

**Wond'rous Machine!**  
***The curious tale of the organ in Britain***  
**Martin Renshaw**  
**Barber Institute, Birmingham**  
**21st February 2015**



A very brief history of the organ in England, in just twenty paragraphs

**1. What did the Romans do for us?** For one thing, they almost certainly introduced organs to Britain, to be used in the amphitheatres of the major cities such as London, Winchester and Canterbury.



***Amphitheatre scene from Zliten mosaic (2<sup>nd</sup> century AD), from a dining room in present-day Libya***



***'Gladiator Mosaic' at the Roman from a villa in Nennig, Germany (3<sup>rd</sup> century AD)***

So, while the gladiators fought and the chariots raced, sweaty bellows-slaves - not seen in these mosaics - produced high-pressure wind while two or more players manipulated key-sliders to sound a multitude of copper or bronze pipes. This type of organ was described by Vitruvius in the 10th century, but Auden's poetic description of it in his Ode to St Cecilia (c1942), who became the perhaps rather unlikely patroness of musicians, captures its essence ...

*'And by ocean's margin this innocent virgin  
Constructed an organ to enlarge her prayer,  
And notes tremendous from her great engine  
Thundered out on the Roman air.'*

Such organs obviously had no ecclesiastical connections whatever until some time later, when the Western part of the church became thoroughly Romanised.

**2. Several Anglo-Saxon monasteries and cathedrals in Britain are known to have possessed organs, probably mounted in their western façades, as here in Jumièges abbey, Normandy:**

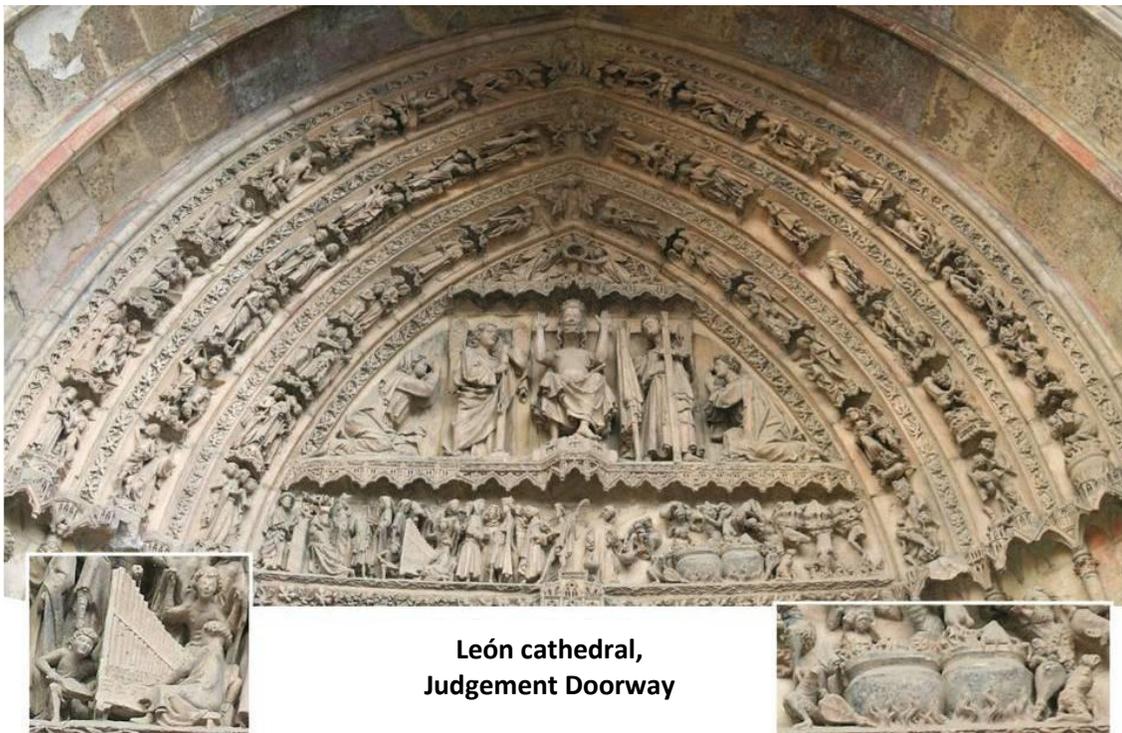


Like the earlier Roman organs, they were there to amuse and perhaps frighten the faithful, but also to sound out, with bells and the inevitable *Te Deums*, to welcome princes and prelates - and to signal high feast days. An organ at Winchester (c985) was celebrated in part of a long poem in praise of the bishop who had it enlarged:

Considuntque duo concordi pectore fratres...  
*'Here sit two brothers of harmonious spirit  
Each a guide ruling his own alphabet.  
There are hidden holes in four times ten tongues [sliders]  
...And they strike the seven separate joyful tones  
Mixed with the song of the lyric semitone  
...And the melody of the muses is heard everywhere in the city...'*

Which in a city surrounded by hills, set in a hollow like an amphitheatre, is indeed perfectly possible. Following the Great Schism of 1054, organs remained in the north-western 'catholic' church, but for some reason were not favoured in its eastern 'orthodox' part.

