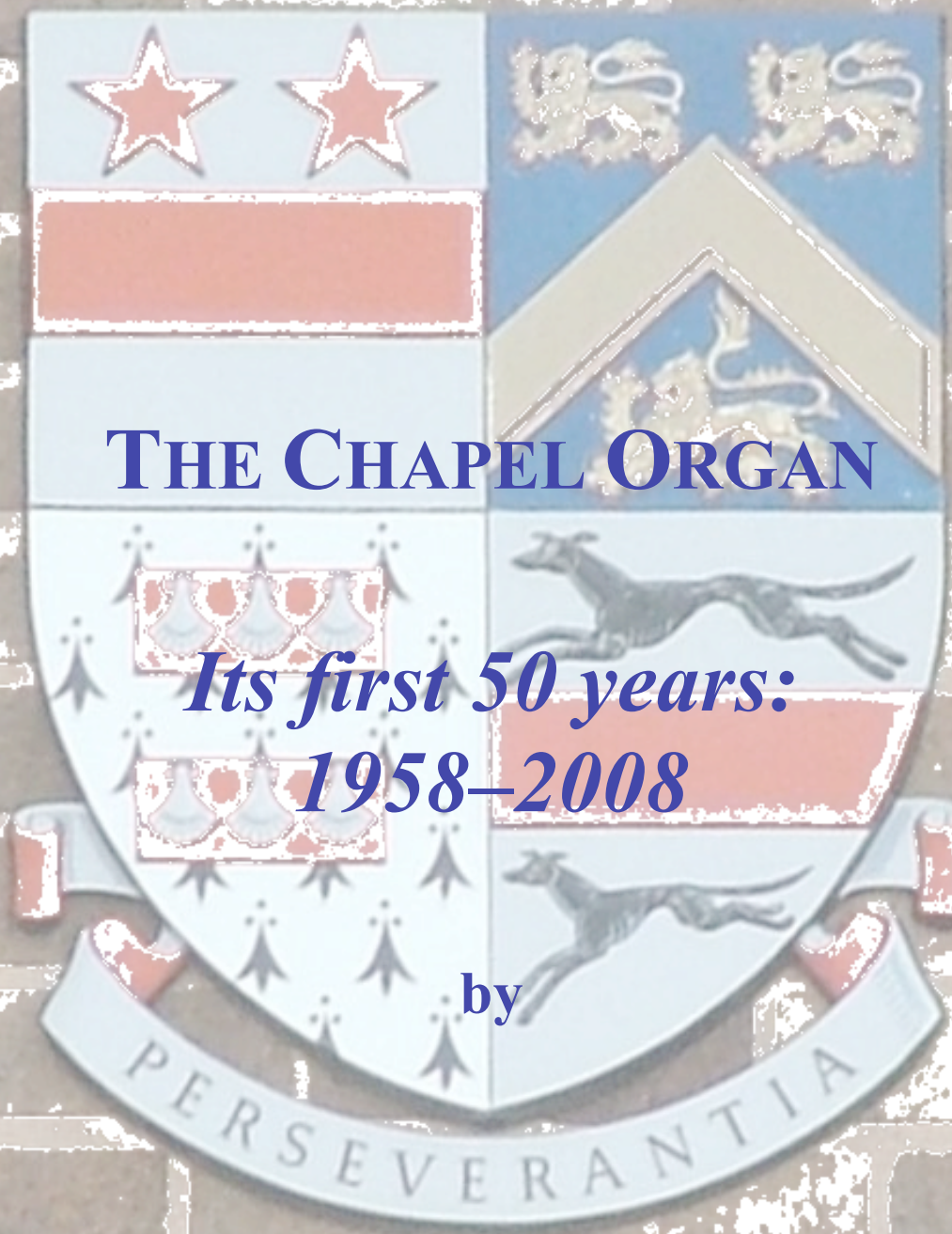
SOLIHULL SCHOOL



THE CHAPEL ORGAN

Its first 50 years: 1958–2008

by

PAUL HALE

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Foreword

by the Headmaster

Mr Phillip J Griffiths

It is hard to imagine Solihull School without its Chapel and equally hard to imagine the Chapel without its organ and choir. Over the years I have heard many of the fine organists that this school has produced develop their talents on the Chapel organ and I have been privileged to listen to the choir sing anthems and canticles in countless services. Each year I await eagerly the service of Nine Lessons and Carols as the beautiful singing and organ music fills the decorated building.

In recent years it has become apparent that the organ was in need of serious renovation. Increasingly frequent visits by Nicholson's to rectify faults indicated radical action was needed if the rich Anglican tradition of organ and choir was to be maintained. The Governors were persuaded by Paul Hale, in a memorable Governors' meeting, that a much cheaper electronic organ was not the answer; they had the courage and foresight to commit to this costly refurbishment of the pipe organ. Paul has given freely of his time to be consultant on this project and has ensured we have an instrument worthy of the Chapel building. His help and advice have been invaluable.

As a young teacher at Solihull School I heard many rumours about the history of the organ, with mention of cinema organs, chapel organs and boy-power used to build a hybrid. It seemed improbable. This booklet sets the record straight and I am indebted to Paul Hale for taking the time to research the facts and to show that the rumours had more than a grain of truth. It was Bernard Hales, quoted in these pages, who explained to me at a London Dinner his involvement in building the organ; such oral tradition makes the story of the organ even richer.

Without the vision of one of my predecessors, Mr H. B. Hitchens, and the determination and dedication of David Turnbull there would not have been a Chapel organ. Now the vision and determination of the Governing body will ensure another fifty years of organ music in this place to continue our rich tradition of music making.

Introduction

Passing by Solihull School in 1959/60, one would have seen a splendid new chapel arising in the south-eastern corner of the school playing fields – a visible sign of the vision and determination of Headmaster Harry Hitchens and a visible Christian statement to those driving by on the Warwick Road. To understand the story of the Chapel organ, its unusual genesis and the need for its total reconstruction in 2007/8, one needs to be appraised of the circumstances surrounding the building of the Chapel.

1560 is taken as the date of Solihull School's founding, for in that year the income from the Chantry Chapels of St Mary and St Katherine, in the Parish Church of St Alphege, was diverted for the founding of a Free Grammar School, by which name the school was first known. In 1566 further income was similarly diverted, from the Chantry Chapel of St Alphege. Until 1872 the school was situated almost within the shadow of the St Alphege, the pupils worshipping daily in the church. After formally becoming a public school in 1948 a feeling grew that despite its close historic ties to the parish church, the school should have a chapel of its own, to emphasise the centrality of the Christian message in its life. The concept of a Quartercentenary Thanksgiving Chapel grew, warmly supported by the Rector of Solihull (the Revd Edward Fraser) and by the Headmaster (Mr H. B. Hitchens), who became the driving force behind the project, as he was behind many initiatives to build up the school and enhance (and create) its traditions.

First built was a temporary chapel, using an old wartime hut. This was erected by Braggs in 1955, Dedicated on 27 September by Bishop Leonard Wilson and rapidly beautified with furniture, fittings and ornaments – many of which were transferred in 1960 to the new chapel, mainly for use in the Ante-Chapel of St Alphege (under the choir gallery at the west end). An electronic organ was installed in 1956. The temporary chapel had a busy and fulfilling five years of life, with no fewer than 319 boys confirmed there and something like 7,000 communicants. Altogether about 1,500 services took place there, endearing the building to members of the school. After the new chapel was built the 'old' chapel became a pair of classrooms, then a workshop in which the school hovercraft was built, before eventually being demolished.

An Appeal for the new chapel was launched in 1954 and in 1957 an Old Silhillian architect, Mr C Neville White was commissioned to design a chapel to seat 400 boys.

The budget was set at £42,000 for the building and its pews. The contract was awarded early in 1959 to Messrs Deacon of Lichfield, who started on site in May. Headmaster Hitchens later wrote "By the time of the Consecration in June 1960, over £36,000 had been given or promised by some 1,600 friends of the School. In addition nearly £3,000 had been independently given or promised for the ecclesiastical furnishings and ornaments of the Chapel….At the beginning of 1961 [when Hitchens was writing] some £5,000 still had to be raised to enable the Trustees to liquidate their obligations".

