



## A DENMAN RESURRECTED

Paul Hale

The church of St Michael-le-Belfrey in York has long been an excellent example of how music-making for modern worship styles can be of excellent quality. Inevitably this has led to less and less use of the 1885 Denman organ in that building until it became unreliable through lack of use, eventually falling silent twenty years ago. There this organ may have remained, mouldering away, had it not been for another York church – St Lawrence – which in 2016 expressed an interest in acquiring the St Michael-le-Belfrey instrument.

Why might they have done this? Well, St Lawrence – a Victorian building (the largest parish church in York) whose worshipping style is at the other end of the candle from St Michael-le-Belfrey – had had a Conacher organ, built for yet another York church (St Olave) and removed to St Lawrence in 1906, where it replaced a small 1860 Postill. In 2011 this organ was on the move once again, this time to St Mary, Lastingham, in the North Riding, where it was rebuilt very effectively by Principal Pipe Organs. A replacement organ was needed, and the long silent and somewhat derelict Denman came to

mind, one mile away at St Michael-le-Belfrey.

What was William Denmans's background? Andrew Caskie (Managing Director of Nicholson & Co. Ltd) has written:

*William Denman was born in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire in 1825. His father was a wood-carver, a skill that was clearly passed on to William. In 1844, William became an apprentice to Robert Postill, a York organ builder who had established his own firm in 1835. Denman was later described as:*

*'A man of very taciturn disposition, he would work most of the day without exchanging a word with his fellow workmen, but he was very observant of what was going on about him. Consequently, he acquired as much information about the construction of an organ as to enable him to set up business in that line...he was a very hard worker, rising before it was light.'*

*At the age of 38 in December 1863, he set up his own firm in York, taking advantage of the boom in organ building at the time. Despite stiff local competition from Postill and*

*others, business thrived and he relocated to larger premises within the city in 1872. His son John Dorrell Denman was a chorister and organ pupil under Dr E.G. Monk at York Minster. Much to the disappointment of Monk, who felt that John had a career in music-making ahead of him, John was taken into his father's organ-building business which then became known as W. Denman & Son.*

Maximillian Elliott adds (from his doctoral thesis on the work of 19<sup>th</sup>-century York organ builders):

*The three manual, thirty-four speaking stop organ [built for] St Michael-le-Belfrey church in York (1885) is the largest surviving instrument constructed by W. Denman & Son during the 1880s and a fine example of their craftsmanship. Although 'minus reeds and about half its stops' at the time of its opening on Sunday 9 August 1885, the instrument appears to have been well received. All 'soft stops on the Choir and the Great organs' were described as being 'exceedingly good', 'particularly the dolce stops on the Choir organ', and its diapasons were*





The casework stripped of its 1970s limed finish and assembled in the workshop



One of the five replica stops under construction in Malvern



New non-harmonic trebles returned to the chorus reeds



The casework features extensive carved detailing

*praised for their 'well finished and smooth tone'. [all quotes from the York Herald, 11 & 15 August 1885].*

*Several instruments constructed during the 1880s by W. Denman & Son were provided with stops never previously employed by the company, including: Geigen Principal 8ft, Violin*

*Diapason 8ft, Dolce 8ft, Spitz Flöte 4ft and Viola 4ft. Spotted metal pipework was included in at least seven organs built or rebuilt by W. Denman & Son during the 1880s including...the St Michael-le-Belfrey organ in 1885.*

Extracts from Dr Elliott again:  
*Many of the organs that William*

*Denman constructed at the beginning of his career appear to have closely resembled those built by his former master Robert Postill. Loosely based on the so-called 'German System', most of the instruments constructed between 1864 and the end of 1869 contained well-developed Great choruses and*



all seem to have been provided with C-compass keyboards/pedalboards. Denman is known to have manufactured and voiced 'all his pipes, whether of flute work, or reed' throughout his career, and appears to have been particularly skilled at voicing reed pipes. William Denman received numerous encomiums for his instruments throughout the 1860s and local newspapers had already begun to describe him as an 'eminent Organ Builder of York'. Many newspaper articles also commended Denman throughout the 1860s for exhibiting the sort of ingenuity that would later earn him the epithet 'very clever mechanic' from Noel Mander.

Denman was not the most prolific organ-builder in late-nineteenth century York, but his abilities deserve to be widely acknowledged. Over the course of his thirty-four year career, William Denman developed a recognisable organ-building signature, including: characteristic nameplates, rounded sharps and scroll-design key cheeks. It is frustrating that few of the largest instruments

produced by William Denman during the 1860s and 1870s have survived, but numerous smaller instruments in original or near-original condition testify to his skill as an organ-builder.

