A vintage Walker revived

St Mary's, Portsea

Paul Hale

When organists bring to mind the dominant organ builders of the late nineteenth century, the names will typically be Willis and Hill, and then perhaps the 'factory' firms of Norman & Beard, and Forster & Andrews. Those in the north might think of Binns, Abbott & Smith, Brindley & Foster, Jardine, or Conacher. Those in the south might include Bishop and Gray & Davison. But for some reason the name of J.W. Walker does not always come first to most organists' minds. Why is this? After all, the firm has now been around for nearly 200 years, undertaking consistently fine work. I suspect the answer lies in the fact that other than for a significant flowering between the mid-1870s and the first decade or so of the twentieth century, the company won no really significant contracts. Perhaps they did not have the salesmanship of the other firms, or perhaps the company's style for some decades was not distinctive enough. All that was to change from the 1885 Inventions Exhibition onwards, for their 40-stop 4-manual there proved a great success, being removed to Exeter Hall in the Strand and then in 1907 to the Public Hall in Ipswich, where sadly it was destroyed by fire in 1948.

Image 1 | The Walker organ in context

That organ was preceded by another important instrument, the 3-manual made in 1875 for St John the Divine, Kennington, to which the company added a Solo Organ in 1893. Notable in this organ was a so-called 'Clarion Mixture'. As at Portsea, the composition was 22.26.29. Despite the exotic name it was simply a sharp mixture designed to sit above the 3-rank Mixture (15.19.22) producing multiple ranks of upper work, all scaled and voiced in a conventional manner, though most unusual at this period. These stops became a Walker trademark in several significant instruments over the next twenty years or so. Another trademark sound being developed at this time was the scale and tone of their Open Diapasons – very large scales (especially in the bass) with thick metal and exceptionally sonorous tone. This, along with Walker's development of fine, rather dark-toned reeds with

unique 'pepper-pot' caps, began to attract the interest of organists of distinction. With that came significant contracts and the company entered its golden period.

A fine 33-stop 3-manual organ was created for St Anne's, Stoke Newington, in 1886, followed shortly after by a magnificent III/38 for St Mary's, Portsea. A prosperous and grand church, it was built 1887-9 to the designs of Sir Arthur Blomfield, which included a spectacular hammer-beam roof. Much of the cost was covered by a £28,000 donation by W.H. Smith (1825-1891), son of the founder of the newsagents. The final cost, £44,000, included a new organ by Walker (costing £1,784), situated behind a fine case projecting at a high level in a gallery in the shallow north transept. As built, the instrument had but 2 manuals and pedals, yet a 4-manual console. Smith's widow generously paid for the addition of the Choir Organ in 1892, the fourth (Solo) manual remaining in place, mute, until being removed in 1965.

A conversion to electro-pneumatic action was carried out by J.W. Walker in 1965, where the original over-complex and worn-out tracker/ pneumatic-lever/ charge-pneumatic key actions were replaced with simple 2-stage electro-pneumatic underactions, along with a new console. Fortunately, a lack of funds prevented the company from making the 'neo-baroque' tonal changes it suggested at the time, thus leaving this masterpiece instrument tonally untouched – well, almost, as the chorus reeds gained harmonic trebles and were transposed up a note; standard Walker rebuilding practice of the time – even with their own organs. Further work was undertaken in 1981 by George Martin & Partner of Portsmouth; this included lowering the pitch of the organ to nearer standard pitch.

Nearly sixty years after the 1965 Walker rebuild, the organ clearly needed a full restoration. But what was to be done? And by whom? Nicholson & Co won the contract, and as their website tells us: 'Alongside the obvious goal of returning the entire instrument to first-class condition, the principal objective was to conserve and restore the Victorian heritage of this instrument. The pipework was returned to its original pitch, scaling, pressures and voicing. The wind system and all soundboards and chests were thoroughly restored, with new three-stage electro-pneumatic key actions of traditional design being provided throughout. The 1965 console was replaced with a new console designed in the style of Walker consoles of the 1880s.'

