as at the unison (standard Binns practice), and three thumb pistons on each department were adjustable by setter knobs placed at the top of each jamb. The Pedal composition pedals and Great pistons were permanently coupled, and the swell pedals balanced. Sir George, in correspondence, made an explicit demand for a sound wind supply; this was met by having in addition to two break-down reservoirs in the blowing chamber, two main reservoirs in the organ and reservoirs to each of the Great flues, Swell flues, Choir, Swell Cornopean, and Great &

Pedal reeds. All nine were large double-rise reservoirs and took up virtually the whole of the space below the soundboards. Binns deviated from the specification in two respects – all pipework from 4ft C up was of plain metal, not spotted, and the Swell Rohr Flöte had un-pierced cork stoppers and was therefore merely a Gedeckt. He was not going to vary his normal practice – even for Sir George Martin.

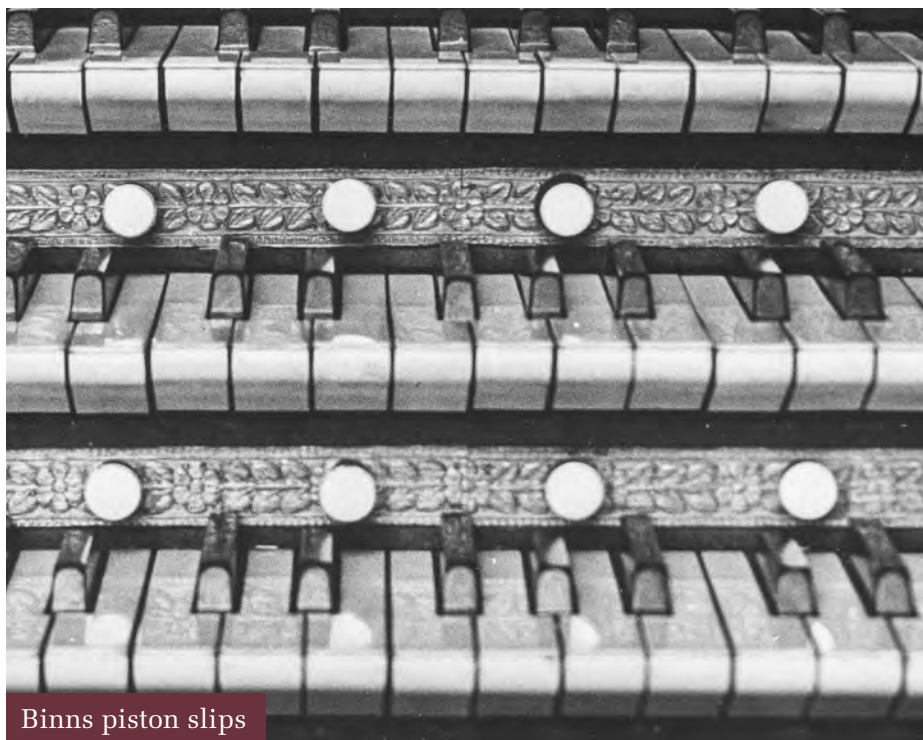
In his book *The Modern British Organ* (1947), Noel Bonavia-Hunt makes several interesting observations about Binns. In the chapter on 'The Diapason' he has a section concerning the influence on English organ building of the renowned German organ builder Edmund Schulze. Several highly influential organs by Schulze were imported in Binns' youth and he, along with many north-country organ builders and T.C. Lewis, set out to emulate the bright ringing Diapasons and clear Germanic flutes. Bonavia-Hunt, a noted authority, states:

*Binns produced some very fine Diapasons [in the Schulze style] in a large number of his organs, examples of which may be*

*found untouched in the School Chapel at Tonbridge, at the Albert Hall, Nottingham, and at Rochdale Town Hall.*

In a later chapter about console mechanism we read the following:

*The adjustable piston was popularised by J.J. Binns about half a century ago when he introduced his "patent interchangeable combinations" into his organs. The drawstops were actuated by large pneumatic motors which worked mechanical fans, and the fans in turn made contact with blocks which were attached to the stop-rods. In place of these blocks Mr Binns substituted specially shaped cams pivoted to the stop-rods: these cams formed the basic principle of his interchangeable piston mechanism. By means of "locking stop-knobs" [the Tonbridge organ was equipped with nine of which] he was able to shift the cams over to such a position on the draw-rod as would enable the fan to engage them or prevent the fan from engaging them as required. I remember how struck I was with the cleverness of this*



Binns piston slips

*device when I examined for the first time his arrangement of the combination pistons at All Saints' St John's Wood.*

The instrument was to have a somewhat eventful life, due to an occasionally leaky chapel roof, the desiccating effect of the chapel heating, and the desire of each subsequent Director of Music for improvement or enlargement.

