

At last – it works!

The Harrison & Harrison organ in the church of St John the Baptist, Lound, Norfolk

Paul Hale

The church of St John the Baptist, Lound, contains an organ by Harrison & Harrison, dating from 1913 and recently re-acted by W & A Boggis of Diss, whose proprietor, Rodney Briscoe, joined the firm fifty years ago in 1972. This is its story.

Soaring high above the western arch of the nave, the organ is contained within a lofty and elevated case designed by Sir Ninian Comper to match his superb rood screen and font cover. Gothic and baroque elements are combined

in what Comper called “unity by inclusion”. The inscription is adapted from Psalm 150 “Laudate Dominum sono tubae. Laudate eum in chordis et organo. Laudate eum in cymbalis bene sonantibus. Omnis spiritus laudet Dominum, Alleluia” (“Praise the Lord with the sound of the trumpet. Praise Him with strings and the organ. Praise Him with sweet sounding cymbals. Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord, Alleluia.”). The front pipes are unusually slender – typical of Comper’s work – to add apparent height and delicacy to the whole composition. In 1999 the organ was awarded an ungraded Historic Organ Certificate by BIOS, in respect of its wonderful and famous case.

The instrument has a detached console standing in the south-west corner of the church, originally connected by pneumatic tubes which ran under the floor from the console into the tower, up the tower wall, under the organ, up the back of the organ and then down again before diverging to the Great, Swell and Pedal Subbass actions, all on the exhaust-pneumatic principle. Until recently, the blower stood on the floor of the tower and was boosted by a second blower, the resulting main wind-trunk feeding the lower and larger of two double-rise reservoirs. This lower reservoir retains its original pair of large feeders and the blowing handle is stored nearby, along with an original ladder for gaining access.

This organ is renowned among organ and church enthusiasts for its beautiful Comper case, which ironically is famous also for being a real challenge to photograph



Image 1 | Lound Comper case from the south



Image 2 | Console close up from treble end

because of a tall gilded font cover in front of it. Until the recent work it was also feared by organ tuners for its persistent unreliability and the danger involved in gaining access.

Like many architect-designed organ cases, this one has little regard for the needs of the organ-builder in setting out the organ within, nor for the need for the tuner to gain access. Thus it is that the interior was particularly cramped, with pneumatic tubes

and wind trunks rising up at the back of the instrument just where a tuner might gain access over the upper reservoir. Instead, the tuner had to place a ladder under the central tower of the case, climb up, lift out from the case the longest central pipe and hand it down the ladder, then do the same with the other pipes in the central tower before squeezing in, on to a short central passage-board over the Great. The Swell is accessed

through the shutters and the Pedal pipes and their actions could hardly be accessed at all. There has been for some twenty-five years an additional chest, tubed off the Great primary action, installed for a Stopped Diapason, added at the then organist's behest.

The other challenge for the tuner has always been the exhaust-pneumatic key action. Elderly residents of the village recall that even in their youth in the 1920s

Original Specification (1913)

GREAT ORGAN (58 NOTES)		SWELL ORGAN (58 NOTES)		PEDAL ORGAN (30 NOTES)	
Bordun	16	Violin Diapason	8	Sub Bass	16
Open Diapason	8	Lieblich Gedeckt	8	Bordun (from Great)	16
Claribel Flute	8	Echo Salicional	8	Flute (ext. Sub Bass)	8
Octave	4	Vox Angelica (ten. C)	8	Swell to Pedal	
Harmonic Flute	4	Gemshorn	4	Great to Pedal	
Swell to Great		Cornopean	8		
		Swell Octave		3 combination Pedals to Great	
				3 combination Pedals to Swell	
				Balanced swell pedal	

and 1930s the organ was prone to cipher or to have notes off. This has been the case all along despite decades of skilled attention from the Harrison tuners. It is known that one highly-respected Harrison tuner, responsible for significant organs such as King's and Trinity colleges Cambridge and Ely Cathedral, grew pale at the prospect of tuning at Lound.

Eventually, in the 1980s, Harrisons said they could do no more and the tuning passed first to one local firm (Richard Bower) and then to another – W. A. Boggis of Diss, who currently maintain it and

have undertaken the recent work. In around 1995 Bower cleaned and overhauled the instrument and installed a booster blower for the action in the hope that this would render it reliable. Sadly, it did not. Boggis, a decade later, fitted a pneumatic relay half-way up the key-action tubes in the tower in an attempt to aid the swift re-charge of the tubes; that didn't work, either.

Despite all the care and these various attempts to improve matters, the key action remained extremely sluggish and irregular in attack, release and repetition. Ciphers were endemic and the

Pedal actions, being particularly hard to reach, were even worse. The stop action was uneven in operation, though more acceptable.

I was called in to advise in 2018 and was pleased to do so, though had some difficult decisions and recommendations to make once I had thoroughly examined the instrument. The conservationist in any organ consultant always wished to preserve and conserve organs when possible – and when wise / appropriate so to do. In this instance it seemed clear to me that having suffered more than a century of unreliable service from what would have been a particularly expensive organ, and having invested further significant sums in attempting to improve it over the past three decades, the church deserved to have a reliable instrument; one where future maintenance and restoration costs are minimised. This must surely be the dominant consideration and the first priority in most such projects.