There, in a nutshell, one has the reason why there was no money for a new pipe organ: building the chapel had more than exhausted all available funds.



Preparation

The young Director of Music, David M Turnbull, fresh from Cambridge where he was inspired by fine chapel choirs and organs, determined that there should be a worthy organ to complement the excellent Chapel Choir. The Headmaster felt the same, so a separate Organ Fund ran in parallel with fund-raising for the construction of the chapel; much of the money was given by old boys from the era of Mr W F Bushell as Headmaster (1920-27). This raised a rather meagre £600 to which was added some £500 collected in an 'Organ-Fund' box which had stood in the old chapel during its five years of existence. In many ways this lack of funds affected the whole story of the chapel organ, as we shall see: only through the work undertaken in 2007/8 have the problems to which this led finally been eliminated.

With funds tight, DMT had to come up with an inexpensive plan. In the late 1950s he had met the remarkable Ronald Oliver, who sang at the time in the choir at S. Alban's, Conybere St, Bordesley – a church where Solihull School organ pupils Paul Hale, John Butt, David Briggs and Roy Hayton were all, briefly, later to be organist. Oliver was passionate about organ-building and earned a meagre living divided between organ work (mainly installing second-hand instruments) and music teaching. A trained engineer and a Church of England Lay Reader, Oliver had even been organist of Bulawayo cathedral in earlier years. Turnbull saw an opportunity and persuaded the Headmaster to back his plans. In 1958 Oliver was engaged by the school to teach music (class and piano), to assemble organ parts and construct an organ impressive enough for the new chapel, albeit with a mere £1,100 to spend. It is worth noting that Coventry Cathedral's new organ (73 stops, built 1961/2) cost £30,000, so Oliver was working on only 1/60th of a realistic budget for a large new organ.

Oliver was fortunate that just at that time, a Birmingham road scheme – where the Bristol Road (A38) now crosses the Middle Ring Road, quite close to S. Alban's – led to the demolition of Wycliffe Baptist Church (built 1859-61), which had been the first and finest Gothic Baptist chapel in this part of England, attended by wealthy folk from neighbouring areas. A well-endowed chapel, it commissioned (presumably in 1861) a fine two-manual organ from the Worcester organbuilder John Nicholson, whose company 150 years later has grown to be a major firm of international renown – Nicholson & Company Ltd. Guided, one imagines, by Oliver, the school acquired the organ, just in time, for the chapel had become derelict. This gave Oliver some 1,400 pipes with which to begin work. At the same time (1959), Lord Rank offered the Compton organ from his Gaumont cinema in Worcester. This organ had been built in 1935; it contained ten ranks and a three-manual console with 'Rainbow' style illuminated surround. Unusually for Compton it contained an (excellent) French Horn stop. Its ten ranks were: Tuba (16ft), French Horn (8ft), Diapason (16ft – diaphone bass), Tibia Clausa (16ft – polyphone bass), Vox Humana (8ft), Clarinet (8ft), Gamba (16ft – haskell bass), Violin (8ft), Violin Celeste (4ft), Flute (8ft).

The Gaumont, which opened in October 1935, was a particularly large and opulent cinema, seating 1,700 patrons. The auditorium was in Art Deco style with seating arranged as a semi-stadium, with a raised section at the rear. The proscenium was 50feet wide and 28feet high and the cinema boasted a fully equipped stage 70feet wide and 40feet deep. On September 1963 the Beatles gave a performance – now legendary – on its stage. The Rank Organisation closed the Gaumont on 4th May 1974; it was converted into a Top Rank Bingo Club, today operating as a Gala Bingo Club.

In 1960 Ronald Oliver also acquired the 1936 Compton (3 manuals, 6 ranks) in the Bedford/Curzon cinema in Liverpool. Designed by Earnest Shennan and built in 1936, the Curzon was one of the few cinemas where 3D films could be seen. The auditorium had 1,750 seats, the organ chamber was behind the screen, and the orchestra pit featured the handsome console of the Compton organ that incorporated their electronic 'Melotone' unit. Ronald Oliver must have rescued the organ just in time, for the Curzon closed on 20th August 1960 after which the building was reconstructed into a row of shops, which remain to this day. This Compton contained the following ranks: Tuba (16ft), Trumpet (8ft), Diapason (16ft – haskell bass), Tibia Clausa (16ft – polyphone bass), Viola (8ft), Flute (8ft).

Mr Oliver also acquired a cinema organ or at least some ranks and chests by Conacher of Huddersfield – provenance so far untraced.

David Turnbull recounted to me (shortly before his untimely death in 2005) that he and a group of boys plus another master fetched the parts and pipes of the Worcester organ on an old truck used by the Combined Cadet Force; Hitchens relates that the Liverpool organ too "was dismantled by Mr. Oliver and a gang of boys". What a marvellous alternative to a day in the classroom!

Bernard Hales (Fetherston, 1957-66), and one of the 'organ boys' has written thus:

> He [Ronald Oliver] toured the country in a horsebox / pantechnicon (in which I think he may also have lived for part of the time!) and collected the parts he required from the different sites.
>
> I was one of the boys who responded to his call for volunteers to help in preparing the parts for assembly as an accepted alternative activity on "games" afternoons. His request was welcomed by such as me who had an aversion for "games" but an aptitude for practical work. Nevertheless, we became so hooked on the job we would spend lots of time "after school" as well.

All cinema organ materials were stored in the attics on the west side of the quadrangle – the high-pitched roof-space in which the School House boarders' trunks were also stored (by the School Marshall). The Compton percussions were not used in the organ: being proper 'Premier' orchestral instruments the tubular bells, glockenspiel and xylophone were mounted in frames and subsequently used in the percussion section of the School Orchestra.

The Organ speaks

The organ was to be installed in a reasonably spacious but awkwardly-shaped chamber (lined – doubtless at Oliver's instigation – with glazed tiles to maximise sound projection) at the west end of the north aisle, at Choir Gallery level, with openings east into the chapel and south across the gallery so that the Chapel Choir could hear the organ perfectly. The chamber was formed by extending a pitched roof north of the chapel in line with the gallery. The window in this gabled wall casts light on the staircase to the gallery, though its upper half is 'blind' as the swell box (see below) backs on to it.

Hitchens:

> Access to the organ chamber was promised for mid-April 1960, but unfortunately building delays prevented its being used until five months later and the assembly of the organ in the Chapel itself could not start until late in September. Mr Oliver and his helpers worked late into the nights to have the Great Organ [the primary manual department of the organ] completed in time for the Visit of H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent on 27th October, 1960.

Ronald Oliver assembled the Nicholson organ first, converting the tracker mechanism to electro-pneumatic (with new under-actions using compound magnets made by Compton and Noterman). The Great was placed to speak down the north aisle, with the basses at the east end of the soundboard conveyed off, partly on to a block mounted above the drawstop machine (of Oliver's manufacture) at the far end of the soundboard. After the visit of Her Royal Highness in October the Swell was installed, mounted higher than and at right-angles to the Great, partly above the staircase to the gallery and backing against the north window. Fitted with a shutter front employing an individual pneumatic motor and return-spring to each shutter, it and the Great were winded from Compton regulators mounted in a stack to the east of the swell box. These were fed from beneath through a large zinc trunk running from the ex-Gaumont organ's Discus blower under the stairs. The blower motor also ran a DC generator for the low-voltage action generator. The chapel's first organist, David Wright (on the staff from 1958-1962), must have been delighted to observe such solid progress.

Bernard Hales again:

> Being keen on metalworking, two of us were allotted the task of adding the non-speaking lengths to the front pipes. It was quite a daunting task for 'small bods' as you can appreciate, knowing their size. Mr Oliver demonstrated the technique involved in cutting and splitting lengths of appropriate sized surplus pipes, fitting collars and spigots before finally joining the false lengths to the speaking lengths. This was achieved by

running solder (using spent tallow altar candles as flux) into countersunk holes to form 'rivets' followed by a fillet ring joint, finally smoothing down the exterior of the rivets and ring in readiness for them being sent away for gilding [they were actually painted silver]. I was impressed by the 'invisible' seams we achieved. All this was undertaken in the North Porch on wooden benches custom built from old pews and the like!