One incident in 1925 is worth recording. Wanting the organ tuned for the unveiling of the War Memorial in the Ante-Chapel on 10 October, Mr R.H. Kay (the then Director of Music) wrote to Binns. The organ builder explained in his

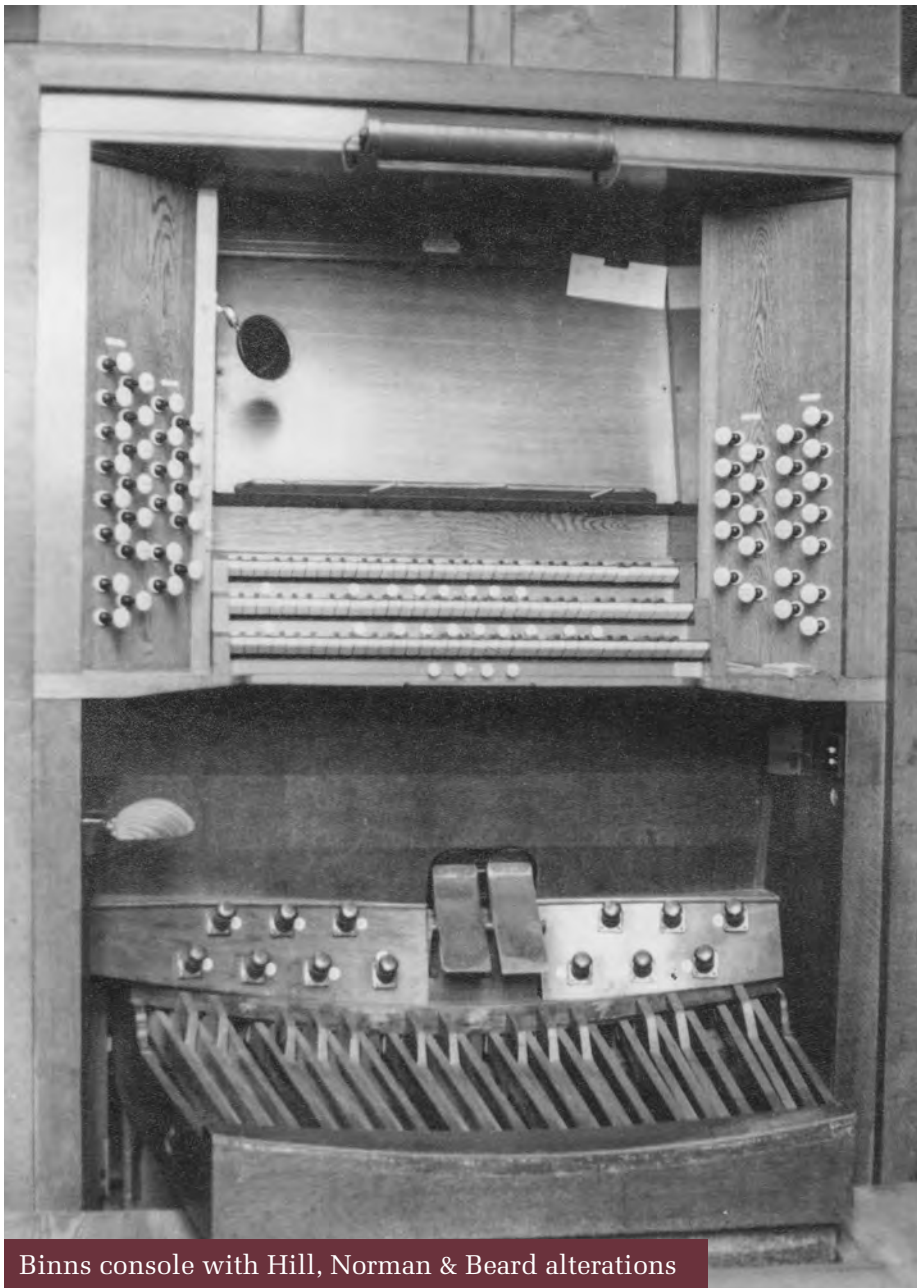
letter of reply (sent to the Governors on 6 October) that as a result of an 'unfortunate stoppage of work throughout the whole organ building industry' he was unable to guarantee a visit. The cause of the strike was predictable (and doubtless timely); Binns continues:

*'The Organ Builders' Union asked for increase in wages, expenses, shorter hours, etc., to such an extent that the Masters' Federation [of Organ Builders] found it utterly impossible to grant.'*

On 22 February 1927 we find Mr Kay writing to the Governors requesting the addition of the Pedal

reed. He states that both Dr Alcock (of Salisbury Cathedral) and Dr C.B. Rootham (Organist of St John's College, Cambridge), 'after playing in the Chapel recently, expressed their opinion that the tonal balance of the organ suffers considerably by the absence of a pedal reed.' Estimates were obtained from Binns—including an abortive one for a 3 rank Dulciana Mixture. The work was ordered (29 July 1927), the cost being £167 for a Pedal 16ft Ophicleide and an 8ft Tromba extension, and £220 for the Tuba (which included an additional building-frame, soundboard, reservoir and action-work). The Tuba reservoir was fed straight from the main wind supply but although this could only provide a pressure of about 7 inches, it proved adequate.

In 1932, by which time the tuning contract had passed to Henry Willis & Sons, the leatherwork in the pneumatic action was largely replaced, along with the concertina trunks which connected the reservoir tops with the underneath of the soundboards (always a weak point in Binns' organs). In 1952 (by which time Hill, Norman & Beard were the tuners) an estimate was prepared by HN&B for the following work: the addition of 16ft Double Trumpet, 4ft Clarion and 2ft Fifteenth to the Swell, the addition of a 16ft Echo Bourdon to the Pedal and the replacing of the piston action with a new pneumatic action. The new Swell Fifteenth was to be placed on the Contra Gamba slide, and the stopped wood bottom octave of this stop was to form the basis of the Pedal Echo Bourdon (which rank was placed horizontally outside the organ on the floor of the north side of the organ loft). The new Swell reeds were to stand on a new chest ('Roosevelt' pattern) at the back of the box, which was to be extended to contain them. There were to be six pistons to the Swell, six to the Great, four to the Choir and three reversibles. This work was to cost £1,835, a new Discus blower adding a further £312 and sundry soundboard and action repairs £39.5s. The enlarged organ was opened in the Autumn of 1953 in a recital by Dr George Thalben-Ball.



Binns console with Hill, Norman & Beard alterations



4846 Tonbridge School Chapel Interior

Six years later, in April 1959, an estimate for £2,585 was drawn up by HN&B which included moving the console to the gallery edge, electrifying the key action up to the underactions, making some tonal changes and doing any necessary re-leathering. The stop and combination actions were to remain tubular pneumatic. The proposals were shown to Sir William McKie, Organist of Westminster Abbey, who in general approved of them. A final estimate was obtained, and the work put in hand during the summer holidays of 1960. The Great Organ was rebalanced by enlarging the scale of the Principal, Twelfth and Fifteenth by three notes, and replacing all but the top octave of the 4ft Hohl Flöte by a new stopped metal flute. The Pedal Organ received extensions of the Violone at 8ft, 4ft and 2ft pitch, with the 8ft octave being derived from the Great Open Diapason (Medium) case pipes. The Swell 16ft Double Trumpet was derived to the Pedal and the 8ft extension of the Open Wood was disconnected, the Pedal 8ft Octave stop being effectively discarded. The Swell strings and the Choir Dulciana were revoiced. A humidifier was added in 1965.

In 1966 there was some cleaning and restoration work and some minor tonal changes were made. Although there was deemed to be no room for a Great Mixture, the Great Open Diapason (Large) was removed in favour of a new 1 3/5 Tierce and the Choir Dulciana was cut down

into a Nazard 2 2/3. The specification of the organ when this work was completed was:

GREAT ORGAN	
Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason (medium)	8
Claribel Flute	8
Principal	4
Stopped Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Tromba	8

SWELL ORGAN	
Open Diapason	8
Rohr Flöte	8
Echo Gamba	8
Voix Celeste	8
Gemshorn	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 15.19.22	III
Double Trumpet	16
Cornopean	8
Oboe	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	