The St Michael-le-Belfrey organ had harmonic trebles fitted to the chorus reeds by Abbott & Smith, during a 1925 cleaning, at which time the pitch was lowered and an additional bottom note was added to every rank, the rest being moved up one semitone and trimmed. Harrison & Harrison cleaned it in 1951 and it suffered several tonal changes when overhauled by another firm in the 1970s. Worse, the original stop-knobs were replaced with plastic, as were the ivory key coverings, and its oak casework was partially stripped and lime-washed. A balanced Swell pedal was fitted, albeit rather crudely. Despite these interventions, it remained a precious survivor and hugely worthy of leading worship again – even if not at St Michael-le-Belfrey.

With that in mind, Nicholsons inspected the organ in 2016. Andrew Caskie writes [see Nicholson website for much more]:

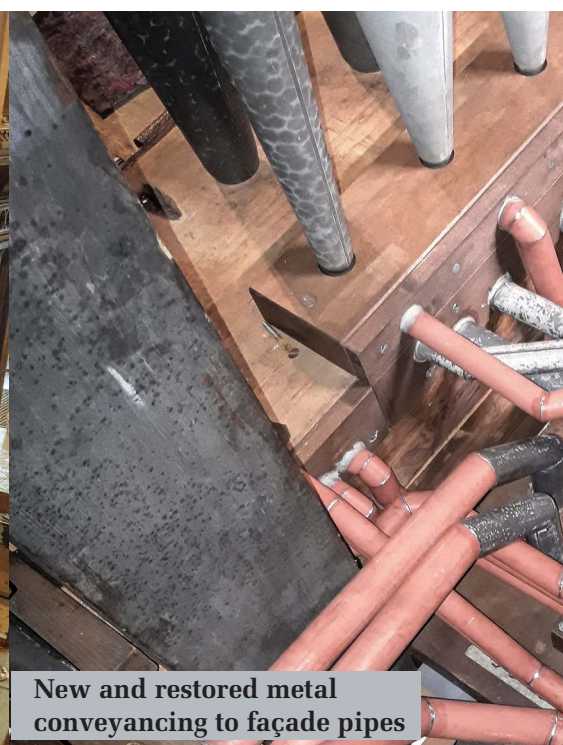
*We inspected the organ in September 2016, by which time*

*the organ had been completely unplayable for many years. The interior was beyond filthy, and there was much evidence of inappropriate repair and alteration. The easy instinct would have been to walk quietly away, but our consciences and imaginations were struck by too many signs of what had once clearly been a flagship instrument of a provincial organ builder, of whom at that time we knew virtually nothing. The carving on the oak case was of a high standard, as was much of the woodwork inside. The scaling and construction of the surviving pipework gave us much confidence that this had once been a fine instrument tonally. By the time we were on the train back to Worcestershire, we were of one mind: the only right course of action would be to restore the organ back to its original form, as its builder intended.*

*Taking on the complete restoration of a long-silent organ is undoubtedly a risk for both the customer and organ builder, and there were many frank discussions as to whether the organ was worth restoring,*



Staining the casework back to its original colour after extensive repair



New and restored metal conveyancing to façade pipes



*whether it would be suitable for St Lawrence, and if so, whether it should be restored back to its original form, restored as found, or significantly rebuilt as the basis of a much larger new instrument. The organ had not been heard at all for nearly 20 years, and had been virtually unplayable for many years before that. No-one could remember what the organ sounded like in its original form and when in good condition.*

The decision was taken to proceed. Nicholson's dismantled the organ in August 2019, restored every part of it over the next year and completed the installation at St Lawrence during November 2020. A synopsis of the colossal amount of restoration work follows, much of the information coming from a comprehensive 59-page *Restoration Report* prepared by Nicholson's and available in full on their comprehensive website. During the work, I was visiting their workshops monthly on behalf of another client and was able to observe the exemplary and almost obsessive detail in which every task was undertaken – down to splicing in hundreds of small pieces of perfectly matched oak

to fill the wide splits with which the enormous casework was riven. Truly a labour of love – and, one fears, with little fiscal profit in it at the end of the day. Here are the details, for the technically-minded [again, there is more detail on the Nicholson's website].

### Soundboards

All five soundboards were in dire condition, with severely split tables of pine (unusual), which were beyond redemption. The tables were replaced in poplar, grooved and graphited in the traditional manner. Several upperboards had to be made new in matching style due to the degree of alteration wrought on them in the 1975 work. In addition, the soundboards received a full internal restoration.

### Manual key action

The manual key actions are entirely mechanical, and their restoration was straightforward. The original steel wires were corroded and worn, and have been replaced throughout with new ones of phosphor-bronze, whipped with red thread in original style. Denman minimised the number of roller-boards in the organ by the use of impressively calculated and

machined splayed backfalls and square beams.