Image 2 | The new console

Consultant Dr William McVicker has this to say:

> The organ has been carefully restored (with some mechanical compromises) but – importantly – its voice has been re-established. This is the first late Romantic organ of this kind to have been restored, and thus represents an interesting jigsaw piece in understanding how the English organ developed at the end of the nineteenth century. As such it will offer insights for other restorations of this kind (which will surely follow in due course) and provide a model of how policies can be developed and aimed for in restoration work.
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> The reworking and restoration of the wind system enabled the pipes to receive their full wind once more; many aspects of the organ's sound fell into place fairly readily. This mainly refers to the main diapason chorus, where it was possible to determine what power levels the pipes once were at and how the relationships of the stops should be restored to each other. This was a case of encouraging a level of dogged discipline from the organ builders in their approach to the work. The most troublesome part was the reeds, which had been altered in the 1960s in order to obtain more drama from their sound. At that time some of the pipes were lost and replaced by new ones (so-called harmonic treble pipes) and notes were transposed and revoiced to increase the power levels of the pipes. Through study and analysis, the lost pipes were accurately recreated. The result of undertaking this was somewhat unexpected, as it became more evident how J.W. Walker & Sons emerged during the 1870s and 1880s from classical English organ building – being an amalgam of traditional, late Georgian English organ-building techniques and changes which emerged as a result of German organs arriving in England both at (and after) the Great Exhibition of 1851, i.e., principally the use of quint rather than tierce mixtures and the inclusion (and refinement) of new types of flute and string stops. The restored reeds, however, provide an opportunity to re-establish the correct balances between the stops, as found in some organ music of the period. For example, the Swell Horn provides a more convincing orchestral sonority, being closer to the power of orchestral horns, rather than the more dominating sound of trumpet stops. In Classical English organ building the Swell Organ provides expressive effects, rather than being a secondary chorus to the

Great Organ diapasons. Only a few years after the Portsea organ was completed, English organ building was to change and develop yet again in the work of J.W. Walker – to make the Swell a bolder foil to the Great chorus. So the Portsea choruses re-establish a particular moment in English organ-building history where the emerging, rich sonority of the Great foundations is enhanced by colouristic stops in the Choir and Swell Organs, using orchestral models for the balances between divisions.

By pulling this information together it was possible to establish what had happened to the Portsea instrument during different rebuilds over the years. In the case of mechanical alterations this was less obvious, as much evidence of the original key-actions was lost completely in 1965 and there are no other extant examples to study. With regard to the pipework and the instrument's sound, there was sufficient evidence to establish a clear policy of how to return the organ as closely as possible to its original sonority.

In harmony with these underlying principles were Andrew Caskie (Managing Director) and James Atherton (Head Voicer) at Nicholson. Mr Caskie writes:

> The original actions at Portsea were tracker to Choir, Barker Lever to Great and Swell, and a mixture of charge pneumatic and Barker Lever on the Pedal. These were almost all replaced (the integral pneumatic action to the Sub Bass 32ft chests was electrified) with new two-stage electro-pneumatic actions when the organ was rebuilt by J.W. Walker & Sons in 1965. Serious consideration had been given for many years (we first inspected the organ in 2004) to the possibility of historical reconstruction of the original actions, as we are presently doing at Manchester Town Hall. However, we felt there were two compelling reasons not to undertake this at Portsea. First, surviving contemporaneous examples to copy are extremely scarce: the only surviving Walker Barker machine of which we are aware is at Romsey Abbey. Secondly, we understand that the machine at Romsey has had to be modified twice to improve its function. We could have restored all of the 1965 actions, but their utilitarian design, with lever magnets exhausting power motors directly, meant that the actions struggled to achieve good repetition on the manual soundboards. While we were content to restore the 1965 actions on the unit chests, we proposed new electro-pneumatic actions of more luxurious design for the soundboards, in order to overcome the problems of poor repetition. To avoid alteration to the soundboards (re-palleting and fitting built-in actions) it was necessary for the new actions to be of traditional underslung type, operating on heavy wind pressure (*c.* 9") to give a snappy response to overcome the significant pallet 'pluck'. Three-stage actions (chest magnet exhausting a primary motor, moving a valve that exhausts a power motor) were specified by the church, and we were pleased to construct some fourteen new underactions to our long-established design of this type.
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> The original console at Portsea was replaced in 1965. The 1965 console could easily have been restored, but there had always been a sense of something not being quite right, sitting at a 1960s console but hearing a wall of glorious Victorian diapason tone. We have a saying in Malvern that you should be able to 'hear' an organ simply by looking at the console. We therefore proposed that a new console be constructed in Walker 1880s style. A tantalising blurred black-and-white photograph of part of the original console had survived, which showed many details consistent with surviving contemporaneous Walker consoles, with one notable difference: the drawstops were arranged in rows rather than columns. We visited a number of older Walker consoles, but in the end settled on an exact copy of the 1890 three-manual console of St Luke, Charlton, London, deviated from only to match the original Portsea drawstop arrangement. Our designer Mike Lane and assistant foreman Darren Bingham copied every detail and painstakingly designed and constructed the new Portsea console, including drawstop lettering, brass tell-tale, nameplate, etc. We all wanted the 'new' Portsea console to appear unmodernised, so the piston provision remains very basic and all thumb pistons unengraved. Controls for piston memory levels, a setter, general pistons, general cancel and stepper are mounted discreetly behind a false upstand between the Swell manual and music desk.