Other members of our gang of about six were instructed in woodwork and the electrical wiring – which was a challenge even to those with model railway experience!

The instrument was played as a two-manual (plus Solo Tuba on the third manual), using the Gaumont organ console with its illuminated surround replaced by oak ply panels; this was placed on the upper level of the gallery, between the choir stalls, the player's back to the west window. A few Compton ranks had also been incorporated (e.g. the Swell strings, 8ft flute and Trumpet – on a pressure of about 7ins [see photo on p.15], the Tuba and the sole Pedal stop, the polyphone bass of the Tibia rank) but the rest remained in storage. The Great Mixture had been rearranged as a Harrison & Harrison-style 'Harmonics', the Great Trumpet and Swell Oboe (indeed all three Nicholson reeds) were absent, and the Great Dulciana given a Compton Viole bass.

Case pipes were made from the Nicholson Large Open Diapason case pipes with extra tubes soldered (by boys – see Bernard Hales' account above) on their tops, to give sufficient over-length for the height of the chamber opening facing the north aisle. At this point there were no pipes in the side opening.

This was the organ playing when the next Royal Visit occurred – a most significant day in the history of the Chapel:



The full scheme that Oliver envisaged was really large – a four-manual organ of no fewer than 86 stops. He planned a largely 'straight' Great and Swell based on the Nicholson Great and Swell, with the Choir, Solo and Pedal organs being of 'unit' construction. Total number of ranks (including Mixtures) would have been far fewer – 46). For interest's sake here is the planned scheme. Makers of the pipework are Nicholson (N), Compton (C), Conacher (Con).

Great Organ			**rank**	**make**
1.	Violone	16	A	C
2.	Contra Dulciana	16	B	C/N
3.	Large Open Diapason	8		N
4.	Small Open Diapason	8		N
5.	Hohlflöte	8		N
6.	Dulciana	8	B	C/N
7.	Octave	4		N
8.	Principal	4		?
9.	Waldflöte	4		N
10.	Twelfth	$2^2/_3$		N
11.	Fifteenth	2		N
12.	Cornet	III		?
13.	Harmonics (17.19.b21.22)	IV		N
Swell Organ				
14.	Geigen Diapason	8		N
15.	Rohr Flöte	8		N
16.	Salicional	8		C
17.	Voix Celeste	8		N?
18.	Geigen Principal	4		N
19.	Flute	4		C?
20.	Violino	2		N
21.	Mixture (12.19.22)	III		N
22.	Contra Posaune	16	C	Con
23.	Trompette	8		C
24.	Posaune	8	C	Con
25.	Octave Posaune	4	C	Con
	Tremulant			
Choir Organ (unenclosed)				
26.	Contra Dulciana	16	B	C/N
27.	Diapason	8	E	C
28.	Stopt Flute	8	F	C
29.	Gamba	8	D	C
30.	Dulciana	8	B	C/N
31.	Unda Maris	8		N?
32.	Octave	4	E	C

33.	Stopt Flute	4	F	C
34.	Octave Gamba	4	D	C
35.	Dulcet	4	B	N/C
36.	Nazard	$2^2/_3$	F	C
37.	Piccolo	2	F	C
38.	Gambette	2	D	N?
39.	Dulcetina	2	B	N/C
40.	Tierce	$1^3/_5$	F	C
41.	Larigot	$1^1/_3$	F	C
42.	Septième	$1^1/_7$	F	C
43.	Octavin	1	F	C
44.	Mixture	III	E	C
45.	Schalmei	16	G	C
46.	Schalmei	8	G	C

Solo Organ (enclosed)

47.	Contra Viol (t.c.)	16	H	C
48.	Harmonic Flute	8	I	C
49.	'Cello	8	H	C
50.	Voix Celestes	8	J	C
51.	Harmonic Flute	4	I	C
52.	Violin	4	H	C
53.	Octave Celestes	4	J	C
54.	Harmonic Flute	$2^2/_3$	I	C
55.	Harmonic Flute	2	I	C
56.	Violino	2	H	C
57.	Cornet de Violes	III?	H	C
58.	French Horn (t.c.)	16	K	C
59.	Bass Clarinet (t.c.)	16	L	C
60.	French Horn	8	K	C
61.	Clarinet	8	L	C
62.	Oboe	8		N
63.	Orchestral Oboe	8		C?
64.	Vox Humana	8		C
65.	French Horn	4	K	C
	Tremulant (unenclosed)			
66.	Tuba	16	N	C
67.	Tuba	8	N	C
68.	Tuba	4	N	C

Pedal Organ

69.	Sub Bass	32	O	C
70.	Open Wood	16	P	N
71.	Violone	16	A	C
72.	Bourdon	16	Q	C

73.	Dulciana	16	B	C/N
74.	Quint	$10^{2}/_{3}$	Q	C
75.	Octave Wood	8	P	N
76.	Geigen	8	A	C
77.	Bass Flute	8	Q	C
78.	Nazard	$5^{1}/_{3}$	B	N
79.	Octave Geigen	4	A	C
80.	Flute	4	Q	C
81.	Cornet	III	ex.12	?
82.	Mixture	?		N/C
83.	Tuba	16	N	C
84.	Contra Posaune	16	C	Con
85.	Tuba	8	N	C
86.	Posaune	8	C	Con
87.	French Horn	4	K	C

Couplers & Accessories

Swell Octave
Swell Sub Octave
Swell Unison Off
Solo to Swell
Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Solo to Great
Solo to Choir
Solo reeds on Choir
Swell to Choir
Solo to Pedal 4
Solo to Pedal
Swell to Pedal 4
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal 4
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal 4
Choir to Pedal
Pedal Off
Great & Pedal Combinations Coupled
Doubles Off

10 adjustable thumb pistons to each manual
10 adjustable toe pistons to the Pedal organ
8 general pistons
Reversible thumb pistons to all 10 unison couplers
Reversible toe pistons to Gt to Ped and Sw to Gt

Balanced Swell pedal
Balanced Solo pedal
Balanced Crescendo pedal



Sadly, Ronald Oliver left the school with the organ incomplete. Bernard Hales:

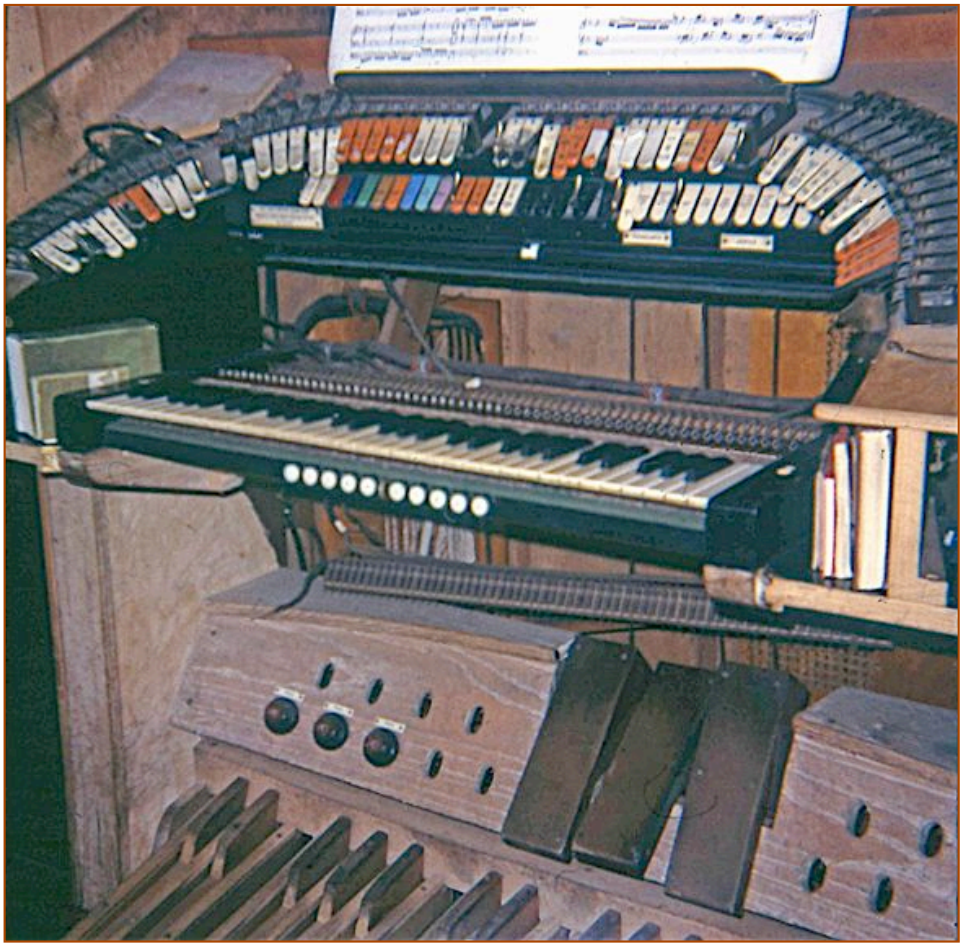
> The loss of Mr Oliver was a great blow to us as no-one had any real idea of his ultimate design which remained in his head. I understand he was suffering from stress and the pressure on him to take on more and more music classes which he really wasn't cut out for, nor was it the real reason for him being there, in his mind. The organ was his 'raison d'être'. I never did hear what became of him, it was a very sad episode. He was an extremely clever man and taught us the skills needed with such enthusiasm.