**3.** In larger early medieval churches (up to 1400), organs were installed on the pulpitum between the nave and quire, or possibly – as at Winchester and Canterbury – on the pilgrims' routes through these buildings. They were made first in monastic workshops and then on the spot by town-based workmen.

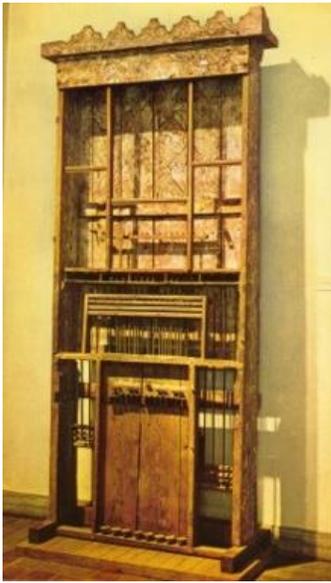


**León cathedral,  
Judgement Doorway**

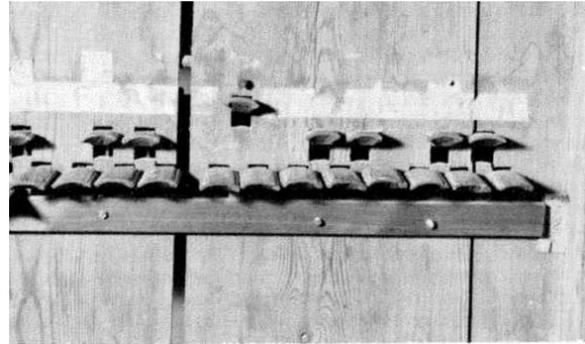
These organs still had nothing to do with singers or their music, but seem to have had specific uses within ceremonies which varied from one cathedral or monastic community to another. Organs also began to be built in parish churches under the patronage of monasteries and priories; there were about six hundred major and minor monastic communities by this time.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote ironically in his Nun's Priest's Tale about the arrogant and proud cock Chanticleer, remarking on his cracked and shrill voice ...

*'... his voys was murier than the murie organ  
On messe-days that in the chirche gon.  
His voice was livelier than the noisy organ  
That sounds in churches on mass-days.'*



*Organ c 1390-1400 from Norrlanda, Sweden*



So it is likely that by then some London parish or monastic churches known to Chaucer possessed organs, and they were used on special days, perhaps liturgically inside the churches. In Chaucer's time the organ was already starting to develop into a varied type of instrument, capable of doing more subtle things than just making a loud noise, and was played from recognisable keyboards and pedalboards.



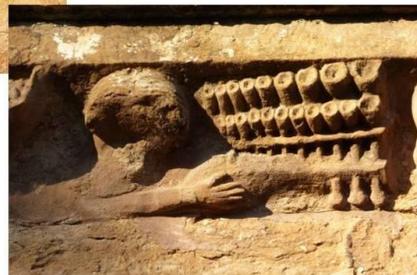
*Adderbury, Oxfordshire: late 14<sup>th</sup> century revels*

In secular music, organs were played in consort with other instruments such as viols and sackbuts in mystery plays, dances and solo song, as above.



*Organ in motion at Alkerton, Oxfordshire*

Here's one that is apparently working outside, with player and organ on a cart:  
And a moveable 'portatyff' organ that seems to be viewed from two angles:





*Hillesden, Buckinghamshire: portatyff-playing angels, after 1493*

**4.** The later medieval use of organs, during the fifteenth century, is implied in wills which are primarily bequests to employ singers, very often chantry-priests.

One, two or even three organs – some of these were smaller ‘portatyffs’, meaning ‘(reasonably) easily portable’, not hand-held – were quite commonly installed in town churches and in richer country areas. Around this time the church reacted against the Lollard heresy by investing significantly in its ceremonial and music by rebuilding chancels to accommodate larger choirs of men and boys - and of course organs.

These quire organs were used every day and were normally placed on the north side of chancels with easy access from the singers’ seats. No doubt in consequence of the greater emphasis on more complex music at the time, their sound were made more flexible dynamically by a redeployment of the key sliders as rank-sliders, to stop off some individual ranks of pipes. The invention of these ‘stops’ may have been due to English or Flemish makers; the other crucial invention - of key pallets - was presumably developed from the small one-pallet-per-pipe shoulder-carried processional organs.

**5.** The polyphonic music of the later middle ages was the fruit of the educational system of about 350 local colleges (and the later university colleges fed from them) founded by such prelates as William of Winchester, among many others, from the thirteenth century onwards.

*Some wooden music desks*



**Cratfield, Suffolk**



**Lenham, Kent**



**Ivinghoe, Bucks**



**Shipdham, Norfolk**

Organ players were usually first trained as boy singers; in both singing and playing they improvised descants and basses to the plainsong melody, this latter no doubt being played on the pedals. Playing organs alternated with singing, verse by verse, and – copying the increasingly complex and professionalised polyphonic vocal style they had learnt – organ players developed an ornamented keyboard style. Organ makers were no doubt under pressure to extend and refine their techniques too. Both vocal and keyboard music reached a generalised peak of commitment and excellence that has not since been surpassed.

