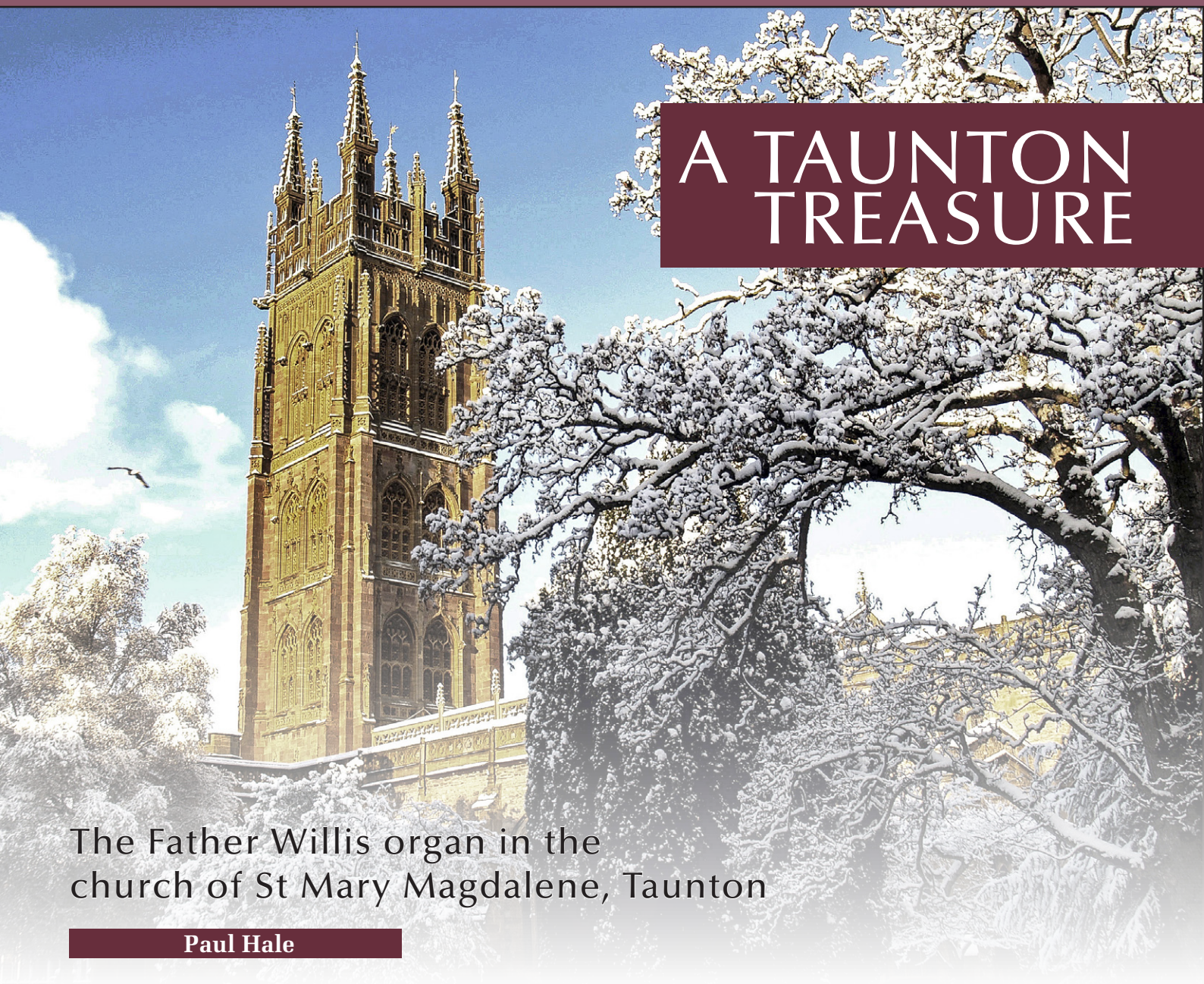


A TAUNTON TREASURE

The Father Willis organ in the church of St Mary Magdalene, Taunton

Paul Hale

Organists enjoying an organ crawl in Somerset, Devon and Cornwall will be surprised and delighted at the number of instruments by Father Willis to be found. Despite the presence of several worthy nineteenth-century firms in the West Country, Henry Willis picked up some plum jobs and three cathedrals (Wells, Exeter and Truro). Extend the trip to Wiltshire and the number markedly drops off, but Salisbury cathedral's 1876 Willis arguably makes up for that in its peerless splendour.

However, it is not only in the cathedrals where Willis can be found to have been at his finest, as there are instruments of 'cathedral' quality to be found elsewhere. One of these is the subject of this article.

