
Organ Works

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

The Compton organ in St Michael & All Angels

Tettenhall, Wolverhampton
(1955/56)

The John Compton Organ Company is often remembered these days mainly as the UK's most prolific builder of organs for cinemas. In fact, this extremely popular (though, in the event, financially challenging) product was made for fewer than two decades when cinema-building was at its height. Their bread and butter – with occasional jam – had always been (and remained) church organs.

PAUL HALE



1 St Michael's, Tettenhall, exterior



After the 1939–45 war, in order to reassure clients that the Compton firm was very much still a going concern, they took out regular full-page advertisements in *Musical Opinion*. John Compton retired in 1953, at the age of 79. He had been in business since 1902, so had completed a half-century of running his firm: five decades of extraordinary technical and musical development in the organ world. In 1954 the firm declared in *Musical Opinion* that since 1947 they had installed 100 new instruments [more than a few were Miniaturas], completed 50 major rebuilds, and sold about 300 Electrones. This was indeed a significant achievement, considering that materials remained rationed for much of this time. It is often forgotten that post-war rationing did not entirely cease until 5th July, 1954.

The next two large rebuilds then came along that year: the first was Bangor Cathedral (IV/87), an electrification and

enlarging of a 64-stop Hill. The second was for St Martin in the Bull Ring, Birmingham (IV/68, finished in 1955). In 1955–6 the firm sent out a totally-enclosed 11-rank III/56 unit organ to St Eugene's R.C. Cathedral, an impressive and beautiful Gothic building in Londonderry. Also in 1956, the fine Hunter at St Cuthbert's, Philbeach Gardens (London) was electrified and slightly enlarged.

A third very satisfactory 1955/6 project was a new instrument with a stop-knob console for St Michael & All Angels, Tettenhall (near Wolverhampton). It was to be John Compton's last significant organ, for he died at King Edward's Hospital, Ealing, on 6th April, 1957 and was cremated on 11th April at Mortlake Crematorium, where in 1939 his company, ironically, had supplied a 4-rank Miniatura variant, while Compton himself was a prisoner of Mussolini during WWII. The company carried on under the direction of



2 Toe pistons - additional Compton pistons sourced through the trade



3 Main organ screen, with Great, Pedal and (elevated) Swell visible

Jimmy Taylor, with the able assistance of Clifford Hawtin, but this stability was all too soon to be irretrievably broken by Taylor's unexpected death in 1957, shortly after the completion of their exceptionally fine instrument for St Bride's, Fleet Street. In 1960/1 a significant new organ was made for the famous Tractarian church of St Alban in Holborn. The Butterfield church of 1863 had been rebuilt after being all but destroyed in the war, as a result of which it lost its IV/46 'Father' Willis of 1895, an organ whose brilliant flue choruses and 13 ranks of reeds famously filled this church with magnificent tone.

Pipe organ-building at Comptons ceased altogether in 1963. The full Compton story is a tale for another day (I'm working on it); let us now consider the Tettenhall and St Alban's instruments – and their recent refurbishment – in detail...

The medieval church of St Michael and All Angels, Tettenhall suffered a devastating fire on 2nd February, 1950, following which all that remained intact was the bell tower and the south porch. The church was rebuilt in a neo-Gothic idiom, though with unusual roof and window shapes, reopening on 16th April, 1955. Needless to say, the William Hill organ had been lost in the fire. A chamber was formed, north of the chancel, for a replacement organ, speaking mainly up the north aisle of the nave, with a smaller opening into the chancel. The John Compton firm was chosen to install a new organ, possibly because West Midlands organists were excited by their activity in rebuilding two notable Birmingham organs in the early 1950s: one in the large new circular Roman Catholic church of St Catherine of Sienna; the other in St Martin in the Bull Ring. It cost £6,750, rather less than Willis and Rushworth & Dreaper had quoted, and contained around 1,700 pipes.