### Pedal key action

What is unusual in this instrument is that the pedal pneumatic action is of exhaust rather than charge form, something Nicholson's had never encountered in any mixed mechanical/pneumatic Victorian instrument. The pallets in the pedal soundboards and chests are all pulled open by normally inflated pneumatic power motors (within the windchest) that collapse when a note is played. These power motors are exhausted by the movement of a small valve that is actuated by the collapsing of a normally inflated pneumatic primary motor, also in the wind. The primary motors are kept inflated by a continuous charge of wind being fed from the touchbox at the rear of the pedalboard; when a pedal is depressed, the relevant lead tube is exhausted to atmosphere and the primary motor collapses. All this was restored. Nicholson's have replaced all of the lead tubing with new, made specially to match the external diameter and internal bore of the original. Wisely, they have introduced connection blocks adjacent to each pedal soundboard/



Re-leathered concertina trunk

chest and to the touchbox, to allow future removal of these components for overhaul without the need to cut the lead tubing.

### Drawstop and combination action

The drawstop and combination actions are entirely mechanical. Nicholsons had rarely seen such robust metalwork, which they opine 'gives every impression of having been fabricated in one of York's railway workshops when a foreman's eyes were turned'. Paintwork on the metal components was in poor condition and has been repainted to match the original colour.

### Wind system

Both reservoirs have been re-leathered and restored. The feeders have been left in situ as unrestored artefacts and their reservoir inlets sealed off in a reversible manner. New metal and wooden trunking has been provided to link the new blower to the two reservoirs. Wind trunking throughout the organ is of timber, and after repair has been fully re-lined with Ingres paper (a type of drawing paper). The Swell soundboard is fed by concertina

trunks; these have also been restored with new leather.

### Pipework

The pipework was in sorry condition and extremely dusty. Wooden pipes were badly split, affecting their speech, and much pinning and repairing was required. Many of the larger metal pipes were suffering from collapsed tips, which have been repaired. All tuning slides and springs have been replaced with new. Because of the limited height in St Michael-le-Belfrey, the Trombone has a half-length bottom octave (of remarkable potency). The 1925 harmonic trebles to the Great and Swell chorus reeds have been removed and new non-harmonic resonators fitted.

The 1975 work included numerous tonal changes, all of which have now been reversed. At that time the Choir Organ lost a Dolce 8ft and Pierced Gamba 8ft in favour of a Blockflute 2ft and Larigot 1½ft. Nicholsons has made and voiced a new Dolce, a copy of the same stop in the Denman organ of St Saviourgate Masonic Lodge, York. The company also made a new Pierced Gamba, copying the Gamba in the Denman organ of St

John the Baptist Church, Healaugh. The Choir division is situated, unusually, at the front and top of the organ, above the Great division, and thus speaks with compelling directness. Its reinstated variety of 8ft tone now returns it to being a choral accompaniment division, perfect for augmenting the Swell.

Another loss in 1975 was the Small Open Diapason from the Great, which reappeared in the Swell as a 4ft Octave. The Great Gamba also disappeared and two new Great stops were fitted – a Tierce and a Mixture II. The Mixture III had its tierce rank removed in 1975; this was reversed. Nicholsons returned the Small Open Diapason to the Great, bringing its bass (case pipes) back into use. They also do duty for the bottom five notes of the Large Open Diapason, which – oddly – had no bass of its own. Room was found for new pipes to take it down to bottom F, after which it runs into the Small Open.

Head Voicer, James Atherton, writes about reinstating the Gamba: *'The Great Gamba threw up another set of problems. The basses for this stop, along with the Double Dulciana and the Small Open Diapason were also on the front,*



Restored console with new replica drawstop heads and labels



however bottom EE and FF weren't, and neither, seemingly, did they ever exist. It became clear to us that Denman had simply left out pipes that wouldn't fit and that the organ could never have been completed with all the pipes that it required! Luckily for us there was just about enough space behind the pipes for a bottom EE and FF for the Gamba, on the new blocks that we made for the Large Open Diapason basses. When we looked at the scale of the case pipes it was clear that the scales of the Gamba we had taken at Healaugh were not going to be a suitable match, and therefore a decision was taken to make a new scale for the Gamba based on the scales of the case pipes. We made the pipes of spotted metal, to follow on from the bass, including the bottom EE and FF, and this has turned out to be very satisfactory.' James has written a fascinating account of the tonal work needed to bring the organ back to its finest voice, which can be seen on the Nicholson & Co. website.