It is possible that by the early 16<sup>th</sup> century there were around 6,000 organs in Britain, some very large and with reed stops. Research to try to refine this figure is still going on at present. It is absolutely certain that countries so rich in music, and so keen to ‘increase’ the quality of the daily offering of services, as Britain was, possessed many organs of tonal refinement and great visual beauty.

6. An unusual, very protracted and for music ultimately catastrophic, Reformation was initiated in 1533 by a musician-King Henry VIII. Music and musicians suffered terribly from the destruction of monasteries and their libraries in the 1530s:

**DESTRUCTION OF LIBRARIES: *Strype's life of Matthew Parker***  
‘... when Abbies and Religious Houses were dissolved, and the Books, that were contained in the Libraries thereunto belonging, underwent the same fate, being miserably embezilled, and sold away to Tradesmen for little or nothing for their ordinary Shop-uses...’

The destruction of the monasteries was followed by similar pillaging of the thousands of local colleges, hospitals and chantries in the mid-1540s and the almost-total loss of their written musical resources and the loss of the livelihoods of their musicians. Then, as part of Cranmer’s preparations for his 1549 English Prayer Book, parliament called in all the Latin ceremonial and musical books so that they could be destroyed under the supervision of Edward VI’s bishops.

#### **ACT OF PARLIAMENT 1548**

*Whereas in the former Service Book[s] are things corrupt, untrue, vain, and superstitious, be it therefore enacted that all books, called Antiphoners, Missales, Grails, Processionales, Manueles, Legendes, Pies, Portuasses, Primers in Latin and English, Couchers, Journalls, Ordinalles, or other books or wrytings whatsoever, heretofore used for the service of the Church, written or printed in the English or Latin tongue, other than such as are or shall be set forth by the King’s Majesty, shall be by authority of this present Act clearly and utterly abolished, extinguished and forbidden for ever. to be used or kept in this realm, or elsewhere within any of the King’s dominions’.*

***Statutes, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of the reign of Edward VI***

Thus an entire musical civilisation was wiped out with the burning of hundreds of thousands of unique hand-written and printed books. These included all those books which we know to have been written for organ players, of which not a single example survives. At the same time the Commissioners of the youthful Edward VI robbed churches of all their valuable goods, all these which had been given during the four previous centuries. Church plate and bells were particularly targeted for their costly gold, silver, tin and copper metals, though curiously organs were not targeted for their tin and lead; it seems that they were intended to be used to accompany metrical psalms, a completely new use for them.

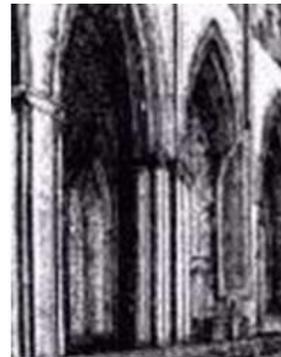
This headlong plunge into evangelical purification was only partly reversed at the accession of Mary in 1553, when Roman (not English) liturgies and their ornaments were briefly restored.

During Elizabeth’s long reign, though, many parish churches gradually lost their old furnishings and organs, having finally been deprived of their monastic support and being heavily taxed to support wars against continental Roman Catholic powers, principally Spain.

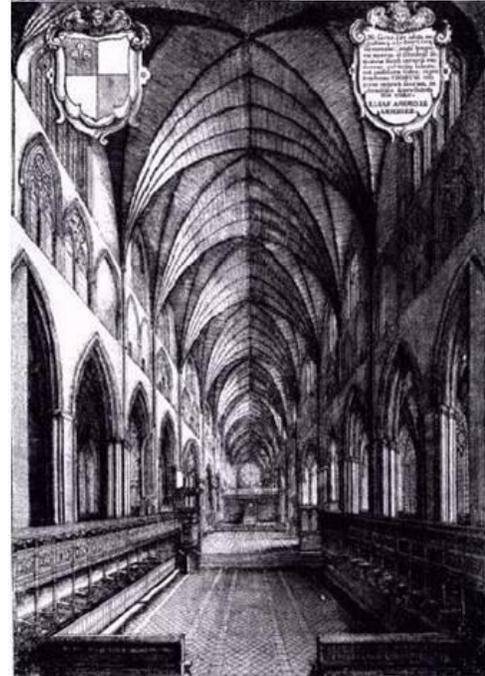
**Westminster 1540  
now St Briec**



**with pipework at  
La Roche Derrien**



**Old St Paul's post-1562**



Two large organs had been made in London during this period of drastic change:

- one at Westminster when the former abbey became a cathedral in 1540, some of whose original pipework seems to survive;
- another was made for St Paul's, following serious damage caused by the fall of its 500-foot spire after it was struck by lightning in 1561.

Incidentally, a wooden spire on Lincoln cathedral's central spire was 25 feet taller: it was the tallest building in the world, even taller than the pyramid of Giza, when first built in the 1330s and until it fell in 1549 - an appropriate date!