Tettenhall is a largely straight III/47 in which much mahogany was used, as was the company's practice in the 1950s; yet only four new pipes were wooden,



4 Looking north east to see the large wooden screens in front of the two organ chamber arches

the very rare tri-phonic Bourdon bass (more on that later). There is an open wooden flute on the Choir, but the pipes have the appearance of a vintage Norman & Beard rank, inserted into an otherwise new and most effective organ. One wonders why Comptons made so few wooden pipes over the decades – just basses. It helps explain their cinema organ Tibias being of metal, whereas Wurlitzer's were of wood. The occasional wooden Compton Tibia was therefore almost certainly 'made out' by Walkers during their years of close association.

Over the years Comptons built a variety of pipe chests – though never a slider soundboard. Though associated with mass-produced standard Roosevelt chests in their cinema work, elsewhere they used pouch chests, cone chests or

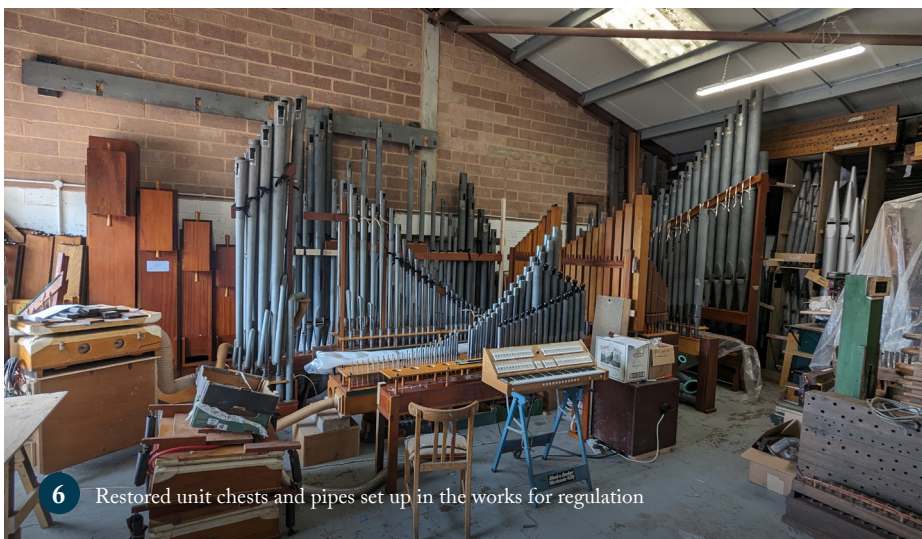
(later) direct-electric chests. If there was no extension, stop control could be by ventil (admitting the wind under a rank when it was drawn) rather than by their otherwise ubiquitous (and incredibly reliable) electro-mechanical switching. The Tettenthall organ was built with a direct-electric chest for the five 'straight' ranks on the Choir. The Great and Swell are ventil chests with envelope motors for each note, activated by lever magnets, which lift a cone valve and play the pipe of whatever stop has had its portion of the chest filled with wind by the stop-knob operating a ventil. The extended ranks all use the usual Compton Roosevelt notes, with the majority of Roosevelt motors activated by chest-magnets, the bass notes by compound magnets.

'It proved the worst possible place in the church to hear the organ, yet John Compton had proposed it!'

The large wooden screen at the head of the north aisle hides the Great and Pedal at the lower level, with the Swell box above, against the rear (eastern) wall of the chamber. Walking through the Swell, from left to right, one then emerges in the Choir box, which occupies the higher position in the portion of the chamber which is



5 Bass jamb – note typical Compton ventil switched for extended ranks and bass chests



6 Restored unit chests and pipes set up in the works for regulation

‘The refurbished instrument was opened by Prof. Ian Tracey, to a full and appreciative audience, on 22nd June, 2025.’

nearest the Lady Chapel (in the former chancel). In front of it, recumbent, is the large mahogany stopped 32ft Polyphone pipe. Wind is supplied by six standard sprung Compton single-rise regulators, with zinc trunking to the chests. The console was situated on the south side, at the head of the nave, with choir stalls in front of it. It proved the worst possible place in the church to hear the organ, yet John Compton had proposed it!