The gracious west tower of the church of St Mary Magdalene, Taunton – of classic 'Somerset tower' design – is a dominant feature of the town. Indeed, Simon Jenkins, in *England's thousand best churches*, describes it as "the noblest parish tower in England". The church is known to have had an organ since 1708, when we are informed by Sperling [Sperling notebooks] that "Schmidt and Schrider" made a 3-manual instrument (Great 9 stops, Choir 4, Echo 3). This was placed in a west gallery, was rebuilt in 1782 by Paul Micheau, by Smith of Bristol in 1828, and then "hacked about" [Sperling, op. cit.] in 1843-4 by Edward Ling (of Taunton) to allow the west window to be seen. In 1862 H.P. Dicker (of Exeter) rebuilt the organ on a gallery near the south door, but moved it only a decade later into a chapel on the north side of the chancel, where the organs in this church have remained ever since.

Following the disposal of this instrument to Taunton School in 1881 (where it remained until 2007, having been rebuilt by George Osmond of Taunton in 1907), a new instrument was commissioned from Henry Willis, installed in 1882 at a cost of £1,280. Willis was extraordinarily busy at this period, capitalising on the fame brought to his firm by its outstanding work during the 1870s. Between 1881 and 1882 forty-six contracts are listed on the NPOR alone, including a very similar organ (destroyed by fire in 1919) made for the Victoria Hall in nearby Exeter and another similar instrument made for Hove Town Hall, subsequently removed to Haberdashers' Aske's


The organ as viewed from the Nave

Boys' School, where it remains – unaltered – awaiting restoration.

The Taunton instrument benefitted from the tonal and mechanical advances Willis had made, advances found only in his larger and more powerful instruments. These included a pneumatic-lever action to the Great and its associated couplers, tubular-pneumatic action to the Pedal organ, plus heavy pressure reeds on their own actions on both Swell and Great. A glance at its stop list will show that Willis realised that its somewhat buried position meant that it would need to be a powerful organ – and powerful it is, its reeds being almost overwhelming at close quarters (see above).

In 1931 the Taunton organ-builder, George Osmond (whose large factory was a stone's throw from the church, conveniently adjacent to the Somerset County Cricket Ground), replaced the fifty-year old tracker action and pneumatic lever with tubular-pneumatic action, the console being modernised with new keys. In 1970 Osmond electrified the stop action so that thumb pistons with a selector board could be added. The only tonal change made at this time was the replacement of the Choir 8ft Claribel Flute (doubtless similar to the Great stop of the same name) with a 2⅔ft Nazard (vintage open wooden pipes with added metal top notes). This work was done well, enabling the organ to play reliably for a further four decades before its age began to tell.

To quote John Bodiley, one of the organists: "The Father Willis organ at Saint Mary Magdalene can be made to purr quietly like a contented cat. It can roar like a defiant lion, either in the distance or alarmingly close. Dark mystery, evocative of a foggy Exmoor, is also within its compass, or it can offer tremulous, plaintive, solo voices. There are brazenly triumphant trumpets and trombones, or a whisper so soft that you have to strain to hear it. The organ can make all of these sounds because it was designed to add colour and expressiveness to words: to characterise joy or sorrow, pride or humility, defiance or pleading. The accompaniment of the liturgy is its primary purpose, and it has fulfilled this obligation with distinction for many years."

After a further 40+ years, the question arose as how to renovate this instrument. The Osmond tubular-pneumatics (note and stop-action) were well-made and had lasted well, but were on the way out, as were the various wind regulators and reservoirs which had been added specifically for the pneumatics. Attempting a conjectural reconstruction of the original tracker action and Barker-lever machine was not considered a realistic scenario, whereas


The Osmond console

converting the actions to electro-pneumatic and electro-magnetic was. More on that below. The console as remade by Osmond was solid enough but distinctly utilitarian in appearance, with keyboards which were unpleasant to play, and little or no visible sign of its Willis heritage.

The greatest challenge was the instrument's position, which realistically could not be changed. Although fine for accompanying the church choir directly in front of it, the organ – despite its heroic voicing – failed effectively to reach down the nave to lead the congregation until the reeds were drawn, which, all being on heavy pressure wind, are devastatingly loud for the choir and the player. There was nothing that could be changed tonally – the organ is something of a masterpiece, not to be touched – but it was felt that a Willis-copy Tuba would be a worthy addition and that octave couplers would add some useful additional combinations to the flue work. Finding space for the Tuba was a challenge – as was obtaining permission for it from the DAC – and as there proved to be no room for the bottom octave, the stop runs all but imperceptibly into the stentorian Father Willis Pedal Ophicleide. It is fed from its own small heavy pressure reservoir and peals splendidly down the nave.