Image 3 | New pepperpot treble resonators being made for Great Trumpet 8ft

James Atherton adds:

> The 1898 Walker organ in St Mary Portsea is an incredible instrument and was made during a transitional period in the firm's tonal output. They were beginning to experiment with their scaling and reed voicing, in particular their Diapason choruses and the introduction of capped reeds with openings around the top to allow the egress of tone. The Diapason scales in particular are of interest as they are enormous. It is clear that

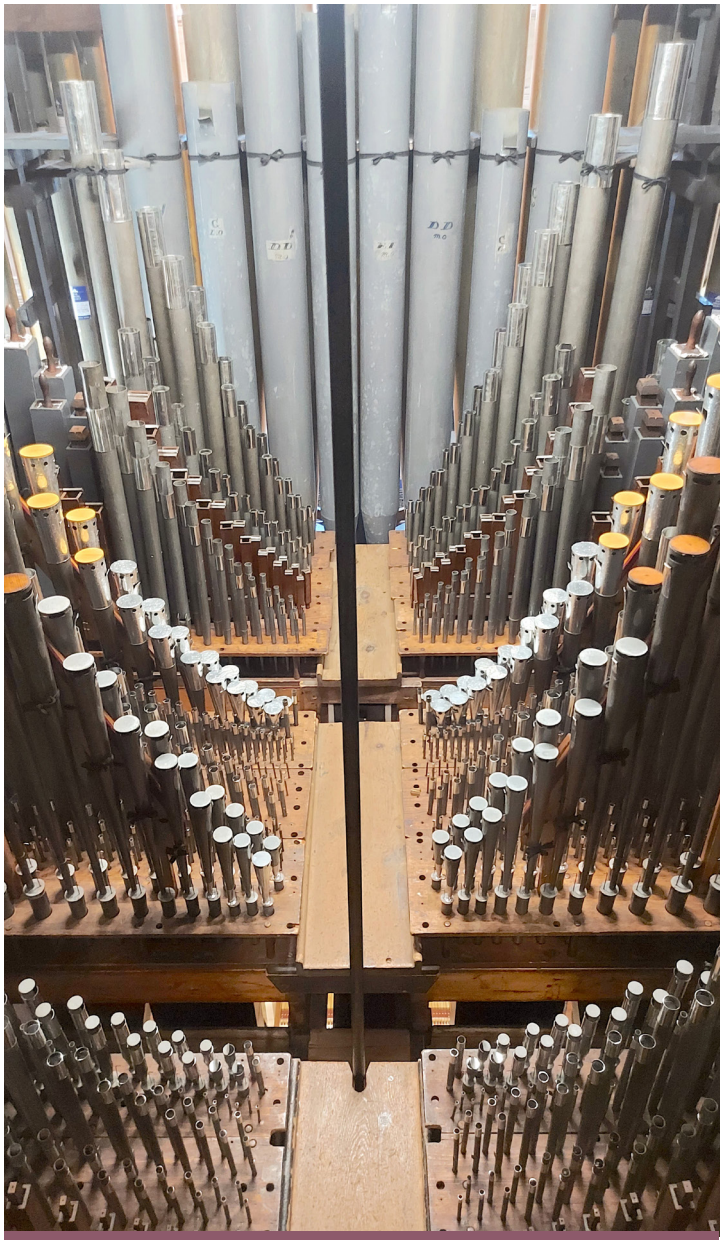

Image 4 | Bottom to top - Choir soundboard, rear Great and front Great soundboards, rear of façade pipes

they had been inspired by someone or something, perhaps at the International Exhibition in London in 1862, or the Inventions Exhibition in 1885. What is certain is that several other organ builders were starting to increase the scales of their Diapasons and introducing large Diapasons to their specifications. At Portsea both the No. 1 and No. 2 Diapasons and the Swell Open Diapason are enormous, particularly in the bass. The rest of the chorus structures followed their early Victorian patterns, and the chorus build up is unmistakably early Victorian, with bright upperwork, voice-led voicing (i.e. an ascendancy in volume as the compass ascends) and topped by Clarion Mixtures. At Portsea both the Swell and the Great have Clarion Mixtures, however only the Great uses this nomenclature, despite both mixtures being exactly the same in every single way. These are bright and powerful and when drawn add an excitement and drive to the chorus work that is absolutely thrilling. My opinion is that these mixtures were not instead of a Clarion, but were designed