And there the organ might have rested ……..

A Second Attempt

The School appointed John Flower, Assistant Organist of Southwark Cathedral and a trained teacher to be Assistant Director of Music and Chapel Organist & Choirmaster, starting in September 1962. He soon took the Chapel Choir to even greater heights than David Turnbull and David Wright had reached with them, and wasted little time in getting on with the stalled organ project. Money, of course, remained extremely tight. Flower (my first organ teacher) called in a small Hampton-in-Arden based firm called Dunchurch Organs (H Glanville Jones and two employees) – who planned to finish the organ as a reduced but still very large scheme of 69 stops on 4 manuals.

Dunchurch organs removed the top two manuals from the console for refurbishment, so for 1965/6 the console looked like this:



They devised a scheme which kept the Nicholson Great and Swell, added a slider soundboard for a Choir Organ, and envisaged using extended Compton ranks for the Solo and Pedal – just as Ronald Oliver had.

Here is the Dunchurch Organs scheme:

Great Organ			**rank**	**make**
1.	Violone	16	A	C
2.	Contra Dulciana	16	B	C/N
3.	Open Diapason I	8		N
4.	Open Diapason II	8		N
5.	Hohl Flöte	8		N
6.	Dulciana	8	B	C/N
7.	Octave	4		N
8.	Principal	4		?
9.	Wald Flöte	4		N
10.	Twelfth	$2^2/_3$		N
11.	Fifteenth	2		N
12.	Sesquialtera (12.17)	III	prepared for	
13.	Harmonics (17.19.b21.22)	IV		N
Swell Organ [wind pressure 7.5 ins]				
14.	Geigen Diapason	8		N
15.	Rohr Flöte	8		N
16.	Salicional	8		C
17.	Voix Celeste	8		N?
18.	Geigen Principal	4		N
19.	Suabe Flute	4		C?
20.	Fifteenth	2		N
21.	Mixture (12.19.22)	III		N
22.	Contra Posaune	16	C	Con
23.	Trompette	8		C
24.	Posaune	8	C	Con
25.	Octave Posaune	4	C	Con
	Tremulant			
Choir Organ (unenclosed)				
26.	Contra Dulciana	16	B	C/N
27.	Open Diapason	8		?
28.	Gedackt	8		?
29.	Salicional	8		?
30.	Dulciana	8	B	C/N
31.	Gemshorn	4		?
32.	Lieblich Flute	4		?
33.	Nazard	$2^2/_3$		?
34.	Piccolo	2		?
35.	Tierce	$1^3/_5$		?
36.	Larigot	$1^1/_3$		?
37.	Octavin	1	B	N/C
38.	Trumpet	8	prepared for	

Solo Organ (enclosed)

39.	Open Flute	8	D	C
40.	Gamba	8	E	C
41.	Unda Maris	8		?
42.	Open Flute	4	D	C
43.	Gamba	4	E	C
44.	Contra Oboe (t.c.)	16	F	N?
45.	Clarinet	8		C
46.	Oboe	8	F	N?
47.	French Horn	8		C
48.	Vox Humana	8		C
	Tremulant (unenclosed)			
49.	Tuba	8	G	C
50.	Tuba Clarion	4	G	C

Pedal Organ

51.	Open Wood	16	H	N
52.	Violone	16	A	C
53.	Bourdon	16	I	C
54.	Dulciana	16	B	C/N
55.	Quint	$10^2/_3$	I	C
56.	Octave	8	H	N
57.	Viola	8	A	C
58.	Bass Flute	8	I	C
59.	Dulcet	8	B	C/N
60.	Nazard	$5^1/_3$	B	N
61.	Fifteenth	4	A	C
62.	Octave Flute	4	I	C
63.	Piccolo	2	I	
64.	Mixture	III	A/B	C/N
65.	Bombarde	16	J	C
66.	Contra Posaune	16	C	Con
67.	Tuba	8	J	C
68.	Posaune	8	C	Con
69.	Octave Posaune	4	C	Con

Couplers & Accessories

Solo Octave
Solo Sub Octave
Solo Unison Off
Swell Octave
Swell Sub Octave
Swell Unison Off
Solo to Swell
Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Solo to Great

Solo to Choir
Swell to Choir
Solo to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal
Great pistons to Pedal pistons
Swell pistons to Pedal pistons
Choir pistons to Pedal pistons
Solo pistons to Pedal pistons
General pistons to Pedal pistons

10 adjustable thumb pistons to each manual
10 adjustable toe pistons to the Pedal organ
10 general thumb pistons (prepared for)
Reversible thumb pistons to all 10 unison couplers
Reversible toe pistons to all Pedal couplers,
plus Sol to Gt and Sw to Gt

Balanced Swell pedal
Balanced Solo pedal
Balanced Crescendo pedal

Speaking stops on stop-knobs
Couplers on stop-keys

As can be seen, the main difference between the two schemes was that the Choir Organ was to be a largely 'straight' division, on a restored slider soundboard which the company presumably had in stock. It is worth noting that the lowest twelve pipes of the Pedal Open Wood were to have been a Compton diaphonic bass, as there was insufficient height for straight 16ft pipes; when installed and put on the wind the rank was found to be monumentally loud. Dunchurch removed two of the three keyboards from the old Compton console from which we were still playing the Great & Swell of the Oliver 'basic' organ. These, together with two more Compton keyboards, were to be refurbished for the new console, for which the floor was altered at the south end of the gallery, where the present console stands. That left the console which we played daily (and on which we were taught and actually took exams) with but one manual – the Great, to which the Swell could be coupled but otherwise remained 'floating'. The contacts were beginning to fail and we watched during services as John Flower pushed slivers of card into the contact blocks in an attempt (largely successful) to keep the contacts from fracturing. The photograph on page 16 shows the console at this stage; this is a transparency taken by my little Kodak *Instamatic*.

Dunchurch ordered all the stop-solenoids (from 'Stero' in Shirley) and the engraved ivory stop-knobs, which arrived one day to my utter delight. Each wrapped in tissue paper, I was allowed to unwrap one: 'Contra Posaune 16ft'. Ignorant, I asked one of the craftsmen what a 'Posaune' sounded like; they seemed as uncertain as I!

Dunchurch mounted the Choir soundboard with a new under-action above the Great, fitted the Solo shutters, installed several Solo ranks and winded them. On climbing the stairs underneath on my way up to the gallery I enjoyed poking a stick with a nail in its end into the magnet armatures to hear the pipes sound. There was a wonderfully creamy French Horn rank which I yearned to play.