**7.** The later 16<sup>th</sup> century and early part of the 'dreadful' 17<sup>th</sup> century was not a good time for anyone living in Europe whilst post-Reformation wars raged against a backdrop of famine and continued attacks of plague. In general the status of music in church worship in England was under relentless attack from hard-line evangelical bishops and 'godly' ministers, except in the south-western counties where many organs continued to be used, and even made, right up to the English Civil Wars. By this time music had moved out of churches, where it was no longer much wanted, into houses; and house organs start to figure in the historical records in appreciable numbers.

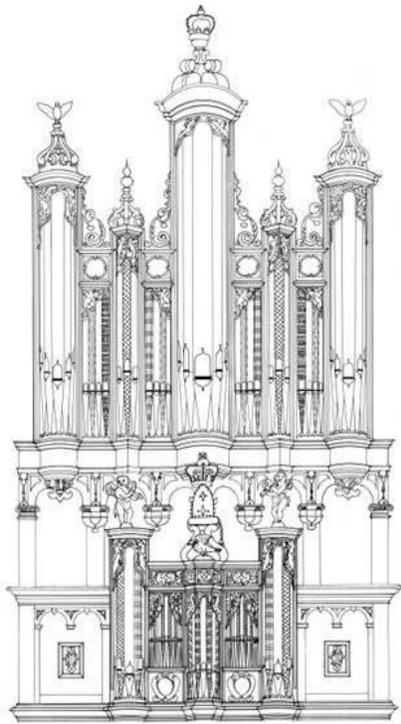


**Consort organ at Knole, 1590s?**

The oldest English keyboard instrument (of any kind) to survive in playing condition is a consort organ which has been since at least 1682 at Knole House, Sevenoaks, in Kent. It is now thought to date from the later years of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the time of Dallam's long journey through the dangerous Mediterranean to Istanbul with an organ-clock as a gift for the Sultan. Mechanically and structurally the Knole organ shares many features with the two 16<sup>th</sup>-century soundboards found in Suffolk, and its oak pipes were used as a basis for the pipework in the reconstruction of the smaller 'Wingfield' organ.

Led by William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, a brief and eventually disastrous pseudo-counter-Reformation took place.

***Magdalen College Oxford, Dallam Organ c1630***



***...whose chair organ survives in Stanford on Avon church, Northamptonshire ; its main case, in Tewkesbury's former abbey - where its colours were overpainted***



Laud tried to revive ceremonies in cathedrals and colleges in the 1620s and 1630s, but this had the unfortunate effect of making church organs all too symbolic of despotic church and political power. So organs were finally ordered by the Puritan parliament for complete destruction in an Act of 1644. At the outbreak of civil war in 1642 between King and Parliament, Robert Dallam's family removed to Brittany, where it seems they had pre-existing family contacts. Here they carried on the established English-Court style of organ-building, building several large instruments.

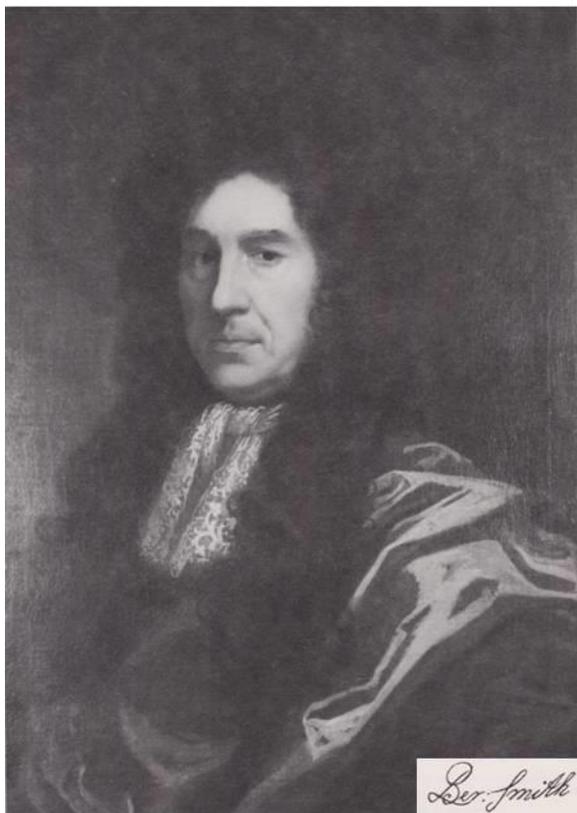


***Robert Dallam organ (1653)  
now in Lanvellec church***

The oldest surviving complete church organ with his English input is now in Lanvellec church, Côtes d'Armor, northern Brittany. It was built in 1653 for a nearby church, and no doubt represents the English style of the period, with upperwork and mixture ranks and cornets - and reed stops, which were then called 'regals'.

**8.** Parliament being victorious under the command of Oliver Cromwell, cathedrals were closed down, their lands and those of the bishops sold off to pay for the wars, the king executed and the Church of England abolished in 1646. By contrast, 'secular' music flourished, using organs in the private houses of high-church aristocrats and the new more puritan trading middle-class, and in private in the universities. The father of John Milton owned an organ and John Aubrey (chronicler of the foibles of the time) wrote that 'he played on that most'; that is, more on the organ than on other instruments. The Puritan soldier and composer, Silas Taylor, said Aubrey, also 'had a very fine chamber organ'.