In recent years, the eastern wall behind the organ (which forms the back of the Swell enclosure) became saturated with water, which seeped through and caused the plaster to become detached from the wall, falling into the Swell basses. Finally, lead theft from the roof resulted in a serious ingress of water. Together, this put many of the pipes off speech and seeped into the chests, causing many more notes to fail. An insurance claim was sufficient to cover restoration of the water damaged elements of the organ. This work, plus the complete renovation of the rest of the organ, was undertaken by Michael Farley Organ Builders Ltd. Led by Michael Farley, the refurbishment was undertaken by Ashley Tooze (who did much of the constructional work), Gary Cook, Alison Henham and Bob Millington (tonal regulation). Driving the project and raising funds for it was Peter Morris, the Organist, who had in recent years done much the same for his previous church – the Collegiate Church of St Peter, Wolverhampton, where he ran a magnificent choir.



7 The Compton console - refurbished and updated

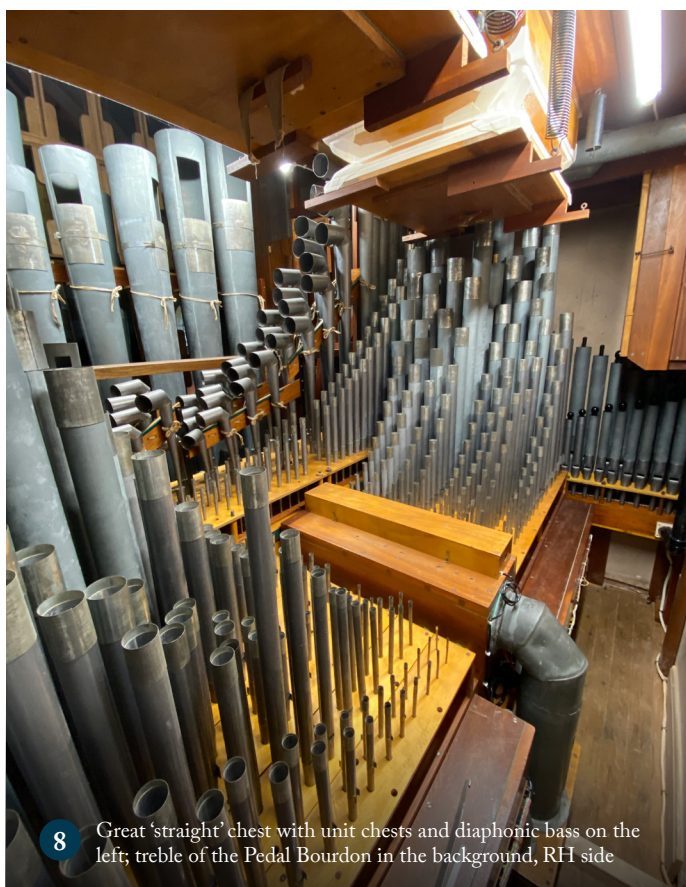
The whole organ has received a top-to-bottom refurbishment and releathering, with new magnets and wiring, two new Swell engines, and a new control system; the console is beautifully refurbished with new (and many additional) thumb and toe pistons, plus a state-of-the-art setter system and nylon feet so that it slides on the church's smooth floor. A Great Mixture – a strange omission from the 1955 scheme – was added, on its own chest adjacent to the Great soundboard, and the Swell Cymbale (extended from the Viola) was pitched an octave higher, the original Cymbale being renamed 'Mixture'. The organ-builders were particularly interested in the four mahogany pipes for the bottom

octave of the Pedal Bourdon rank, the rest of which is of metal. Each of these pipes plays three notes, the lower two of which add to the fundamental pitch additional stopped/tuned chambers mounted on the front of the pipe. Most such Compton basses (for Flute or Tibia ranks) were bi-phonic, with simply a mitred metal tube emerging from the pipe, tuned with a tuning slide.

The refurbished instrument was opened by Prof. Ian Tracey, to a full and appreciative audience, on 22nd June, 2025.

In the June issue I shall be looking at the 1959–60 Compton organ in St Alban's, Holborn, and its recent complete refurbishment by B. C. Shepherd & Sons.