Upon the company asking for more money to complete the console, John Flower called in a friend of his who worked for Henry Willis & Sons (whom he knew from their 1952 rebuilding of the Southwark Cathedral organ) to assess Dunchurch's work. It was clear that they were out of their depth; much work was not up to standard, so the School stood them down and obtained estimates for sorting things out.

In retrospect it is not insignificant that all firms approached refused to have anything to do with endeavouring to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. They quoted for new organs (not large ones) but even these were more than the school felt it could afford, despite the dedication to music and the arts of the new Headmaster, Mr Bruce McGowan. Henry Willis & Sons quoted for a new organ either side of the West window (as did J W Walker) or a refurbished and electrified two-manual Father Willis (20 stops, with a fully equipped standard Willis all-electric detached console) in the chamber. The Willis organ was to have been a Great (8.8.4.$2^{2}/_{3}$.2.II[prep.]), Positif (8.8.4.$2^{2}/_{3}$.2.$1^{3}/_{5}$[prep.].$1^{1}/_{3}$[prep.].Tremolo), Pedal (32[resultant].16[prep.].8[prep.].8.4.2) in which five Pedal stops were a unit with Great 8ft Gedackt. It would have been a typical early Henry Willis IV instrument, chosen as a stock model from his 'Junior Development Plan', and voiced on fairly neo-baroque lines. There was the usual Willis array of couplers and pistons. Interestingly, a Swell was offered as an alternative to the Positif (8.8.4. $2^{2}/_{3}$.2.16[Contra Fagotto]) which one wonders might have been an old department re-planned and recycled. The Walker scheme also was of their typical 1960s neo-baroque type: Great (8.4.4.$2^{2}/_{3}$.2.III[Cornet]), Swell (8.4.2.$1^{1}/_{3}$.III.8), Pedal (two ranks extended to 16.8.8.4.2, plus a 16ft Regal). Couplers and console would have been far more basic than Willis – again standard Walker for the period.

None of these schemes would have been remotely adequate. One feels that each reflects the minimal budget the school was at that time prepared to set for the purpose.

But all was not lost….

Success!

In the event one firm, Nicholson of Worcester, agreed to build an organ based on the school's 100-year-old Nicholson pipework and soundboards, also using some parts (ranks of pipes, chests, wind regulators and blower) of the cinema organs, along with new modern pipework (made by Stinkens of Zeist – in the Netherlands – and also by Nicholsons) with a new slider soundboard containing an inbuilt 'schwimmer' wind regulator for the third manual (the 'Positif'). A new console was supplied, made out of 'Utile' (an African hardwood of the mahogany type, used throughout the chapel) incorporating three of the Compton keyboards in new frames, and the solenoids and ivory stop-knobs bought by Dunchurch Organs. At first the school could only afford three manual departments and the pedal – leaving the Positif 'prepared-for' at the console, but in the event more money was found and at their meeting in November 1965 the Governors agreed to order the whole organ, at a price of £7,650. Nicholsons started work in the chapel on 23rd July 1966, getting much done during the summer holidays. During the following term I thrilled to watch all these wonderful new and restored parts being installed, winded and wired; such a pest did I prove that the men limited me to half-an-hour's visit a day. Organ lessons carried on at St Francis' church, an eight-minute bicycle ride away. An invaluable little practice organ it proved, on which I and others made our public debuts. One pupil (Cuthbertson) was organist there, being paid £50 per annum – a very worthwhile sum then for a school boy.

Nicholsons cleared out the attics where the Compton and other material had been stored, recycling remaining Compton ranks in other organs they were building at the time (St Edmundsbury Cathedral, St Chad's Cathedral Birmingham, and Ledbury Parish Church among them). What happened to the wonderful (and rare) French Horn is sadly not recorded.

By the time the organ was finished (Christmas 1966) John Flower had found promotion as Director of Music at St Edward's School, Oxford, and in his place arrived Peter Read, a Limpus prize-winner at FRCO and a former organ scholar of Balliol College Oxford. It fell to him to organise the celebrations which heralded the arrival of this long-awaited instrument.

Here is the stop-list of the Nicholson organ of 1966. It differed very little from their first draft, which had been based on a scheme by John Flower. The main difference was that as no room could be found for the Pedal Open Wood unit, it was omitted, and instead of having a Pedal Principal/Fifteenth rank these stops were derived from the Violone. Nicholsons 'dressed' the organ with new woodwork and new zinc pipes in each of the chamber openings: those facing down the chapel are from the Open Diapason No. 1 bass, and those facing across the gallery are the bass octave of the Positif Viola, together with a few dummy pipes.

Makers of the pipework are old Nicholson (oN), new Nicholson (nN), Compton (C), Conacher (Con), Stinkens (S), Henry Jones [the 1887 Swell Cornopean from St Mary's Moseley, rescaled larger by one pipe] (J), Hill, Norman & Beard (HNB).

			rank	make
Great Organ	(wind pressure 3ins)			
1.	Open Diapason No. 1	8		o/nN
2.	Open Diapason No. 2	8		C/oN
3.	Claribel Flute	8		oN
4.	Dulciana	8		C/oN
5.	Principal	4		oN
6.	Flute	4		oN
7.	Twelfth	$2^2/_3$		oN
8.	Fifteenth	2		oN
9.	Mixture (19.22.26.29)	IV		oN
10.	Trumpet	8		J
Swell Organ	(wind pressure $3^1/_2$ins; [$2^3/_4$ins planned])			
11.	Open Diapason	8		oN
12.	Hohl Flöte	8		C
13.	Gamba	8		C
14.	Voix Celeste	8		oN?
15.	Principal	4		oN
16.	Fifteenth	2		oN
17.	Mixture (15.19.22)	III		oN
18.	Contra Fagotto	16	A	Con
19.	Trumpet	8		C
20.	Clarion	4	A	Con
	Tremulant			
Positif Organ	(wind pressure 3 ins [$2^3/_4$ins planned])			
21.	Viola	8		nN/S
22.	Gedeckt	8		S
23.	Gemshorn	4		S
24.	Flute [open metal]	4		S
25.	Nazard	$2^2/_3$		S
26.	Piccolo	2		S
27.	Tierce	$1^3/_5$		S
28.	Larigot	$1^1/_3$		S
Solo Organ				
	(enclosed) (wind pressure 5ins)			
29.	Concert Flute [open wood]	4		HNB
30.	Clarinet	8		C
31.	Orchestral Oboe	8		HNB?
	Tremulant			
	(unenclosed) (wind pressure 10ins)			
32.	Tuba	8	B	C
33.	Octave Tuba	4	B	C

Pedal Organ

(wind pressures: flues 5½ins, reeds 10ins)

34.	Violone [haskelled bass]	16	C	nN/C
35.	Bourdon	16	D	C
36.	Dulciana [haskelled bass]	16	E	C
37.	Violoncello	8	C	C
38.	Bass Flute	8	D	C
39.	Dulcet	8	E	C
40.	Fifteenth	4	C	C
41.	Octave Flute	4	D	C
42.	Trombone	16	B	C
43.	Clarion	8		C

Couplers & Accessories

Swell Octave
Swell Sub Octave
Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Solo Octave
Solo Sub Octave
Solo Unison Off
Swell to Choir
Swell Octave to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal
Great pistons to Pedal pistons

5 thumb pistons to each manual
5 toe pistons to the Pedal organ
5 toe pistons to the Swell organ (duplicating)
Reversible thumb pistons to Sw to Gt,
Ch to Gt, Sw to Ped, Gt to Ped
Reversible toe pistons to Sw to Gt,
Gt to Ped, Trombone