When the Church of England and monarchy were restored in 1660, organs in cathedrals and Oxbridge colleges were fairly rapidly re-installed as well. The newly-dominant Church began to realise the symbolic importance of organs where they could be afforded, as in major cities and ports, including London after its most recent Great Fire, and in those university colleges which had professional choirs.



**Barnard Smith**



**René Harrisson - St Botolph Aldgate, City of London**

There was enough work for organ-builders to tempt various members of the Dallam family to return from France; the German-experienced Barnard Smith (whose own origins were likely to have been in the Stuart court) later returned from Holland. Robert Dallam's grandson, René Harrisson (aka Renatus Harris), born in northern Brittany about 1640, and the older Smith rivalled each other for the major London and courtly contracts for 35 years. Instruments with long, but still essentially vocal, keyboard compasses and a larger variety of reed stops were now made for English parish churches.

**9.** Henry Purcell (1659-1695) was trained under the remnants of the medieval system as a boy-musician in the court chapels and worked briefly as an adolescent organ-builder. Perhaps thanks to him, a conservative way of playing cathedral organs which had probably arisen since the 1550s was finally abandoned in favour of something more like their secular use.

## IN PRAISE OF THE ORGAN

### John Dryden for Purcell's 'Ode to St Cecilia' 1692

*From heav'n its wond'rous notes were given,  
Cecilia oft convers'd with heav'n.  
Some angel of the sacred quire,  
Did with his breath the pipes inspire,  
And, of their notes above, the just resemblance gave.  
Brisk without lightness, without dulness grave...  
Wond'rous machine! ...*

Purcell's Ode to St Cecilia for 1692, to words by the catholic John Dryden, includes this eulogy of the organ : This is a good description of the early classical English organ. It implies that the ideal organ was neither too solemn nor too frivolous - a characteristic English compromise, perhaps, but one that can only have happened in a country whose organs were by then at least as much secular ('light') as religious ('grave').

***Sound the trumpet ... ... and let the list'ning Shores rebound ...***



***Contemporary Trumpet, life-time of Henry Purcell***

One of Purcell's friends, the trumpeter John Shore, invented the tuning fork in 1711, and this practical invention (apparently not exported) meant that in Britain 18th-century orchestras and organs could be used together wherever they were in the country, where churches inaugurated new organs and/or held music festivals. The English organ remained at this pitch (around A=425 Hz) for the next 150 years or so.



***Jordon Organ, St George's Botolph Lane***

At the same time, the first organ with four keyboards and a swell-front action controlled by the organist was built by the Jordans, a family of house builders and furniture makers turned organ-builders, at St Magnus church by the old London Bridge.

**10.** By the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, organs were now made to fixed contract prices in workshops with much use of sub-contracting, and no longer on the spot; this profitable activity once more became a dynamic and dynastic London-based industry. At the same time, the craft of instrument-making was thrown open to new influences and pressures with the invited immigration of German-speaking protestants. Especially important among these was of course Handel, but also the Swiss harpsichord makers Burkart Tshudi and the Kirckmans, and the young organ-builder Johan Snetzler, who arrived not very long after Handel and like him became an English citizen.

### Snetzler organs in Norfolk churches



*St Margaret's Kings Lynn  
installed 1754*

*Hillington, made for the  
Duke of Bedford in 1756*



*Sculthorpe, made for  
York Assembly Rooms in 1755*

'John Snetzler', arriving in London around 1730, showed the English how to organise a workshop system to produce organs of very high quality in considerable quantity, though he used mostly immigrant labour and had no direct successors. He sold church organs to town-church councils in Britain and the American colonies and just as many (and at higher prices) to the aristocracy and concert hall managers on both sides of the Atlantic. So, slowly, organs started to be installed in churches again; but only around 750 of these possessed organs at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

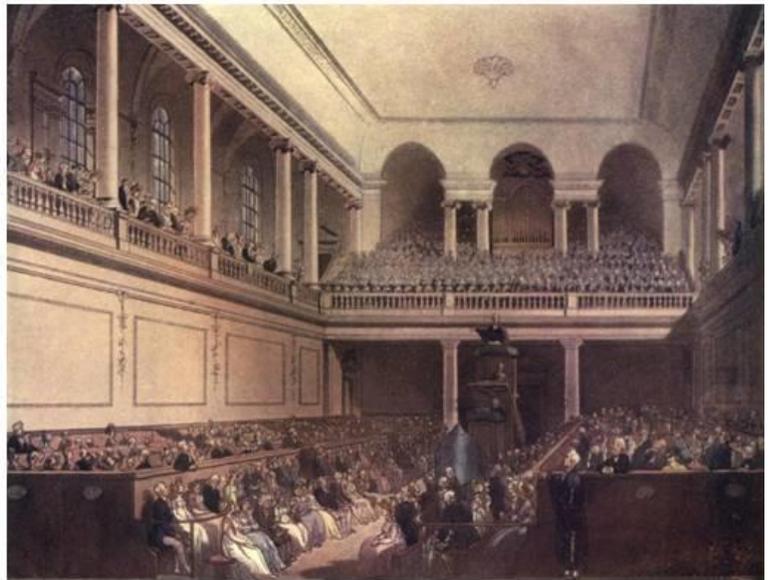
**11.** Handel was only one, but he was the most admired, of many musicians from all over Europe who came to England to make London the European capital of 'baroque' music.

