
Organ Works

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

The Compton organ in St Alban's, Holborn (1959–60)

Once dubbed 'the loudest organ in London,' the Compton at St Alban's, Holborn has long been both admired and misunderstood. Now, after a comprehensive refurbishment, its full musical character has been rediscovered.

PAUL HALE



1 St Alban's, Holborn



‘Had the Compton firm survived, under new management, one wonders what they might have continued to achieve.’

In the March issue we looked at the first of two late Compton organs which have recently been refurbished – Tettenhall parish church in the West Midlands. In this issue I turn to consider the other, built during 1959–60 for the famous Tractarian church of St Alban, in Holborn, London.

The instrument built for St Alban’s (nominally to the design of Arnold Richardson, who was organist there as well as at Wolverhampton’s Civic Hall, also

being a Professor of Organ at the RAM) had to be somewhat larger and louder than that at Tettenhall, as the church is probably three times the size. Additional ranks were an extra Great Diapason, a Choir/Pedal Tuba 16/8/4 instead of a Tromba, four independent chorus reeds (on Great and Swell) in addition to two derived to the Pedal, plus a big string and a Dulciana Mixture (‘Acuta’ – the usual Compton name for such a stop) and an Orchestral Oboe on the Choir. In the



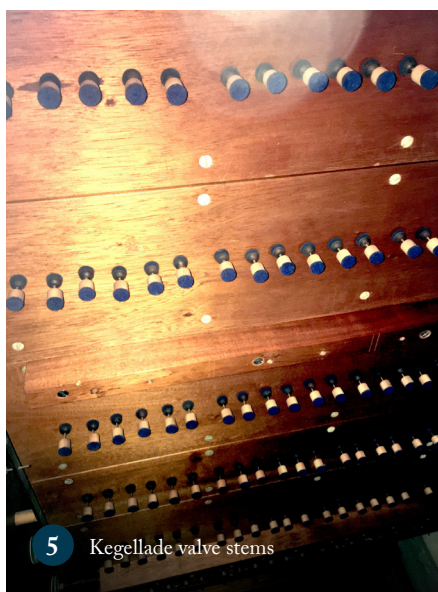
2 Biphonic Bourdon basses



3 Envelope motors awaiting releathering



4 Flue pipes of the Great division



5 Kegellade valve stems



‘The church’s acoustics revealed themselves as exceptionally resonant.’

The organ has fared well over the decades, with remedial and tonal work by Rushworth & Dreaper in 1990. N. P. Mander Ltd had already made one alteration, in 1980: they cut down and stoppered the Great Hohl Flute, renaming it Gedackt, putting it on the Choir to replace the Concert Flute, and fitting a vintage Stopped Diapason to the Great in its place. Thus the organ lost both its open 8ft flutes and gained two stopped ones; curious. The 2024–5 complete refurbishment by B. C. Shepherd & Sons (with assistance from P&S Organ Supplies) has been related to me by Eric Shepherd: ‘The restored main chests have new chest-magnets replacing the old ones for the primaries. The chests use German envelope motors for their type of Kegellade action, all of which have been replaced with new white leather motors, many made by Paul Corin. All of the unit chests have been overhauled: the Great Third Open rank, the Tuba, and the basses of both reeds and front pipes have new chest-magnets on their Roosevelt chests, which have been overhauled. The Swell Salicional chests and bass chests have new chest-magnets, as does the Choir Dulciana rank and bass chests. The Swell engines have been overhauled and fitted with new chest-magnets. The stop ventilis, which were overhauled, now have lever-magnets, as does the Open Wood chest. The eight wind regulators were releathered (by Andrew Fearn); the tremulants were overhauled with new chest-magnets. Unusually for Compton, there are no compound magnets in the organ.’

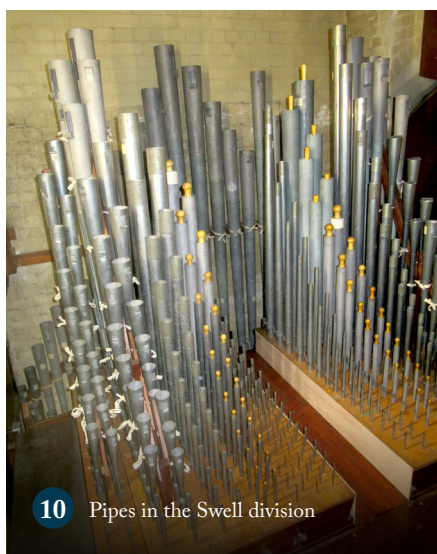
Eric added, in a talk to the IBO at the church:



8 Pedal Bourdon and Principal/Fifteenth rank



9 Pipes in the Choir division



10 Pipes in the Swell division



11 Right-hand stop jamb



12 Swell boxes on the South side



13 The Compton console, updated 2025

The console has been restored (by P&S), the keyboards overhauled, with new and additional pistons fitted. The pedalboard has been overhauled with new pedal keys fitted. New contact actions have been fitted, and new drawstop solenoids have replaced those fitted in 1990. A new Sonic Services electronic control system has been fitted, along with a new multi-channel piston capture system. The cabling and the transformer/rectifiers have been renewed. We have replaced the fibreboard behind the front pipes at the lower level of the Great with thin MDF, leaving a gap at the top so that the sound gets out better. We also removed the crumbling fibreboard behind the front pipes at the top of the organ, which stifled the tone of the Tuba – which now sounds magnificent, also restored to its original 10ins wind pressure.