to be an integral ingredient in the chorus. When underpinned with the colossal Diapasons the effect is one of grandeur and majesty. The later Walker at Northampton has Clarions on the Swell and Great which have flues from the middle octave at two pitches and blown 'flat out' These are very different stops to the ones at Portsea. The integrity of the chorus had been compromised by rebalancing and some attempt at revoicing in 1965, but with a lot of painstaking investigation and discipline it has been possible to return the original chorus structure and voicing of this incredible organ.

The reeds at Portsea are magnificent. These were also a product of Walker's experimenting: the Swell 16ft Contra Fagotto and the Great 16ft Double Trumpet are capped, but with 'letterbox' openings at the top. We reintroduced leather to the shallots of the bottom octaves of both stops and this had given the basses a roundness without losing any tonal quality. Both stops are remarkably musical and extremely powerful. The shallots are open and parallel English shallots which helps to keep the tone bright and brassy, despite the caps. The Great Trumpet had been altered with harmonic trebles; all resonators had also been hooded. Thankfully almost all the original tongues remained on all the reeds, though they had been recurved with a pronounced tip curve in the style of the day and of the Walker reed voicers. We decided that we would remake the resonators of this stop and reintroduce the 'pepperpot' caps. We were kindly allowed to take the details of the same stops at Northampton, which is exactly the same scale, luckily! Our pipe-makers recreated this unique stop and I voiced it using the original tongues, recurved. This stop has open English shallots and the sound is magnificent. It is brassy and powerful, and when combined with the Open Diapason No.1 makes the sound and volume of a Tuba! It is remarkable.

The honour and privilege of restoring this noble organ back to life with its magnificent new console and its original voice returned has been one of the highlights of my 27 years in organ building and will remain so. I cannot put into words how wonderful and musical this organ is, it has to be seen and heard to be believed. It is one of the finest organs in any parish church in the land.

The opening recital was given on 16 July 2022 by Dr Thomas Trotter. Trotter commented to the audience: 'This organ has been magnificently restored. I think it is one of the best organs of the period that I have ever played, so many congratulations to Nicholson & Co.'

I have no doubt that this superb restoration will count as another feather in the cap of Nicholson's. How heartening it is that a British firm of organ-builders founded in 1841 has just restored the work of one founded in 1828 – both still trading.

Following the superb result of this restoration, it is surely more than time that J.W. Walker come to mind more readily when considering who were indeed the most distinguished of great Victorian organ-builders. Perhaps when the Bristol cathedral organ has also been restored their name will once again be back where it deserves.

GREAT ORGAN (58 NOTES)	
1 Double Diapason	16
2 Open Diapason Large	8
3 Open Diapason Medium	8
4 Open Diapason Small	8
5 Wald Flute	8
6 Principal	4
7 Harmonic Flute	4
8 Twelfth	2 2/3
9 Fifteenth	2
10 Mixture 15.19.22	III
11 Clarion Mixture 22.26.29	III
12 Double Trumpet	16
13 Trumpet	8
Swell to Great	
Choir to Great	
SWELL ORGAN (58 NOTES, ENCLOSED)	
14 Double Diapason	16
15 Open Diapason	8
16 Stopped Diapason	8
17 Dulciana	8
18 Echo Gamba	8
19 Vox Angelica (tenor C)	8
20 Principal	4
21 Flute	4
22 Mixture 15.19.22.26	IV
23 Mixture 22.26.29	III
24 Contra Fagotto	16
25 Horn	8
26 Hautboy	8
Tremulant	
Octave	
Sub Octave	
CHOIR ORGAN (58 NOTES)	
27 Violin Diapason	8
28 Lieblich Gedact	8
29 Dulciana	8
30 Dulciana Principal	4
31 Lieblich Flute	4
32 Harmonic Piccolo	2
33 Clarionet	8
Swell to Choir	
PEDAL ORGAN (30 NOTES)	
34 Sub Bourdon	32
35 Open Diapason (wood)	16
36 Violone	16
37 Bourdon	16
38 Trombone	16
Swell to Pedal	
Great to Pedal	
Choir to Pedal	
Great & Pedal Combinations	

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