Private house concerts, daily evening concerts in pleasure gardens, and concerts and recitals in specially-built halls as well as in theatres became preferred recreations during the London season.



This activity then spread all over England as the monied classes travelled to their country houses and spas. Even cathedrals eventually held large festivals, often for charitable purposes.

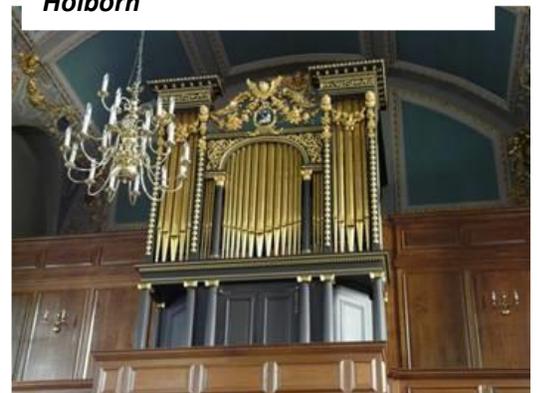
*Foundling Hospital Chapel with organ, drawn by Thomas Rowlandson & Augustus Charles Pugin c1808*



*c.1920 photo of Foundling Hospital Chapel: Bevington organ in Parker-Russell case Museum of London Archive*



*Organ case, now in St Andrew's Holborn*

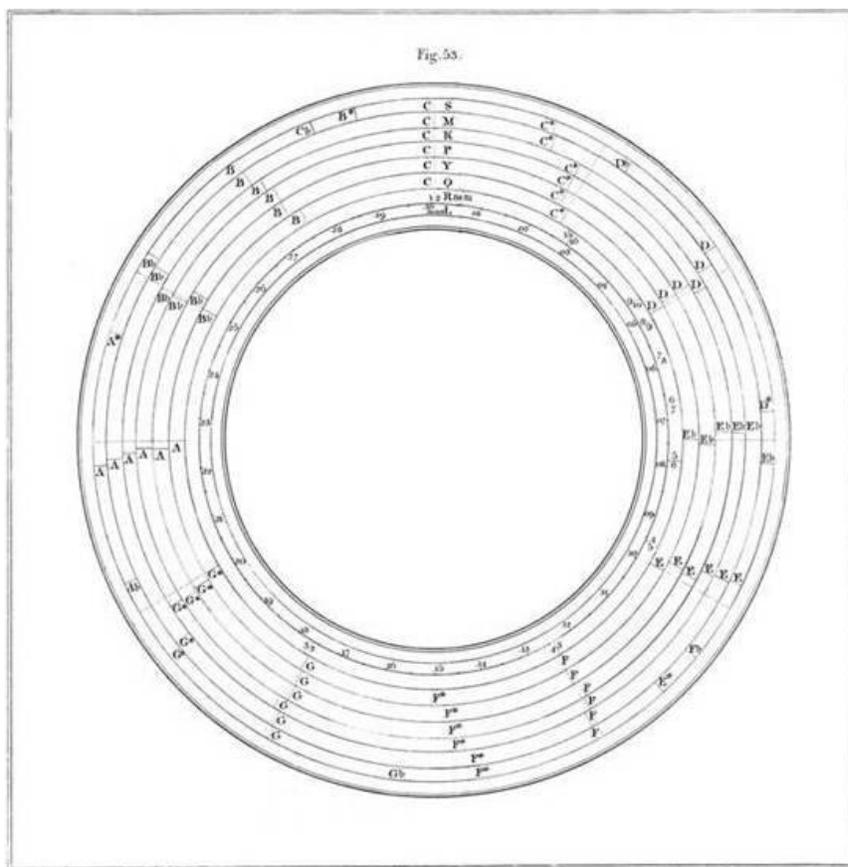


The Foundling Hospital in London gave concerts for its own upkeep, and Handel was among its first governors.

It was proposed to make this a conservatoire on the French model, but the English preferred the old system of musical apprenticeship in the choir schools attached to every cathedral and of study with organists in the large towns. Organs became more and more sophisticated in tone and appearance, with finely-carved mahogany or oak cases and gold-leafed front pipes. Their actions were sensitive; the music written for them suggests that their playing technique was closely allied to that of the harpsichord and early fortepiano.

**12.** The classical organ was fully established by the end of the 18th century. Organ building became highly inventive, the monarch, George III, being personally interested in the craft and ordering organs for his own use and as gifts to churches and cathedrals.

