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## *Organ Works*

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

# David Shuker and Orgelkids

**I**n this issue I interview a man of many abilities, Dr David Shuker. He fits the profile of this column – ‘Something Old, Something New’ – better than anyone else I can think of, for his life has embraced particularly diverse careers.

After many years working as a research chemist at the very highest level, David turned to organ-building, publishing, and antiquarian organ book sales. Sufficient skills to occupy the lives of several busy people were clearly needed, but all four careers were managed – indeed, executed with distinction – by one person. It is David’s current central involvement with the Orgelkids project which prompted me to interview him. During the summer of 2025 he has been making two kit organs for Orgelkids, which were finished in time (just!) to supply photographs to illustrate this article.

PAUL HALE



**1** Children assembling an Orgelkids organ



**PH** Thanks for agreeing to be interviewed, David. May I start by asking you from where your initial interest and enthusiasm for the organ began? At school? In a church choir? And was it technical and historic, as now, or were you a serious player as well?

**DS** I started having piano lessons at the age of 12 and then began organ lessons at 14. I can't quite remember exactly how I became interested in the organ except perhaps being impressed by the grandeur, and variety, of the sounds. The first organ I heard was the Abbott & Smith rebuild of an 1811 G. P. England organ in Shifnal Parish Church (see NPOR N04690), and I know that you are very familiar with that organ in its restored state (NPOR N01386), Paul, having advised on its most recent restoration. But the organ I had lessons on was the much smaller 1914 Nicholson organ in nearby Kemberton Parish Church (NPOR N04702) where I used to cycle to practise. I wasn't a particularly assiduous student as a teenager because

my other passion was chemistry, which took up a lot of my time – mainly developing ever more efficient, and sometimes spectacularly explosive, rocket propellants, with my best friend.

**PH** We'll return soon to chemistry, but can you remember the first organ book you came across? Did it fire you with enthusiasm to collect books on the organ, as was my own experience?

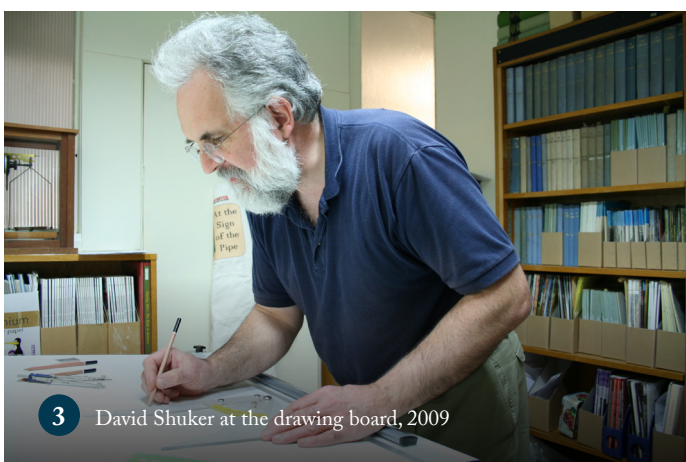
**DS** Fairly quickly I became interested in the mechanics of organs and my first book was *The Organ Handbook* by Hans Klotz, closely followed by a copy of *The Organ* by Sumner. They were, and still are, my long-time companions and sat, perhaps a little uncomfortably, alongside my science books and journals for a number of years.

**PH** And yet you must have read chemistry at university? Ever tempted to read music instead?





2 David Shuker at the bench, summer 2025



3 David Shuker at the drawing board, 2009



4 David Shuker in his Rothley workshop, 2009

**DS** I went to Imperial College in 1974 to study chemistry and took advantage of a lot of music that was on offer in London, including having organ lessons with the late Stephen Drummond Wolff FRCO on the organ of Holy Trinity, Prince Consort Road. I wanted to play better but I didn't practise enough. I worked my way through the *Eight 'Short' Preludes and Fugues* and that was about it. I used to practise on the Chaplin organ at the top of the RCO building just behind the Royal Albert Hall, and only once played the College organ, using only the quietest stops. The coffee in the members' common room was excellent – with real cream!

**PH** The first 30 years of your working life were spent, I believe, as a research chemist, specialising in the biological chemistry of cancer, during which you published some 120 research papers. Did you have time to nurture your interest in the organ during this period, and if so, how?