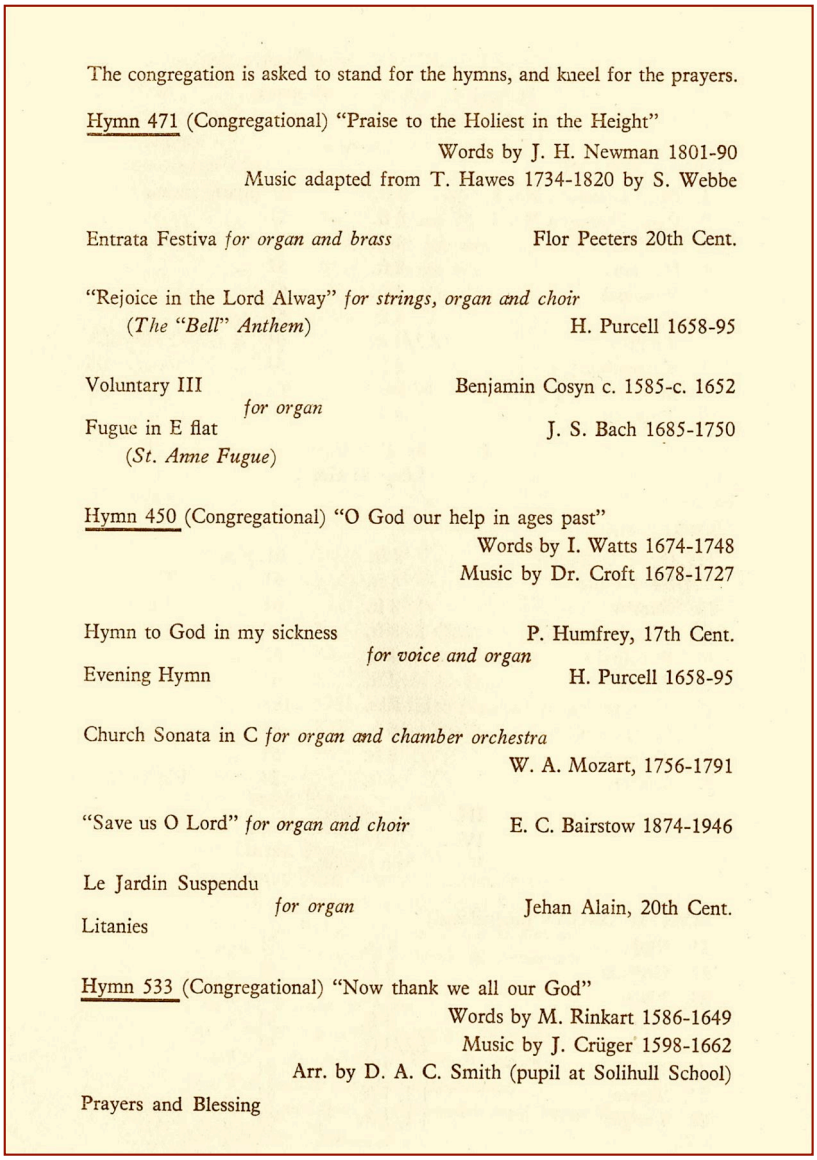
Balanced Swell pedal
Balanced Solo pedal

pistons adjustable at a switchboard
behind the music desk [on-off-neutral]



The smart new console with ivory (Compton) keys, ivory knobs and ivory thumb pistons

The organ was dedicated at Evensong on Sunday 15th January 1967, and a Thanksgiving Service was held on 15th February, which as a prolix 15-year-old I wrote up enthusiastically and at length for the *Shenstonian*, concluding thus: "We are indeed lucky to have such a fine instrument to play, and I know that it gives many hours of pleasure to all who hear and play it." The Act of Thanksgiving involved the Chapel Choir, string orchestra, brass group, chamber orchestra, with Peter Read at the organ. As well as stirring hymns, works including the organ by a wide range of composers (Flor Peeters, Henry Purcell, Benjamin Cosyn, J. S. Bach, Pelham Humphrey, Mozart, Edward Bairstow and Jehan Alain) were performed. In October that year Organ Recitals were given by Roy Massey (Birmingham Cathedral), Richard Greening (Lichfield Cathedral), and by Peter Read.



The congregation is asked to stand for the hymns, and kneel for the prayers.

Hymn 471 (Congregational) "Praise to the Holiest in the Height"
Words by J. H. Newman 1801-90
Music adapted from T. Hawes 1734-1820 by S. Webbe

Entrata Festiva *for organ and brass* — Flor Peeters 20th Cent.

"Rejoice in the Lord Alway" *for strings, organ and choir*
(*The "Bell" Anthem*) — H. Purcell 1658-95

Voluntary III — Benjamin Cosyn c. 1585-c. 1652
for organ
Fugue in E flat — J. S. Bach 1685-1750
(*St. Anne Fugue*)

Hymn 450 (Congregational) "O God our help in ages past"
Words by I. Watts 1674-1748
Music by Dr. Croft 1678-1727

Hymn to God in my sickness — P. Humfrey, 17th Cent.
for voice and organ
Evening Hymn — H. Purcell 1658-95

Church Sonata in C *for organ and chamber orchestra*
W. A. Mozart, 1756-1791

"Save us O Lord" *for organ and choir* — E. C. Bairstow 1874-1946

Le Jardin Suspendu
for organ — Jehan Alain, 20th Cent.
Litanies

Hymn 533 (Congregational) "Now thank we all our God"
Words by M. Rinkart 1586-1649
Music by J. Crüger 1598-1662
Arr. by D. A. C. Smith (pupil at Solihull School)

Prayers and Blessing

The organ as finished by Nicholsons proved an inspiration for a generation of keen organists who went on in the 1970s to win organ scholarships at King's College Cambridge (John Butt and David Briggs), New College Oxford (Paul Hale), Christ Church Oxford (Ian Simcock), St Peter's College Oxford (Richard Newsholme and Richard Millward), and others. I left the school in 1971 with the organ in fine shape, played for many hours a day by these talented young organ students. One imagined all was set fair; it certainly appeared that way.



The new Positif pipework photo-graphed during installation in late 1966 (the Trombone bass is behind)



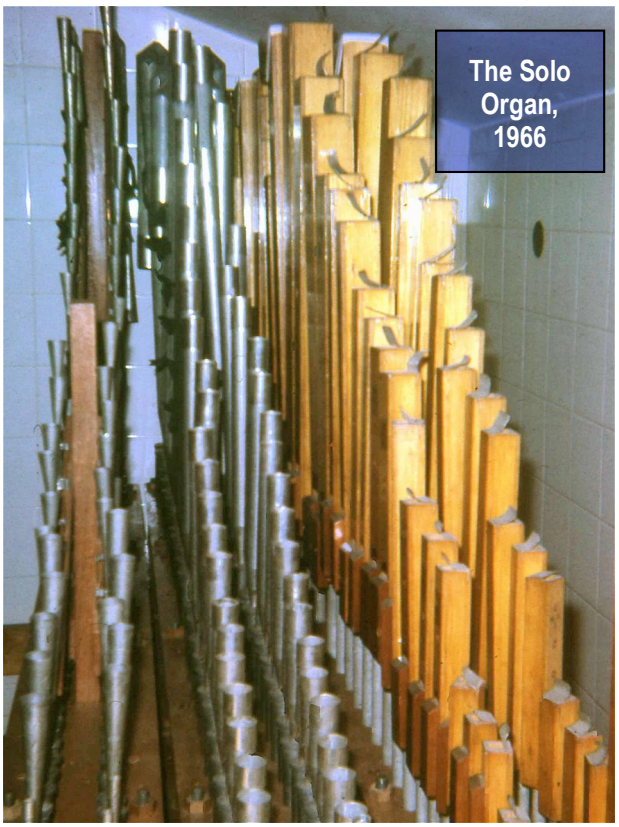
Solo Tuba and Swell Fagotto 16/4 unit (photographed 2007)



Problems

In fact things were not quite so rosy. The organ began to have problems fairly early on – usually connected with the effect of the chapel's heating (occasionally extremely fierce) on the older wooden and leather parts of the instrument, many of which had to be revisited from time to time over the following years as they split or perished. Despite a Watkins & Watson humidifier being fitted in 1969 at the request of Peter Read and the organ tuner, the problems remained and were greater than one would have expected.