One way to achieve this with minimal loss of original materials would be to disconnect the pneumatic apparatus at both ends, fit direct pull-down magnets to the pallets in the soundboards and contacts to the key action within the console. It should be said at this point that although the organ was well restored by Bower and was looked after as well as could be managed by Boggis, the two areas of the lead pneumatic tubes which had never been reached for repair were in a serious state. Under the floor the lead tubes had suffered corrosion over 100+ years through the damp with which they are surrounded. They needed replacing – an extremely challenging task, given their inaccessible position. Similarly, at the very top of the tube run, behind the organ, the weight of the 20ft vertical tube run had distorted and pinched the tubes at the top (a common problem with such vertical runs after 100 years), adding to the need to replace them, though they did not, in my view, add to the action problems,



Image 3 | Electrification of the stop action, leaving all mechanical parts in place for composition pedals



Image 4 | Restored Great soundboard fitted with pull-down magnets

which were clearly endemic and could not be corrected simply by replacing tubing.

So, my recommendation was to retain the mechanical part of the key actions in the console up to the touch box and fit contacts to the external exhaust valves, which are sprung like small pallets, lifted by stickers at the rear of the keys, presenting a ready surface for fitting out. In this way the touch would remain the same and the console would lose no components. In the organ, the new magnets should be able to be fitted to the pallet pull-downs. Pedal chests would also need converting, with a lever-magnet operating the valve stem, as is commonly and perfectly satisfactorily done. The stop-action was also converted to solenoid operation at the soundboards, but leaving all the mechanical components in the console (for the composition pedals).

By making this fundamental but reversible change the parish would, I felt, both gain an organ

which has a fast and reliable action, and also preserve much of the 1913 mechanism. The booster blower could be removed along with all the tubing and the pneumatic relay, and the original wind trunk from the main blower could be rerouted to the main reservoir, as it once was.

A Stopped Diapason had been added to the Great at the request of a previous organist, who did not like the Claribel Flute. I felt it was arguably redundant, whereas the Great suffered not a little from the lack of a 2ft Fifteenth. The incumbent who commissioned all Comper's wonderful work in the church and bought the finest organ he could (Fr. Booth Lynes), was not a fan of bright organ tone – a trait in common with most of his generation – and thus he wrote in a letter to Arthur Harrison on 10th November 1912, that “The Great will be quite bright enough as it is without a Fifteenth.” My recommendation was not to remove the Stopped Diapason chest and console stop action as all were beautifully done

in matching style by Boggis, but to replace the Stopped Diapason pipes by Fifteenth pipes, made in the Harrison style of the time. The stop-knob would need re-engraving and exchanging places with the Great 4ft Octave knob – all easily done. The Great would then not only lead congregational singing more effectively but would also balance the Swell better when the powerful Swell Horn (+/- octave coupler) is drawn.

The work was duly carried out – during and after the Covid months – by W. A. Boggis, and has been entirely successful, with no detriment to the tone of the pipes occasioned by the action change, the composition pedals also being reset to more useful combinations. It is a great pleasure to see the good people of Lound so relieved and delighted that after 110 years their fine organ is completely reliable for the very first time.

A church is not a museum for unreliable bits of old organ mechanism (however beautifully

made) to be kept semi-functional. The liturgy and music making at Lound has been impeded for far too many decades by the unreliability of its otherwise superbly-made organ. Now was surely the time to sort that out, once and for all. Some would object to the very idea

of electrifying a vintage Harrison action – a few did. Had it ever been reliable I would of course have recommended restoring it back to factory condition. But it had *never* been reliable and anyone challenging this recommendation would have needed to come up with

another method of ensuring that the parishioners of Lound have, for the very first time, an organ whose responsive and reliable key action is a worthy complement to Comper's glorious and ever-inspiring organ case, font cover and rood screen.

Very much worth a visit.



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

~ THE LISTENING POST ~

David Grealy

From Galway in the west of Ireland, David Grealy has recently moved to the UK to take up the post of Assistant Organist in Leeds Cathedral. As well as working closely with the cathedral choirs, he teaches within the Diocese of Leeds Keyboard Studies Programme. Prior to coming to Leeds, David was Organist of St Mary's Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, and has also held posts in Westminster and Galway Cathedrals.

David is a graduate of Maynooth University (Ireland), as well as the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz, Cologne (Germany), where he completed a Master's in organ performance.



What's the last recording you bought?

A recording of the Tallis Scholars singing Tallis's *Lamentations* and assorted others of his motets.

What have you been listening to for work recently?

I've been listening to Widor's *Symphonie Romane*, as I'm hoping to finish learning it soon. I've had a recording of Daniel Roth playing it in St-Sulpice for a while, and there is also a more recent recording from Peter Stevens on the organ of Buckfast Abbey.

What have you been listening to for pleasure recently?

I've been going through a Gilbert and Sullivan phase lately. The use of the English language is so clever, and much of the satire is still very relevant today. I also like the way Arthur Sullivan's music subtly pokes fun at the operatic conventions of the time.

Which recording would you take with you to your desert island?

I would either take a recording of the Bach orchestral suites or of his string concertos, especially the Double Violin Concerto. It's possible to engage with this music intellectually, or just simply to relax listening to it: a lot of music lets you do only one of those things.

What's the most surprising/unexpected recording you own?

I have a 'Best of André Rieu' disc that a relative of mine got for me a couple of Christmasses ago. I was taken along to see Rieu perform in Dublin not long afterwards thinking that it wouldn't be my sort of thing, but it was actually great fun. He certainly knows how to put on a show!