**DS** I was very fortunate in my chemistry career. I studied chemistry initially because I wanted to be a forensic scientist (inspired by the BBC TV series *The Expert* with Marius Goring) but the Home Office did not take in summer students and I ended up in the analytical labs of the Thames Water Authority. This experience led progressively to an interest in the biological chemistry underlying the progression of cancer, from the earliest molecular changes in DNA to the clinical disease. Interestingly, while I was away in London, the G. P. England organ at Shifnal had been restored by Hawkins of Walsall back to something like its original state, and I was at the opening recital. Hearing that organ and having discovered a wonderful recording by Nicholas Danby of English organ music on the St Mary's, Rotherhithe organ fired up my enthusiasm for the early English organ.

After completing my PhD at Imperial College, supported by the Cancer Research Campaign, I went to MIT in Cambridge, Massachusetts to work in the Nutrition and Food Science department – accompanied by my wife, Linda, also a chemist. In the US I became good friends with a fellow ex-pat scientist who was also a very good organist, who introduced me to the neo-baroque style of organ-building that was very much in vogue in the mid-70s. I even arranged a visit to the workshops of Fritz Noack and came away clutching a handful of brochures of some of their smaller organs with some vague notion that this was something that I wanted to do at some point in my life.

**PH** Having decided to change career, how did you develop the skills to offer yourself as a professional organ-builder? Such a late arrival into paid work as an organ-builder is rare.

**DS** My career as a research scientist progressed to the inevitable stage of seniority where the thing that I was good at – laboratory work – was replaced by the thing that I am most definitely not good at – administration: a classic case, I fear, of the Peter principle – promotion to the level of incompetence. I had become Head of the Department of Chemistry at the Open University, which was a tremendous privilege because the staff had developed very successful ways of teaching a notoriously difficult subject to all comers. I really enjoyed teaching at the summer schools, but the administration became a real burden. So, while remaining a member of the Science Faculty, I became a student in the Arts Faculty – enrolling for an MA in Music – something that only the OU can offer to a person like me whose only musical qualification was an ABRSM Grade 5 certificate for violin! The OU MA course had many elements derived from the great Handel scholar, Donald Burrows, who was Head of Music at the time, including a module on researching the history of an organ of your choice. I was already planning to ‘jump ship’ and needed something to give me a modicum of credibility in a new career. The opportunity came when my wife was accepted for ordination and became a curate in Rothley, Leicestershire. I resigned my chair at the OU and rented a small industrial unit in the village. I bought some tools, a workbench and a pile of reclaimed pine and oak library shelves and set about making a portable organ. If, at the end of the first year, no-one had paid me to do any organ work, I would have to be reconciled to the pursuit of a very expensive hobby. During the first 12 months I did a small job for the University of Leicester on a chamber organ, and re-leathered a harmonium. I had approached Martin Goetze and Dominic Gwynn, offering some of my time for no salary to learn the art of organ-building, but Martin gently suggested that I was too old at 50 to be an apprentice and that I should just go ahead and build organs if I wanted to. It was meeting another Martin, Martin Renshaw, that made the difference for me. I was aware of Martin R’s book on Snetzler (another early acquisition) and we met when he came to tune the Snetzler organ at Swithland (NPOR R01307).

**PH** What took you then to Kent? And what interesting projects did you execute there?

**DS** When my wife Linda was offered the incumbency of four rural parishes near West Malling in Kent, I was able to rent larger premises on a rural estate and that was when work began to take off. Apart from a few small jobs in Rothley, most of my early work came from joint projects with Martin Renshaw. Martin and I worked a lot together,

and I felt that every day I worked with him I learnt something new about organ-building. The first job I did for Martin was to make a small bass chest and rollerboard for a little two-stop organ that may or may not have been made by Holdich (the bellows weights had GMH on them) that ended up with a beautifully painted case in a small church in northern France. The next job was much more substantial – a two-manual late-eighteenth-century organ for which I rebuilt the building frame, made a new stop and coupler action, restored the shifting mechanism, and built a new console surround – again destined for a church near Blois in France.