The Swell's 4ft Viola and Flute were both removed in 1975, in favour of the 4ft Octave (previously the Great Small Open) and a new 2ft Super Octave. Nicholsons have created a new 4ft Viola, copying a Denman stop at Sowerby Methodist Church, and copied a 4ft Flute in the Denman organ of St John the Baptist Church, Healaugh. Given that there was originally – and now is again – no 2ft on the Swell, it is odd that the Mixture started with a 19<sup>th</sup> as the bottom rank. However, it was found that the 4ft Viola throws up sufficient first harmonic (at 2ft pitch) that its loss is not felt, especially as the Mixture's bottom rank breaks back to a 15<sup>th</sup> at tenor C.

### Console

The console design is unusual. Denman grouped the drawstops in three columns on each jamb, which is rare on British instruments. The simple jambs are set back in a wide angle from the keyboards. All bushings around the drawstop shanks have been renewed and



The magnificent timber fan vaulting in the casework

reproduction Denman knobs with carefully researched matching engraving have been made. The 1975 plastic key coverings have been replaced with bone and Denman's unusually-shaped key cheeks carefully restored. The console woodwork was stripped and re-stained to match its original colour, remnants of which were found. The original nameplate was missing, and has been reproduced by copying that of the Healaugh Denman organ.

### Swell box

This had been so badly remade in 1975 that an entirely new front was needed, with shutters and mechanism made as exact replicas of the shutters and mechanism in the Denman organ at Healaugh. The

paint was stripped from inside the box and the box interior papered to match surviving Denman boxes elsewhere.

### Casework

Restoration of the magnificent casework was one of the most significant parts of the project. Nicholsons had to: i) repair a myriad of splits and broken/missing decoration; ii) treat and repair sections damaged by woodworm; iii) strip the 1975 liming off; iv) re-stain and polish the timber to its original darker finish, of which they found fragments; v) re-make the casework at the right-hand side (much had never existed due to the position of the floor and Open Diapason 16ft pipes in St Michael-le-Belfrey); and vi) provide new casework to the

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## Specification

### GREAT ORGAN

|                     |                               |
|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| Double Dulciana     | 16                            |
| Large Open Diapason | 8                             |
| Small Open Diapason | 8                             |
| Stopped Diapason    | 8                             |
| Gamba               | 8                             |
| Principal           | 4                             |
| Flute Harmonique    | 4                             |
| Twelfth             | 2 <sup>2</sup> / <sub>3</sub> |
| Fifteenth           | 2                             |
| Mixture 17.19.22    | III rks                       |
| Trumpet             | 8                             |

### SWELL ORGAN

|                        |         |
|------------------------|---------|
| Lieblich Bourdon       | 16      |
| Open Diapason          | 8       |
| Stopped Diapason       | 8       |
| Salicional             | 8       |
| Vox Angelica (tenor C) | 8       |
| Viola                  | 4       |
| Flute                  | 4       |
| Mixture 19.22.26       | III rks |
| Horn                   | 8       |
| Oboe                   | 8       |
| Clarion                | 4       |

### CHOIR ORGAN

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| Lieblich Gedact | 8 |
| Dolce           | 8 |
| Pierced Gamba   | 8 |
| Gemshorn        | 4 |
| Flute           | 4 |
| Clarionet       | 8 |

### PEDAL ORGAN

|                      |    |
|----------------------|----|
| Open Diapason (wood) | 16 |
| Sub Bass             | 16 |
| Contra Gamba         | 16 |
| Flute                | 8  |
| Violoncello          | 8  |
| Trombone             | 16 |



The restored Denman organ in its new home

rear of the instrument (which had previously been against a wall). The spotted metal façade pipes had been damaged by lacquer, wood stripper and liquid lime and required extensive cosmetic work to restore their lustre. Together with the casework restoration, these major undertakings have transformed the appearance of the instrument.

Remarkably, the organ looks and sounds far finer in its north chancel position at St Lawrence

than it ever did at St Michael-le-Belfrey; in fact, it will be hard in the future for people to believe that it was not originally made for its new home. What a triumph.

In *Something Old, Something New* over the past 15 years I have covered 'organ transplants' quite regularly. Looking back at those articles, it strikes me that never have I come across a more magnificent example of an instrument deserving a new home and a sympathetic restoration. Readers

who use YouTube may already have heard this organ, through the delightful extemporisations of the Nicholson Head Voicer, James Atherton. We should all now (when conditions permit) beat a path to the impressive doors of the largest parish church in York to experience the splendour and sheer musicality of this beautiful and immaculately restored instrument.



### 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 and the Archbishop of Canterbury's 'Thomas Cranmer Award' for his contribution to church music. More information is available at [www.PaulHale.org](http://www.PaulHale.org)