**Figure 53 from Dr Thomas Young's 'letter', read to the Royal Society 16 January 1800**  
*'... its chief claim to preference [is] ... the similarity of its theory to the actual practice of the best instrument makers ...'*



Another more serious scientist than the monarch was Thomas Young, the polymath who used organ pipes in his experiments on Newtonian physics and took a significant part in deciphering the Rosetta Stone. He noted that London organ builders had devised a clever unequal tuning system, and devised the 'circle of fifths' to illustrate this in comparison with other theoretical and practical systems.

Typically, the English organ stayed tonally quite conservative, with stylised modes of playing the church instruments, as in France. Its technical and tonal resources – stable winding systems, combination actions, the Swell and contrapuntally-clear choruses were further refined. Because the Great and Choir keyboards of domestic and church organs always descended to at least low G these organs could supply a sub-octave bass to the human voice without pedal stops, but by the end of the century, pedal-boards were not uncommon again. The music of Corelli, of J.S. Bach's sons, and eventually Haydn and Mozart, now also influenced the style of organ music, and organ concertos (initiated by Handel in the 1730s) became very popular in both sacred and secular contexts.



**Canterbury Catch Club with its 1789 Hugh Russell concert organ, engraved in 1828**



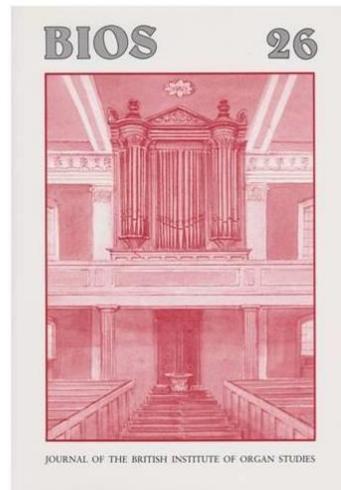
**The same organ near Dieppe in 2013 in a Handel concerto with La Petite Bande**

Even the smaller cathedral cities, spas and towns built municipal concert or assembly halls, often on a quite intimate scale, and these were provided with organs.

**13.** Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century life in London and the provincial towns was very difficult because of the Napoleonic wars and terrible weather. For about twenty years cultural life was depressed, though it never ceased, as is clear from the Journals of John Marsh which cover his lifetime (from 1752-1828). Meanwhile the war machine had accentuated the rise of industrial cities; when peace came, Parliament voted a large sum of money for building churches in these new cities and in the new suburbs of older towns. Organs built for these quickly became proto-romantic in style as organ-building became a considerable industry, using new techniques such as compensated horizontal reservoirs with transverse bellows, and inter-manual and pedal couplers.



**Holy Trinity Newington Butt, Southwark, 1824, made by Hugh Russell and John Abbey**



These techniques were exported to France by John Abbey (from 1826) and Charles Barker, both of whom ran organ-building enterprises in Paris, the Abbey family doing so right up to the 1920s. From there the latest English inventions were disseminated to continental Europe, thus making large romantic-orchestral German and French organs technically possible. These proto-romantic organs made in the 1820s, very few of which remain in recognisable condition, formed a second high point of organ-building in Britain, but their influence here was destined to disappear almost as completely as those made in the first high-point in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in an even shorter time.

**14.** The music of J S Bach first became known to London organists in the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and eventually the lack of a truly independent pedal organ (such as, we should remind ourselves, the later medieval organ must have had) began to be felt. The existing classical model was adapted to provide this during the 1830s and 1840s, under the influence of Henry Gauntlett, friend of Mendelssohn.

***Great George Street chapel Liverpool, 1841***



***William Hill (and  
J H Gauntlett)***

Young's description of current tuning practice shows that it was also well-adapted to the newly-fashionable performances, solo and duet, of transcriptions of European masters' music published by the organist Vincent Novello from the late 1820s onwards. Newly-emancipated Roman Catholic and other independent chapels installed organs quite quickly and organs (barrel or 'finger' or both) began to be placed in country churches again where the local squire liked to imitate what he heard in London or the nearest city. Many more 'secular' organs of all sizes were built for town houses, rectories and even suburban villas. Edward Hodges took his version of a proto-romantic Bach organ from Bristol to New York, thus extending an always inventive west-country organ-building tradition into a new world.

**15.** Large Town Hall concert organs were installed from the late 1830s onwards by those new industrial city municipalities rich enough to build very large town hall complexes. These always included sizeable concert halls, the largest being at Liverpool and, later, the Albert Hall. In these halls, and previously at the Great Exhibition, somehow the Willis family (which, like the Jordans, had a background in house building) found the money and labour resources to build very large instruments.

So, for the first time the middle and working classes could hear European orchestral music transcribed for organ and played by salaried virtuoso organists. They were also encouraged to sing the oratorios of Handel and contemporary composers (Mendelssohn, Spohr and Gounod were their favourite ones) accompanied by these mighty instruments. Even quite small towns also now boasted their own choral societies in which all



*Mendelssohn conducting Elijah at Birmingham*

***The first performance of 'Elijah'; Birmingham Town Hall's organ was played by John Henry Gauntlett***

were invited to join and learn to read music, either from the staff or using a clever and practical adaptation of French solfège called 'tonic sol-fa'.