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Little by little, work began to come my way in my own right. One of the most interesting projects was the restoration of the organ part and case of a 1791 ‘organised piano’ made by Érard. I had long been interested in such an instrument and had admired from a distance one that was in the Cité de la Musique in Paris. Then, one day, I got a call from someone who lived only ten miles from my workshop who had purchased an almost identical instrument in the US and had it shipped to England to add to his collection. I was able to reconstruct the foot-operated bellows (pedals made by a local blacksmith) from the bits that had remained after a blower had been inserted inside the case. Remarkably, the majority of the original pipework was there and overall was in a better state of preservation than the Paris example, despite having travelled thousands of miles over more than two centuries (see *BIOSJ* 43 (2019) pp. 47–57). Another collector commissioned me to buy





5 David Shuker leathering the bellows of a portable organ, 2009

an early-nineteenth-century chamber organ at a country house auction in Dorset, dismantle it and move it back to my workshop for a complete restoration. All of this happened just before the COVID pandemic, and the work kept me gainfully occupied in splendid isolation in rural Kent before taking it to Braemar in Scotland. This led to another job in Scotland where I was recently employed to move a Bewsher & Fleetwood chamber organ from one church to another and carry out some essential repairs, including the restoration of all the original features, including foot- and hand-blowing, a shifting mechanism and a remarkable early pedalboard.

**PH** So good that such interesting organ work kept you busy, David. And then there was/is the specialist bookselling business and, indeed, book publishing. How did that come about?

**DS** The bookselling came about simply due to my change of career – I have always been something of a bibliophile, and when I moved into organ-building I needed to replace my science books and periodicals with ones on organs. Finally, Klotz and Sumner were among friends!

As an independent researcher with limited access to academic libraries I value having the key reference books and periodicals to hand. I also came to realise that moving into organ-building rather late in life was not going to pay all the bills, so I needed something to provide regular income. I found that I could acquire books and music at auctions, and through private purchases of collections, and put together catalogues to send to like-minded organ enthusiasts who were interested in building up their collections. The internet has also been a key factor in this side of the business, as a specialist physical bookshop would have had overheads that could not be easily recouped in such a niche area.

The publishing began with a little book called *Historic Organs of Leicestershire: A Personal Perspective* published in 2010. There wasn't anything like that for some of the very interesting organs in Leicestershire – I printed 100 copies and they all sold out fairly quickly. Sadly, some of the organs have since gone. Anyway, that early success encouraged me to do more, particularly as several people approached me to publish their books – the late Rodney Matthews on Holdich, Nigel Browne on Devon Organs, Rolf Claus on BWV 565, and Martin Renshaw on John Marsh. I was



happy to publish these books as they might not have found a publisher otherwise, I suspect, and all have added valuable new information to the organ literature. I knew my limits, however, and could not take on larger projects that have been more successfully undertaken by BIOS.

**PH** You're currently the editor of the *BIOS Reporter*. Have you always been active and interested in the work of BIOS, and how do you think it has changed over the past 50 years?

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**DS** I first came across BIOS in the OU library almost 25 years ago – after carefully perusing the chemistry journals for my day job I would reward myself with a stroll along the music section (Early Music was one of my favourite periodicals) and was pleased to come across a copy of the *BIOS Journal*. Out there was a group of people interested in the more academic side of organ history, as I had become – and out fell a membership form! I had discovered during the course of my OU MA that research in music history made use of a similar skill set that I had acquired in my chemistry career – detective work in the published literature and in original documents to winkle out key facts. Just as with organ-building I thought that I would arrive too late on the scene to be able to add anything of interest – surely the ground in organ history had been so well trodden that nothing new could be unearthed. Not so! In my case I have been astonished to discover that there were many more women organists two hundred and more years ago than had been imagined. As a relative newcomer to BIOS I feel that there is still a vast amount to do – not just to uncover new facts (or 'stamp collecting' as Peter Williams once sagely advised me not to fall into the trap of doing) but to deepen our understanding of our organ history and its contribution to our cultural and technological life.