A personal postscript, if I may: I am researching John Compton, his company and organs, in preparation for writing a book – long overdue – on all he and his talented colleagues achieved over five decades. If any readers have Compton printed material (particularly any factory documents such as console layouts, rank derivations and drawings) they would be prepared to lend me, I would be enormously grateful. I can be reached at PaulHale@diaphone.clara.net.



8 Great 'straight' chest with unit chests and diaphonic bass on the left; treble of the Pedal Bourdon in the background, RH side



9 Haskelled Swell Contra Viola basses

Great Organ

1	Double Diapason	16	A; bass F
2	First Diapason	8	bass G
3	Second Diapason	8	A
4	Hohlflöte	8	
5	Dulciana	8	B
6	Octave	4	
7	Principal	4	A
8	Harmonic Flute	4	
9	Twelfth	2 ² / ₃	
10	Fifteenth	2	A
11	Mixture 19.22.26	III	new, 37 notes, repeating; added 2024
12	Tromba	8	C
Swell to Great			
Choir to Great			
added 2024			

Swell Organ

13	Contra Viola	16	D, Haskelled bass
14	Geigen	8	
15	Lieblich Gedeckt	8	
16	Viola da Gamba	8	D
17	Viole Celeste	8	from tenor C, beats sharp
18	Gemshorn	4	
19	Octave Viola	4	D
20	Fifteenth	2	D
21	Mixture 12.15.19.22	IV	D (was Cymbale)
22	Cymbale 19.22.26.29	IV	D
23	Contra Hautboy	16	E
24	Trumpet	8	
25	Hautboy	8	E
Tremulant			
Super Octave			
Sub Octave			

Choir Organ

26	Contra Dulciana	16	B, from tenor C
27	Claribel	8	wood
28	Dulciana	8	B
29	Vox Angelica	8	from tenor C, beats flat
30	Flauto Traverso	4	
31	Dulcet	4	B
32	Dulcet Twelfth	2 ² / ₃	B
33	Piccolo	2	
34	Tierce	1 ³ / ₅	
35	Hautboy	8	E
Tremulant			
36	Tromba	8	C
37	Octave Tromba	4	C
Swell to Choir			
Great to Choir			
Super Octave			
Sub Octave			

Pedal Organ

38	Subbass	32	F, polyphone bass
39	Contrabass	16	G, diaphone bass
40	Bourdon	16	F, triphonic bass
41	Gamba	16	D
42	Octave	8	G
43	Flute	8	F
44	Fifteenth	4	A
45	Mixture 12.15.19.22	IV	A
46	Harmonics 17.19. ^b 21.23	V	A & F
47	Trombone	16	C
48	Hautboy	16	E
49	Tromba	8	C
50	Octave Tromba	4	C

Swell Octave to Pedal

Swell to Pedal

Great to Pedal

Choir to Pedal

Accessories

Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled

Generals on Pedal toe pistons

Generals on Swell toe pistons

Auto Bass on Great

Ventil switches to unit chests (7) and main Choir chest.

Swell pedal indicators

Eight thumb pistons to Great

Eight thumb pistons to Swell

Eight thumb pistons to Choir

Eight General thumb pistons

Eight toe pistons to Pedal

Eight toe pistons to Swell

Multi-level indicators for divisional (99) and General (999) piston memories

Stepper for Generals with thumb and toe advance and retard pistons

Reversible thumb pistons to Great to Pedal, Swell to Pedal, Choir to Pedal, Swell to Great, Choir to Great, Swell to Choir, Great to Choir, 32ft Subbass, 16ft Trombone

Reversible toe pistons to Great to Pedal, Swell to Great

General Cancel

Setter piston

Recorder, with tablet control

The couplers are on luminous touches above the Swell manual

Wind pressures

Great main 7ins, Great Second Diapason 5¹/₄ins, Swell main 6ins, Swell reeds 5¹/₂ins (bare), Choir 3³/₄ins (bare), Pedal 5¹/₄ins, Tromba/Trombone 8¹/₂ins (bare)



10 Lady Chapel screen (Choir and polyphone behind)

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