The metal 1990 Pedal Octave rank has been extended to a Super Octave 4ft mainly because of the difficulty of tuning the Pedal 3-rank Mixture with no rank close by to tune it to. We used the drawstop knob for the borrowed Pedal 8ft Dulciana for this stop. The 32ft Subbass polyphone pipe had been suspended on framework and sounded very disappointing, so we have taken it out of the Pedal chamber and fitted it on the gallery floor, so that it reflects off the wooden floorboards; it is very effective now. A 32ft Bass Cornet has been derived, Compton fashion, from various Pedal ranks, and is available (uniquely) at three powers, one based on the Contra Posaune borrowed from the Swell, one based on the Trombone borrowed from the Great, and one based on the Ophicleide, which is extended from the Tuba. A new drawstop head made and engraved to Compton pattern was made for this stop. Finally, the whole organ has been cleaned.

The Organist at St Alban's since 1998 is Edward Batting. Known for his monthly Bach recitals at the church, for his work as a repetiteur and for directing the Highgate Choral Society, Mr Batting arrived at St Alban's in 1995 as Assistant to Michael Fleming. He gave a wide-ranging opening recital on 10th September 2025, beginning (refreshingly) with a delicate and delightful Voluntary by William Boyce.

The recital then embraced works by Langlais (the rarely played 'For the dedication of a church', from *Esquisses Gothique*), Buxtehude (*Prelude, Fugue & Chaconne in C*: the recently clarified Great chorus now works perfectly well in such repertoire), Whitlock (the nimble and tricky *Divertimento*, written for and dedicated to Fr Peter Priest, for many years parish priest at St Alban's), Porter-Brown (his very jolly *Tuba Tune*), Karg-Elert (*Valse mignonne*, with all the lush colours it calls for), Bossi (*Stunde der Weihe*), Howells (*Psalm Prelude II/1*) and Wagner's *Overture to 'Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg'*. Despite an Underground train strike that day, a goodly number managed to be present, applauding most warmly a superb recital and the revived tones of this splendid organ.

A new era has dawned at St Alban's, with its Compton organ now surely sounding as its makers always hoped it would. It can hold its head up now as one of the very finest late Compton organs, joining St Bride's Fleet Street and St Michael & All Angels, Tettenhall in that elite group. And it's no coincidence that all three are basically 'straight' instruments with some departments unenclosed. Had the Compton firm survived, under new management, one wonders what they might have continued to achieve.

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.



14 Polyphone with chest magnets uncovered



15 Tuba behind west case front pipes



16 West case with Great and Tuba



17 Wind regulator

Specification (2025):

Great Organ			
1	Double Open	16	B
2	First Diapason	8	
3	Second Diapason	8	
4	Third Diapason	8	B
5	Stopt Diapason	8	second-hand; 1961: Hohl Flute
6	Dulciana	8	C
7	Octave	4	
8	Principal	4	B
9	Twelfth	2 ² / ₃	
10	Super Octave	2	
11	Fifteenth	2	B
12	Mixture 19.22.26.29	IV-V	1980: was III ranks (17.19.22)
13	Double Trumpet	16	E
14	Trumpet	8	
15	Clarion	4	
Swell to Great			
Choir to Great			
Swell Organ			
16	Contra Salicional	16	A, Haskelled bass
17	Geigen Principal	8	
18	Lieblich Gedeckt	8	
19	Salicional	8	A
20	Vox Angelica	8	from GG
21	Gemshorn	4	
22	Zauberflöte	4	
23	Salicet	4	A
24	Fifteenth	2	A
25	Mixture 17.19.22	III	
26	Hautboy	8	
Tremulant			
27	Contra Posaune	16	D
28	Cornopean	8	
29	Clarion	4	
Octave			
Sub Octave			
Unison Off			
Choir Organ			
30	Contra Dulciana	16	C, Haskelled bass
31	Violoncello	8	
32	Gedackt	8	1961: Concert Flute
33	Dulciana	8	C
34	Unda Maris	8	from tenor C, beats flat
35	Harmonic Flute	4	
36	Dulcet	4	C
37	Nazard	2 ² / ₃	B
38	Dulcet Fifteenth	2	C
39	Piccolo	2	
40	Tierce	1 ³ / ₅	
41	Acuta 19.22	III	C
42	Clarinet	8	2025: replaced Orchestral Oboe *
Tremulant			
43	Tuba	8	I
Swell to Choir			
Octave			
Sub Octave			
Unison Off			
<i>*The Orchestral Oboe used Compton cinema-type Muted Trumpet pipes and proved unsatisfactory.</i>			

Pedal Organ			
44	Subbass	32	F, polyphone bass
45	Open Wood	16	G, Brindley & Foster vintage pipes
46	Open Metal	16	B
47	Bourdon	16	F, biphonic bass, treble vintage pipes
48	Salicional	16	A, Haskelled bass
49	Dulciana	16	C, Haskelled bass
50	Octave	8	H, 1990; 1961: Octave [Wood]
51	Flute	8	F, vintage pipes
52	Super Octave	4	H, 2025
53	Flute	4	F, vintage pipes
54	Mixture 15.19.22	III	
55	Bass Cornet 17.19. ^b 21.22.23	32	2025: various ranks / 3 powers
56	Ophicleide	16	I
57	Trombone	16	E
58	Contra Posaune	16	D
59	Tuba	8	I
60	Clarion	8	I
Swell Octave to Pedal			
Swell to Pedal			
Great to Pedal			
Choir to Pedal			
Accessories			
Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled			
Generals on Swell toe pistons			
Rotary switch 1, 2, 3 for Bass Cornet 32ft at three volumes			
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 and General 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, Reversible toe pistons to Great to Pedal, Swell to Great			
General Cancel			
Setter piston			
Wind pressures			
Great main 4ins, Great First Diapason and reeds 5ins, Swell 6ins, Choir 5ins, Tuba/Ophicleide 10ins, Pedal main 7½ ins.			