**PH** What have been your own areas of particular research interest, in the greater organ world?



6 Keyboard, stage 3 – all cut and polished



7 Organ with partially completed pipes





8 Bellows and reservoir before leathering



9 Chest and upperboard



10 Just leathering, action and pipes needed



11 Orgelkids UK case

**DS** My final year dissertation for the OU MA was on the musical life of the astronomer William Herschel. Ever since handling the manuscript copies of Herschel's symphonies in the old British Museum Reading Room more than 40 years ago, I have been fascinated by the character of someone who made such fundamental discoveries in science (the discovery of Uranus in 1781 and of infrared radiation in 1800) having spent the first part of his life as a professional, and successful, musician, including being an organist. I have come to the view that Herschel's scientific success was actually closely related to his musical life and I have yet to tell this tale – another book is brewing, let us say – and, more widely, that the subtle interplay of musical culture and scientific culture is something to be cherished rather than the former merely being something desirable but too easily dispensed with.

**PH** Let's turn to your current project which is back to organ-building again, but on a tiny scale – 'Orgelkids'! Where and when did Orgelkids start and how did you come to be involved with building these kit organs (is that the correct expression?), and indeed running educational events with them?

**DS** For me, Orgelkids goes right back to my first attempt at organ-building when I made a reconstruction of a late-Medieval portative organ. People were always intrigued how such a small organ could make the sound that it does. I was always on the lookout for some way to make organs more accessible to a wider public. Almost by chance I came across a YouTube video of a small organ that had been designed by a retired Belgian organ-builder named Wim Janssen. The organ could be assembled without tools and illustrated the main principles of organ-building – the action viewed through a transparent window, sliders to show how stops worked and a wind system with a small reservoir. I soon learned that this little organ had been taken up by the Dutch Orgelkids project – an initiative promoted by Lydia Vroegindeweij (see <https://www.orgelkids.nl/en/> for the background and many resources).

The Dutch organbuilders Verscheuren had produced a set of plans which could be purchased for a modest sum, and they would also make the kits to order. I decided to promote the Orgelkids idea in the UK and spent the winter of 2018/19 making one of the kits myself. My first Orgelkids workshop was in a community school in Leicester in the autumn of 2019. Plans were already underway for several workshops in Norfolk and Essex when the COVID pandemic hit in March 2020 and everything ground to a halt. Post-Covid things began to gradually get moving again and I have led workshops all over the country as well as building one kit for a customer. There is also a Dutch Orgelkids kit in the UK, coincidentally in Norfolk (see <https://www.orgelkidsuk.org/>)





**12** Founder of OrgelKids, Lydia Vroegindeweij, and organ builder Wim Janssen

Despite now being retired and moved to Norfolk I have recently taken in a couple of orders for Orgelkids kits, and 2025 being Play the Organ Year has led to several bookings for workshops in the autumn. Orgelkids is, I think, an inspired idea and works very well for children of all ages and for adults. I am happy to have been a small part in spreading the word about organs in a very hands-on way, and it makes me wonder how my life would have been had I seen such an accessible organ when I was a child.

**PH** That's so very interesting, David – thanks so much for taking time out to answer my questions. I'm sure our readers will be fascinated by your unusual and remarkably productive life. They will also enjoy studying the photographs of the current pair of Orgelkids instruments you have been making this summer. Your work in schools with these beautiful kit organs will be transformational for those children fortunate enough to attend one of your 'put it together and play it' sessions. I hope some of our readers will get in touch with you to ask whether such a session might be possible in a school that they know.

#### Following the interview, David wrote to me further about the Orgelkids instruments:

Things perhaps to emphasise about the Orgelkids kit: they are made of solid oak (seasoned for almost 20 years now). Except for a few screws and the pipe connecting the bellows to the soundboard, everything else is made from scratch. Traditional techniques are applied throughout, with suspended action, English style glued-down tails to pallets, brass springs, and English style Stopped Diapason pipes rather than the Gedackt style found in the original kits.

I encourage readers to watch the YouTube video at [https://youtu.be/TCm\\_3pcHGvk](https://youtu.be/TCm_3pcHGvk) to see for themselves just how engrossed a group of small children can be in assembling an entire small two-rank, 48-pipe organ. Every school should have one!

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**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 has been a diploma examiner for the RCO, and has been awarded honorary fellowships by the GCM and the RSCM, and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth 'Thomas Cranmer Award' for his contribution to church music.

More information is available at [www.paulhale.org](http://www.paulhale.org)

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