Following Peter Read as organist in 1972 was Colin Edmundson, fresh from Magdalen College Oxford. After Colin were (briefly) Murray Stewart and Phillip Underwood. In 1984 Peter Irving arrived, so the remainder of the organ's story – to date – falls during his period at the School. Each organist had his own ideas about the organ and one (Murray Stewart) had much of the Great pipework loudened. Wind stabilisers were fitted to the pedal ranks (making access to the pedal organ for maintenance and tuning almost impossible), the individual pneumatic motors to the shutters of the swell box were replaced by a concertina-type electro-pneumatic engine, and piecemeal re-leathering took place. The Great soundboard had a major overhaul having been split by the chapel's replacement heating system (the original under-floor electric heating having failed, gas-fired heaters were installed around the chapel and the level of heating rose dramatically). At some stage, the unsatisfactory Compton open metal trebles of the 8ft Swell flute were replaced by a slightly better 19th century stopped wooden pipes.


The Solo Organ, 1966

Work carried out during Peter Irving's time included the following: the Swell box engine was releathered, the pedalboard re-furbished (1991), Positif pipework loudened (1991-2), a new Positif 4ft stopped Nason Flute replaced 4ft Open Flute (the original Postif 4ft flute was a rather breathy large-scale open metal stop that was transferred to the Solo and happily revoiced. The wooden Solo Concert Flute had split, so was discarded (1994). In the console there was some rewiring, replacement of drawstop solenoids and piston contacts, and the piston selector board was replaced by a Taylor micro-processor system (1995).

A new Great mixture was funded by the Parents' Association (1996) and the Great heavy pressure bellows was repaired (1999).

Despite the organ's need for regular major maintenance, school organ pupils continued to flourish. Organ Scholars and notable organists during Peter Irving's time have included Laurence Cummings (Christ Church, Oxford), Christopher Monks (Gonville and Caius, Cambridge), Jonathan Clarke (Trinity, Oxford) and other talented musicians who eventually chose other paths.

Despite all this work, the chapel's heating and the summer sun beating down from the roof continued to take their toll. As a result the tuning could be terrible, and by the early 2000s the whole instrument leaked like a sieve, with dozens of notes on the unit chests not sounding. Coupled with the never satisfactory nature of the Pedal Organ – its Compton cinema pipework strident and unblending – the organ's faults and wind noise made it a dispiriting instrument to play, so the number of organ pupils dried to a trickle.

Peter Irving turned his thoughts towards acquiring a new organ. When quotes came in for a new mechanical-action organ centrally placed on the gallery it became clear what a prodigious cost such a desirable project would run to. The Governors felt unable at the time to make such a commitment, and there the matter languished. The writer was invited to play the chapel organ (after a gap of some 25 years or more) for the Memorial Service for Bruce McGowan and then for a similar service for David Turnbull, who as Director of Music had been my mentor and guide. Playing for these sad events brought home to me just how derelict the organ had become; the wind leakage was incredible. I returned to the chapel on a later date, and with the organ-builders there surveyed the organ.

On investigation, it became clear that the 1966 budget had not allowed for the leatherwork on the many hundreds of small pneumatic moving parts and wind reservoirs to be replaced, nor the 1930s electromagnets to be updated. As these materials date from the 1930s (the cinema organ parts) and some from the 1860s (the church organ parts), it was hardly surprising that they had come to the end of the road. The 1960s electrics were weary; forty years on: they also had come to the end of their reliable life after much heavy use. The two other main factors were (a) the mismatch of church and cinema pipework, most clearly felt in the poor balance of the ranks of pipes on the Pedal organ and the sluggish speech of the Tuba, Trombone and Swell reed unit, (b) the detrimental effect of the chapel heating on the nineteenth-century wooden soundboards on which most of the pipes stand – which were split from end to end despite repairs over the years, and (c) the wind system, which leaked appallingly.

Peter Irvine, Nicholsons and I devised a scheme of work to tackle all these problems in a radical fashion. But the cost – over £200,000 – was more than twice that which the school could possibly contemplate spending.

Was this to be the end of a once inspiring instrument?

A Rebirth

With the advent of Phillip Griffiths as Headmaster a new determination became evident to sort out the Chapel Organ once and for all. The school needed an distinguished instrument once again if its notable chapel tradition was not to languish.

Just at the right time a large sum of money became available to the Governors, who voted to spend it on the organ, so the contract was awarded to Nicholsons with much rejoicing, and in the fervent hope that they would be able to make a balanced and beautiful musical instrument and an efficient and reliable machine out of that with which they had to work.

In brief, the task was to:

1. replace the Swell and Great soundboards with new, made of modern materials to withstand strong chapel heating. The Great soundboard has been made chromatic so that the trebles are at the casework end (just as Ronald Oliver arranged right back at the beginning by standing off many bass pipes). Restore the Positif soundboard with a new under-action and wind-regulator. Restore all unit chests and off-note bass chest fully with Roosevelt motors releathered and magnets replaced or refurbished.

2. fit a new wind system, based in part on four Compton regulators which were remade as new, and incorporating 'schwimmer' inbuilt regulators to the Swell, Great and Positif slider soundboards, with an additional regulator for the Pedal and break-down reservoir for the Great and Positif.

3. move the Positif Organ to a position above the Great (where in 1966 the Tuba and Pedal Clarion were mounted) and fit it with a Tremulant.

4. move the Tuba chest to a position alongside the Great soundboard.

5. fit new all-electric swell engines to work the shutter fronts, replace the Swell Tremulant with a modern device and restore the Compton Solo Tremulant.

6. re-wire the entire organ and fit a new computerised transmission system.

7. rebalance the Pedal Organ by scrapping the Dulciana rank and the 8/4 extensions of the Bourdon (renamed Major Bass 16ft), add a smaller Bourdon rank at 16/8/4, add a Principal/Fifteenth 8/4 rank, and revoice the Trombone/Clarion rank on a lower wind-pressure. Move the Pedal Clarion chest down to join the other Pedal ranks, some taking the place of the Positif soundboard. Replace the Great Dulciana (4ft C up) with a more useful Gamba; derive the new Pedal Bourdon to the Great at 16ft; replace the treble of the Swell 8ft flute with a Stopped Diapason; the Positif 4ft Nason Flute with a Chimney Flute, the Tuba with new pipes made to 'Willis' scales,

remake as open pipes the Swell 16/4 reed unit, with a new 16ft bass of larger scale; add a fourth rank (the top rank) to the Swell Mixture, and add a Swell Hautboy.

8. regulate all 2,500 pipes to blend and balance correctly.

9. restore, re-stain and re-polish the console, fitting a new set of manual keyboards and pistons, remaking the toe piston sweep with improved geometry for the swell pedals, making the bench adjustable, increasing the number of pistons and incorporating a stepper.

10. strip the peeling varnish from the 1966 zinc front pipes and spray with a grey 'pipe-metal' shade of cellulose paint.

In the event some fine historic pipework by Hill became available just at the right time (Nicholsons were able to acquire some ranks from the old Worcester Cathedral organ). Suitable ranks have been pressed into service as the Great/Pedal Bourdon (61 pipes), the Pedal Principal/Fifteenth (42 pipes) the Swell Stopped Diapason treble (c.49 pipes) and the Great Gamba (49 pipes – the Compton 8ft string bass applied in 1966 to the Great Dulciana still being employed). A Walker 1964 Chimney Flute (ex Uppingham School Chapel) has been used as the Positif 4ft flute, and a spotted metal Lewis & Co Oboe (ex Ampleforth College Music School, c.1900) has been added to the Swell.

Here is the 2008 scheme. Makers of the pipework are old Nicholson (oN), new Nicholson (nN), 1990s Nicholson (rN), Compton (C), Conacher (Con), Stinkens (S), Henry Jones (J), Hill Norman & Beard (HNB), Hill (H), Walker (W), Lewis (L).