CHOIR ORGAN (ENCLOSED EXCEPT TUBA)	
Gamba	8
Lieblich Gedact	8
Flauto Traverso	4
Nazard	2 2/3
Piccolo	2
Clarinet	8
Tremulant	
Tuba	8

PEDAL ORGAN CC TO G. (32 NOTES)	
Open Diapason	16
Violone (1-24, Gt 16ft)	16
Bourdon	16
Subbass	16
Principal (ext Violone)	8
Bass Flute (ext Bourdon)	8
Fifteenth (ext Principal)	4
Octavin (ext Fifteenth)	4
Ophicleide	16
Double Trumpet (Swell)	16
Tromba (ext Ophicleide)	8

During the second part of the 1970s it became quite clear that despite the partial renovations undertaken in 1953 and 1963, the instrument would soon need a complete rebuild

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GREAT ORGAN (11 STOPS) FLUES 3½ INS, REEDS 6¾ INS PRESSURE				
1	Double Open Diapason	16	1909	bottom 24 in east case, top 37 on Mander chest
2	Open Diapason	8	1909, 1980	rescaled three notes larger by Mander
3	Claribel Flute	8	1909	stopped bass octave
4	Principal	4	1909, 1960	rescaled three notes larger by HNB
5	Stopped Flute	4	1909, 1960	HNB, replacing Hohl Flöte except for top octave
6	Twelfth	2½	1909, 1960	rescaled three notes larger by HNB
7	Fifteenth	2	1909, 1960	rescaled three notes larger by HNB
8	Tierce	1¾	1969, 1980	HNB, revoiced by Mander
9	Fourmixture IV–VI ranks Tremulant	1½	1980	Mander, on old Double Open Diapason slide
			1909, 1980	old Swell heavy wind tremulant
10	Trumpet	8	1909	revoiced by Mander
11	Clarion	4	1909, 1980	extension of no.10, new spotted metal top octave
	Choir to Great			
	Swell to Great			
SWELL ORGAN (11 STOPS) FLUES & OBOE 3½ INS, OTHER REEDS 6½ INS PRESSURE				
12	Open Diapason	8	1909	open wood bass octave
13	Rohr Flute	8	1909	wooden bass octave, cork stoppered metal treble
14	Echo Gamba	8	1909	revoiced less keen 1960
15	Voix Celeste (tenor C)	8	1909	revoiced less keen 1960
16	Gemshorn	4	1909	slotted, not tapered
17	Fifteenth	2	1953	HNB, on old Contra Gamba slide
18	Mixture III ranks	2	1909, 1980	slightly recast by Mander
19	Oboe	8	1909	revoiced Mander
	Tremulant			
20	Double Trumpet	16	1953	revoiced by Mander, Mander chest
21	Cornopean	8	1909	revoiced by Mander
22	Clarion	4	1953	revoiced by Mander, Mander chest
	Octave			
	Unison Off			
	Sub Octave			
CHOIR ORGAN (8 STOPS) FLUES & CLARINET 3½ INS, TRUMPET 6¾ INS, TUBA 13½ INS PRESSURE				
23	Lieblich Gedeckt	8	1909	same construction as Swell Rohr Flute
24	Viola da Gamba	8	1909	
25	Flauto Traverso	4	1909	harmonic from middle C
26	Nazard	2½	1909, 1960	old Dulciana cut down by HNB, with new treble
27	Piccolo	2	1909	revoiced by Mander
28	Clarinet	8	1909	revoiced by Mander
	Tremulant		1909	
29	Trumpet	8	1909	derived from Great (1980)
30	Tuba (unenclosed)	8	1927, 1980	revoiced by Mander on increased pressure.
	Octave			
	Unison Off			
	Sub Octave			
	Swell to Choir			
PEDAL ORGAN (16 STOPS) 3½ INS, 4½ INS, 6¾ INS, 9 INS PRESSURE				
31	Open Diapason	16	1909, 1980	c1–e5 old Open Wood, f6–b12 ex-dummy pipes in s.w. tower, c13–a22 old Great Open Diapason (large) basses in e. case, a#23 to top new, on Mander chest.
32	Violone	16	1909	derived from no.1
33	Subbass	16	1909	Mander chest
34	Lieblich Bourdon	16	1909, 1953	Mander chest
35	Principal	8	1909, 1980	extension of no.31
36	Bass Flute	8	1909	extension of no.33, Mander chest
37	Lieblich Flute	8	1953, 1980	extension of no.34, Mander top octave and chest
38	Fifteenth	4	1960	Mander chest
39	Stopped Flute	4	1909, 1980	extension of no.36, Mander top octave and chest
40	Octavin	2	1960	extension of no.38, Mander chest
41	Mixture IV ranks	2½	1980	Mander pipes and chest
42	Double Ophicleide	32	1927, 1980	extension of no.43, Mander bottom octave and chest
				revoiced by Mander, Mander chest
43	Ophicleide	16	1927	derived from no.20
44	Double Trumpet	16	1953	extension of no.43, Mander chest
45	Posaune	8	1927	derived from no.10
46	Clarion	4	1909	
	Swell to Pedal			
	Great to Pedal			
	Choir to Pedal			

