

BIRMINGHAM CONFERENCE February 2011

ORGANS c1530 – a handout

Organs in monasteries and chantry foundations

Peter Horne and I are still working on all the available references to organs when still in their respective monasteries or inventoried at their destruction. There are several references to their organs being moved into nearby parish churches, such as from Woburn abbey to Wing church in the 1530s, and we can follow their subsequent history in their new homes.

Nearly 700 monastic establishments were smashed by the minions of the crown. Their workmen – those who made their clocks, organs and mills, and supplied the organs and clocks to the parish churches dependent on the various monasteries – received no pensions and were sent out to wander on the roads. If you want to know how dreadful life was like then, I suggest you read the opening pages of CJ Sanson's marvellous novel 'Dissolution'. Some monasteries had more than one organ, no doubt. In general terms one can say that since the chief musical officer, the precentor, was highly placed in the monastic establishment, when polyphonic or 'pricksong' music became more general and paid choristers more normal in the larger establishments, he would have been well placed to get his 'bearded' lay-brethren or paid monastic 'servants' to make the organs necessary to be played alongside the professional choristers...

Chantry establishments and colleges: these varied in size from major foundations as at Westminster and Fotheringhay, whose dissolution inventories we have, and the chantry colleges that still exist at (e.g.) Eton, Winchester, Oxford and Cambridge, down to small enclosed chantry 'chancels' in parish churches. The larger ones definitely had organs, often two, the small local chantries hardly ever.

Hospital chapels sometimes had organs – there was one at the hospital and school of the Fraternity of the Holy Ghost at Basingstoke, for example – and the private chapels of bishops (as at Lambeth) were furnished with them too.

Cathedrals, whether monastic or not, supported professional choirs and organs. Sometimes there were two completely separate choral establishments, one to supply the main quire and the other for the Lady Chapel, each with its own organ(s).

Organs in parish churches

I have looked at all the surviving parish church inventories made under Edward VI around 1550 ; these give a 'snapshot' of the moment the inventories were made and may or may not mention organs (whether they were there or not), depending on where they were done, or under whose supervision. The City of London inventories, for instance, apparently detail the existence of almost every organ – though the very large one at St Paul's seems to have escaped the notice of the commissioners – whereas the rather laconic ones from Norfolk mention scarcely any (including in churches where we know from other sources that organs were there) except in one or two rare instances.

One of these was a small and relatively poor parish which used proceeds of their selling church plate to buy themselves an organ! This was Massingham Magna (1552 Certificate): '[sold:] Inprimis a payr of Censours and oon lytell shyppe with a monster weying xiiij unces & di. At iiijs the unce Summa liiijs / It'm bestowed [=paid out] for a payr of orgayns liijs iiijd.' So the organ cost just 8 pence less than the money raised by the sale of thuribles, an incense boat and a monstrance...'

And at South Lynn, in the same county, a certificate states that: 'Off the whiche moneye [from sales] we have bestowed upon the Sowth yle of ye Church & the walls thereof xvj li. Also for a paier of organs vj li. Also for takinge downe of ymagys and tabernacles whitinge of the Church and other necessary thinges to be doen xls'. The residue went to the poor; here an organ was bought at a time when other 'popish' items were being removed or whitewashed over.

WHAT HAPPENED LATER?

Churchwardens' accounts can show (over a long period from the middle of the 15th century to the middle of the 18th, and later) the evolution of the musical side of their churches' life, among many other things. Here I must refute what Temperley and many others have written, usually based (at second hand) on the rather capricious inventories. The churchwardens' accounts show that organs did *not* go under Edward VI, but were nearly all removed - sometimes decades later - following pressure exerted on the parish churches by reforming bishops and archdeacons under Elizabeth.

In 1562 the Convocation of the Church of England very narrowly voted against the total abolition of all organs, this motion having been proposed by particularly hard-line bishops. In 1570 the Pope pronounced a fatwa against Elizabeth. This bright idea was followed the next year by the horrors of the Massacre of St Bartholomew in Paris; the Ridolfi plot followed soon after. Subsequent waves of immigration of Protestants of more radical persuasions produced further pressure. And from about then onwards there was constant harassment of 'Papists' under Francis Walsingham's police state. Add to these pressures, bad weather and harvests, recurrent plagues, constant calls on parish income to maintain the poor and unhealthy who had previously been supported by monasteries and hospitals, rampant inflation and the political knock-on of the attempted invasion by the Armada, plus the anti-organ example of the newly-founded and much more iconoclastic Scottish Kirk... All these and slightly more incidental matters, such as the lack of obvious place for music in the Edwardian or Elizabethan books of Common Prayer, combined to make organs in churches seem like unnecessary luxuries.

Zealous vicars like a Mr Freeman, who arrived at Michinhampton (Glos) in 1575, declared that organs should be included among 'sundy superstycyous thinges tendinge to the maytenaunce of idolatorye' and so they were sold off forthwith, giving the fund-starved churchwardens a welcome ten shillings. But they did survive longer, often much longer, in some places, especially in the West Country. For example, at Broadlist in Devon, a Royalist soldier, Richard Symonds noted 'an old paire of organs now used in the church' during the civil wars, in the 1640s.

At Chudleigh, also in Devon, the parish officials even set up their organ on a new 'stage' in 1608. More remarkably, at Wimbleton parish church, there was still in 1649 'a faire and riche payre of organs of curious worke, the cases [sic - this was presumably a 'double' organ] of which are wainscot, well guilt and wrought with flower worke'...

The gradual disappearance of parochial organs under the so-called 'Good Queen Bess' is another story, and for the moment you will have to let me continue with my researches into her reign for a little longer. This will be the subject of my talk at Birmingham, 2 March 2013. Five years ago, my hunch was that there were about 3000 organs in churches in England at the eve of the Reformation. I now think this may be an underestimate. Anyway, they all disappeared by 1650, and it took another 200 years for the same number of organs to be re-installed in churches.