However, for hymn-singing, the tone of the rest of the organ also needed to get down the nave far better. The church's director of music, Miles Quick, had heard of the sound projection and enhancement system that had been installed with notable success in Cambridge, at the church of Our Lady and the English Martyrs (OLEM), when Nicholsons restored the transept-positioned organ there in 2002. At OLEM the tone of the 1894 Abbott & Smith organ is picked up by high-quality microphones suspended in front of it, the signal being fed to loudspeakers out of sight high up in the nave triforium towards the west end of the church. The time-lag for the direct sound of the organ to reach this spot was measured and then built in to the software so that the relayed sound matches it precisely. The volume of the relayed sound is set at a level where the listener does not hear the organ coming from the speakers but simply hears the organ sounding 'present' in the nave. The difference with the speakers turned off is always surprising to those to whom this installation is demonstrated.

Miles Quick was duly impressed, and writes: "We located possible firms, explained our needs to them, and they submitted quotes. APi Communications (Exeter), a company with many years' experience of installing audio-visual equipment in churches, were eventually chosen and proceeded during the renovations to install high quality microphones in the organ case and also above the choir-stalls, so that the organ and choir can be boosted separately or together. The whole system is entirely independent of the church PA equipment and the levels were pre-set after careful experimentation – so basically it is either 'on' or 'off' (controlled by two simple and discreet buttons at the console). It uses four unobtrusive but highly effective separate dedicated speakers, two at clerestory level in the nave (photo, above right) and two on the floor for bass frequencies. It has indeed proved most successful in giving the organ more 'presence' in the building without any awareness, in even discerning listeners, that there is subtle relaying of the sound. It


Nave roof


2019 console

has also proved especially effective for giving Father Willis's lovely quieter romantic sounds more presence in the building. This kind of system would certainly be worth recommending to other places where a 'buried' or remote organ (or choir!) needs a boost to enhance the support for congregational singing etc – and could be a great way to preserve a pipe organ and give it a new lease of life using the latest technology, rather than scrapping and replacing it, possibly with an electronic instrument."

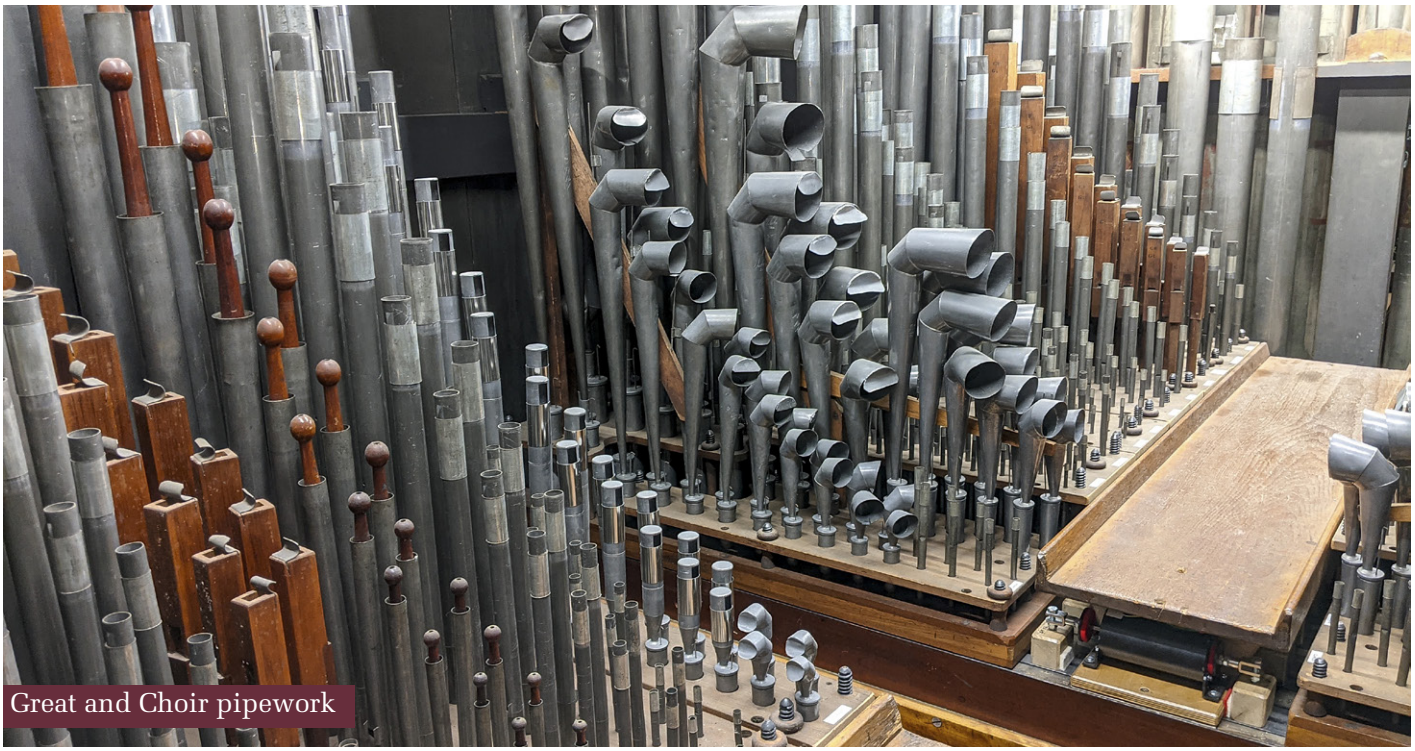
Returning to the organ itself, Michael Farley's firm won the refurbishment contract, with Stephen Lemmings looking after the *c.*1920 Mecvent blower. Stephen observed that it was in "remarkably good condition at *c.*100 years of age". It was decided to electrify all the actions and to rebuild the console with new keys, jambs, stop-knobs and pistons, with all the original oak woodwork re-finished. A glance at the photograph shows at once how smart and elegant the console now appears. The new keys, with 'tracker touch', have Willis-profile solid oak cheeks and are fully specified with a modern combination piston system. Note the appearance of General pistons 1-4 in the bass and 5-8 in the treble: so much more player-friendly than having them all at one end or the other. The drawstop jambs have been remade with African ebony panels – looking more like a Harrison & Harrison console than a Willis one, and no less smart for that. All the 'walnut-whip' toe pistons are easy to see and to reach. The original Willis wind system (low and high pressures) was fully restored and the double-rise reservoirs releathered. Slider solenoids replaced the Osmond pneumatic slider machines.