and restoration, including a new action and console, and a Great Mixture to help lead the singing of the much larger number of boys in the School than when the Chapel was built. Accordingly, an invitation

to tender was sent to four leading organ builders in March 1979. After much careful deliberation and consultation a quotation for £76,900 (plus VAT) from N.P. Mander Ltd was accepted and the contract signed in

June. Work began that summer, the organ being completely dismantled for the first time in its history, most of it being removed to London. Re-assembly in the Chapel began at Easter 1980, was interrupted when the new console fell from a hoist, and was finally completed by the end of the year. The Dedication took place on Advent Sunday and the opening recital was given to a packed Chapel on 22 January 1981 by Sir George Thalben-Ball, who had, of course, reopened the organ once before – in 1953. Notable recitals were given on it subsequently by players such as Carlo Curley and Allan Wicks.

The Mander work effectively rebuilt the organ ‘as new’, with no stone left unturned. A new action was fitted as well as a new console, along with improvements to the Choir box and the Tuba. There were several important tonal alterations. The stop-list was devised by Ian Bell, then at N.P. Mander, and the present writer.

The rebuilt instrument combined the warmth yet vigour of the Binns pipework with the brilliance of the new Great Mixture and the excitement of the big reeds. Used imaginatively it was immensely colourful and musical, far more so than even its stop-list on paper can show. Superbly crafted, it was set fair for another century’s service. However, a terrible fire on 17 September 1988 was to destroy the instrument completely, leaving absolutely nothing behind except the smallest of charred fragments. The Chapel itself was left a gutted, smoking ruin.

When, eventually, it was decided to rebuild the Chapel, at a cost of £7,500,000, much discussion took place as to who should build the new organ. The then Director of Music, John Cullen, his Assistant, David Williams and the Consultant, Simon Preston, travelled the world listening to its finest modern organs. Eventually the firm of Marcussen was chosen, the contract for a four-manual 66-stop organ signed and the instrument was installed during 1995 in the gloriously-rebuilt chapel. The Marcussen organ has been an

inspiration to all who have heard or played it over the past 25 years – but for those of us who knew the wonderful Binns organ, a feeling of deep regret at its fiery fate always lingers.

*Paul Hale, Southwell Cathedral Organist Emeritus, is a noted recitalist, choral director and writer, honoured in 2017 by the Archbishop of Canterbury with a Lambeth Award for his contribution to the Church's musical life, who now finds most of his time taken up with stimulating work as an organ consultant.*



Mander console

## My "DAMASCENE" moment

### Ouriana Gassiou



I started learning the organ with Nicolas Kynaston at the Athens Concert Hall in 1998. A year later an organ festival took place there, and this is where I saw a lady playing the organ for the first time. It was Jane Parker-Smith.

I remember that I wound myself nervously in between the people at the entrance doors of the hall, found my seat and waited with great anticipation. The atmosphere was tinged with excitement, the concert started and, from the first few notes, I realised it was going to be special!

It was a unique treat for the Greek audience anyway, but for

me it was a revelation. Her playing was so inspiring that it was definitely a pivotal moment in my learning experience. I had never seen anyone playing with such exuberance and stylishness: the hall was filled with Jane's musical energy. Her playing was stunning and this is a concert I will never forget.

*Ourania Gassiou is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music in London, where she studied with Nicolas Kynaston. Aided by an Eric Thompson Trust Grant she continued her studies with Johannes Geffert in Cologne and*

*Susan Landale in Paris.*

*As a soloist and chamber musician, she has performed extensively throughout the UK and Europe in recital series and major international festivals.*

*In 2011, Ourania was appointed Organist and Curator of the organs of the Athens Concert Hall, and she is also the organist of the French protestant church in London.*

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