Great Organ (wind pressure 3ins)			**rank**	**make**
1.	Bourdon	16	C	H
2.	Open Diapason No. 1	8		o/nN
3.	Open Diapason No. 2	8		C/oN
4.	Claribel Flute	8		oN
5.	Gamba	8		C/H
6.	Principal	4		oN
7.	Flute [open wood]	4		oN
8.	Twelfth	$2^2/_3$		oN
9.	Fifteenth	2		oN
10.	Mixture (19.22.26.29)	IV		rN
11.	Trumpet	8		J
Swell Organ (wind pressure $3^1/_2$ ins)				
12.	Open Diapason	8		oN
13.	Stopped Diapason	8		H
14.	Salicional	8		C
15.	Voix Celeste (t.c.)	8		oN?
16.	Principal	4		oN
17.	Fifteenth	2		oN
18.	Mixture (15.19.22.26)	III		oN/nN

19.	Contra Fagotto	16	A	nN/Con
20.	Trumpet	8		C
21.	Hautboy	8		L
22.	Clarion	4	A	Con
	Tremulant			

Positif Organ (wind pressure 3ins)

23.	Viola	8		nN/S
24.	Gedeckt	8		S
25.	Gemshorn	4		S
26.	Chimney Flute	4		W
27.	Nazard	$2^2/_3$		S
28.	Piccolo	2		S
29.	Tierce	$1^3/_5$		S
30.	Larigot	$1^1/_3$		S
	Tremulant			

Solo Organ

(enclosed) (wind pressure 5ins)

31.	Flute [open metal]	4		S
32.	Clarinet	8		C
33.	Orchestral Oboe	8		HNB?
	Tremulant			

(unenclosed) (wind pressure 10ins)

34.	Tuba	8	B	nN
35.	Octave Tuba	4	B	nN

Pedal Organ (wind pressures: part flues $4^1/_2$ ins; part flues & reed rank $5^1/_2$ ins)

36.	Major Bass	16		C
37.	Violone [haskelled bass]	16		nN/C
38.	Bourdon	16	C	H
39.	Principal	8	D	H
40.	Bass Flute	8	C	H
41.	Fifteenth	4	D	H
42.	Octave Flute	4	C	H
43.	Trombone	16	E	C
44.	Fagotto	16	A	nN/Con
45.	Clarion	8	E	C

Couplers

Swell Octave
Swell Sub Octave
Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Choir Octave (acting on Positif & Solo)
Choir Sub Octave (acting on Positif & Solo)
Choir Unison Off (acting on Positif & Solo)

Swell to Choir
Swell Octave to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal

Great pistons to Pedal pistons

Accessories

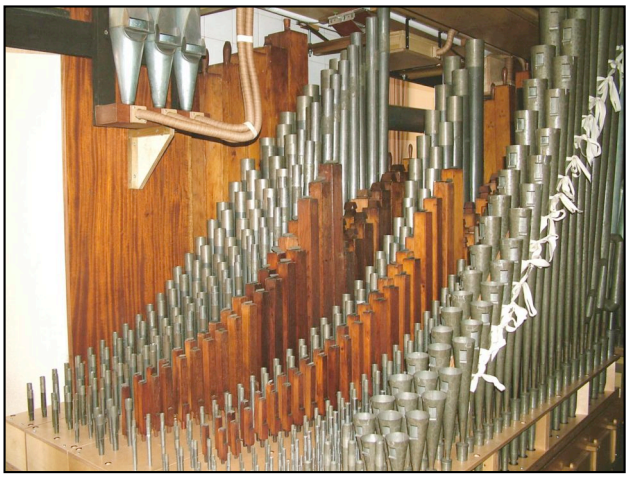
6 thumb pistons to Swell
6 thumb pistons to Great
6 thumb pistons to Positif & Solo
8 general thumb pistons
6 toe pistons to the Pedal organ
6 toe pistons to the Swell organ
(duplicating thumb pistons)
Reversible thumb pistons to Sw to Gt,
Ch to Gt, Sw to Ped, Gt to Ped,
Ch to Ped, Sw to Ch
Reversible toe pistons to Sw to Gt,
Gt to Ped
Thumb (3) and toe (1) stepper 'advance' pistons
Thumb (1) and toe (1) stepper 'retard' pistons
Setter piston
General Cancel
16 levels for divisional pistons
96 levels for general pistons
Balanced Swell pedal
Balanced Solo pedal
Adjustable bench

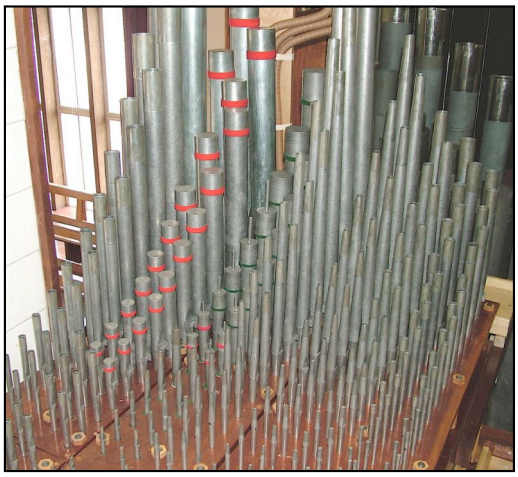
The organ was dismantled in the summer holiday, 2007, restored in Nicholson's workshops near Malvern, reinstalled during the Spring Term 2008 and completed by the end of May.

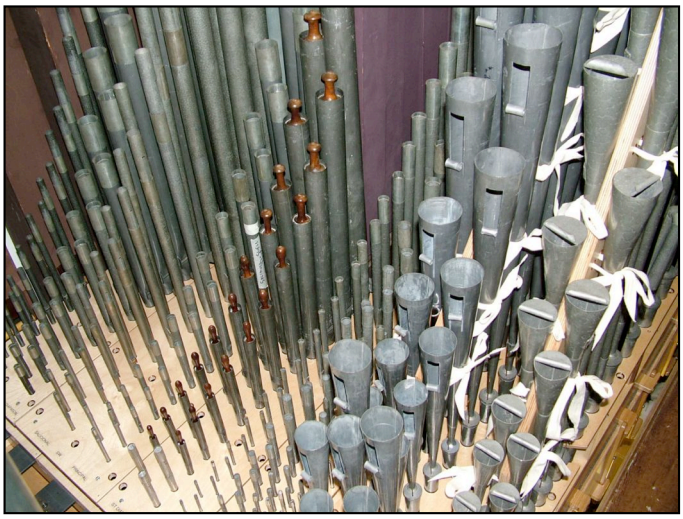


The refurbished console (2008)

An opening recital series featured Old Silhillian organists David Briggs (9 June), Professor John Butt (4 September) and Paul Hale (17 November).









Great Positif
Swell Solo
Tuba Pedal





Author's Note



As a member of the Chapel Choir from September 1964, it was my delight to see the initial organ construction work slowly being carried out. John Flower's beautiful organ playing and the sight of an organ being built determined me – aged 13 – to aim for an Oxbridge organ scholarship so that I could become a cathedral organist and organ designer. Eventually all three came to pass, in no small part due to the dedication of the teaching staff at Solihull, in particular David Turnbull, John Flower, Peter Read, Jill Godsall, John Geddes and the Chaplain, the Reverend Lorys Davies.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to help lead this rebuilding project, and to research and write the story of the organ. For forty years I have had much of the early material in notebooks awaiting such an opportunity. I would like to thank the school organist, Peter Irving, for allowing an Old Boy to dominate a rebuild of 'his' organ. I would also like warmly to commend the immensely positive approach of the Headmaster, Bursar, Governors and Director of Music, who were behind the scheme from the start. I would like to congratulate Nicholsons on their outstanding work, as they rescued an organ in imminent danger of total collapse. Denis Tomlin – who inspired us all with his vivid teaching of Shakespeare's plays – has been most helpful by delving into the archives and into his own all-encompassing memories of the School from the mid-1950s.

As the Chapel Organ enters its second half-century there is no doubt in my mind that in another fifty years time it will still be going strong, needing only a clean and brush-up. My earnest hope is that it will once again prove an inspiration to future generations of aspiring young organists. This wish would undoubtedly have been shared by David Turnbull, who for fifty years watched over the chapel music with a benevolent smile and utter dedication.

I dedicate this account to his memory.