The slider soundboards were completely restored and re-actioned by Farley staff member Ashley Tooze. They were glue-flooded and the pallets (two sets for each of the Great and Swell soundboards) were covered in fresh felt and leather. The question of what sort of note action to fit to the soundboards was resolved by employing a method used by most European organ-builders when fitting a detached second console to a tracker action primary console – for instance in concert halls and large churches. This was to use direct pull-down electro-magnets (made by Heuss in Germany) to the soundboard pallets. To help this action overcome the 'pluck' on the fluework pallets, small direct pallet magnets were also installed in separate chests attached to the bars. This two-magnet system was developed by John Norman for the 1972 HN&B Positive division at Bath Abbey and was used by the late Kenneth Tickell in the organs in Worcester Cathedral and Manchester Cathedral (for the nave console). The result has been a crisp, responsive action, where both attack and release match as nearly as possible the original tracker and Barker-lever actions. Repetition and speech are perfect, as I can attest, having recently given a recital on this organ.


Ashley Tooze with Fr Willis pipes

The fine pipework was easily restored and then the voicing checked and all the pipes regulated by Simon Brown (of Ark Voicing), formerly Kenneth Tickell's voicer. The tonal result is spectacular and beautiful, the flue choruses having all the energy and brilliance of the best Father Willis work, the flutes having real beauty and charm and the reeds being some of the finest examples of Willis chorus reeds to be found anywhere.

I would travel many miles to hear and play this superb organ, immaculately rebuilt by Michael Farley and his team in a not dissimilar fashion from their recent rebuild of the (rather more altered) Father Willis at St Peter's Collegiate Church, Wolverhampton. The firm should take great pride in the quality and integrity of these two contracts, and should feel pretty certain that the shade of Father Willis will be smiling on their endeavours.



Great and Choir pipework

Pull-down magnets attached to pallets

Specification

GREAT ORGAN Compass CC–g (56 notes)	
Double Diapason	16
Open Diapason I	8
Open Diapason II	8
Clarabel *[sic]*	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Flûte Harmonique	4
Twelfth	2⅔
Fifteenth	2
Mixture (17.19.22)	III
Posaune	8
Clarion	4

SWELL ORGAN Compass CC–g (56 notes)	
Lieblich Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Lieblich *[sic]*	8
Salicional	8
Vox Angelica	8
Gemshorn	4
Flageolet	2
Tremolo	
Cornopean	8
Hautboy	8
Clarion	4
Octave	
Sub Octave	

CHOIR ORGAN Compass CC–g (56 notes)	
Lieblich Gedact	8
Gamba	8
Dulciana	8
Concert Flute	4
Nazard	2⅔
Piccolo	2
Corno di Bassetto	8
Octave	
Sub Octave	
Tuba	8
Great Reeds on Choir	
Swell Reeds on Choir	

PEDAL ORGAN Compass CCC–F (30 notes)	
Open Diapason	16
Violone	16
Bourdon	16
Violoncello	8
Bass Flute	8
Ophicleide	16

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