16. The 300th anniversary of the start of the Reformation in 1833 had seen a new Oxford-based movement of renewal in the established Anglican church. Though this started as a social and theological call, young Cambridge student ecclesiologists soon moved its emphasis towards the 'restoration' of churches, and especially their long-neglected chancels, to their supposed medieval state. This work included novelties such as parallel choir-stalls for mixed choirs, bench-pews for the faithful in the nave and its aisles, and the acoustically-disastrous removal of plaster ceilings.

SCUDAMORE ORGANS,  
OR PRACTICAL HINTS RESPECTING ORGANS  
FOR VILLAGE CHURCHES AND SMALL  
CHANCELS, ON IMPROVED  
PRINCIPLES.

BY THE REV. JOHN BARON, M.A.  
RECTOR OF UPTON SCUDAMORE, WILTS; LATE MICHEL  
FELLOW OF QUEEN'S COLLEGE, OXFORD.  
WITH DESIGNS BY  
GEORGE EDMUND STREET, F.S.A.

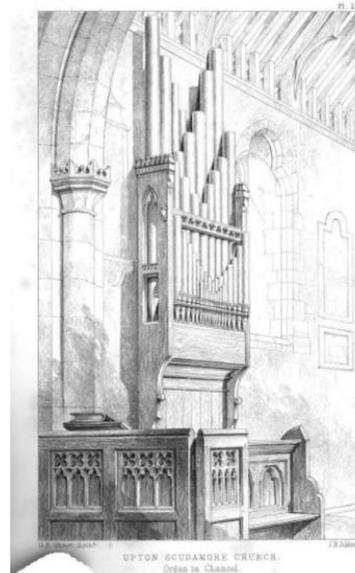
"The God, and I believe the tale,  
The humblest reed could more prevail,  
Had more of strength, divine rage,  
Than all which charms this lagging age,  
Even all at once together found,  
Ouzel's mingled world of sound."  
*Albion's Isle in "The Pillars."—CHALICE.*

LONDON:  
BELL AND DALDY, 186, FLEET STREET.  
1858.

*The right of translation is reserved.*

*I ... know that there are still many chancels of village churches disused, frequented by frogs and such-like animals, so damp and ill-ventilated that even the clergyman thinks it a service of danger to go there on the Sunday to read the Communion Service ...*

*From Scudamore Organs by Dr John Baron, 1858*



UPTON SCUDAMORE CHURCH.  
Organ in Chancel.

Despite the pleas of such as the Revd Dr John Baron of Upton Scudamore, who seemed to know, like Pugin and his clients (and unlike Edward Hopkins) where medieval organs were placed, the musical qualities of organs all too often suffered seriously from being thoughtlessly designed, ugly and badly positioned. In the 1850s, they were still beyond the financial reach of most country churches.

**A simple Scudamore**



**Warmington, Warwickshire**

**A grand Scudamore**

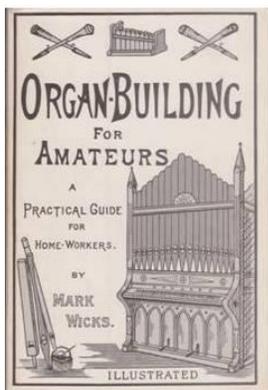


**Sutton Veny, Wiltshire**

17. From this time, too, the end of the classical organ came in Britain with the boomerang importation of some highly-influential German (Schulze) and French (Cavaillé-Coll) organs. Ironically, the fact that these German and French organs would not have been possible without classical English techniques was forgotten. Very quickly the so-called German 'scientific' style of organ building was preferred because it was much easier and cheaper to construct, a fact which appealed to the highly-competitive British organ-builders. Chiefly thanks to the highly dubious polemics of Edward Hopkins in his widely-influential book, first published in 1855, the music of J.S. Bach was made the excuse for eradicating the English organ with all its special characteristics in favour of a heavily-standardised style which led in too many cases to organs that were both ugly to see and dull to hear. Perhaps as a consequence, the organ was now often discussed as if it was primarily a 'sacred church instrument' again, and its social values stressed, as in the foreword to a book (1887) on Organ-building for Amateurs:

**Organ Building for Amateurs, 1887**

*'...the moral value of such an instrument itself in a home where children are growing up cannot ... be over-estimated.'*



**18.** The later 19th-century and early 20th-century saw organs being installed at high speed into most Anglican country churches, in many places for the second time since the early 17<sup>th</sup> century. All non-conformist churches now dropped any residual antipathy to the organ in the face of this competition. An edgy preoccupation with mechanical novelty, grandchild of the precocious Industrial Revolution no doubt, led builders to invent or 'improve' all sorts of systems: pneumatic and electric, new sorts of wind-chests and wind-raising and wind-regulating mechanisms, and consoles which could be detached at any distance from the pipework.



*Salisbury cathedral (Willis 1876)*



*St Mary, Redcliffe (Harrison and Harrison 1912)*

With all this excitement there was perhaps an inevitable tendency for the organ's musical and visual structures to take second place and they began to disintegrate. But the materials used were often of the finest, sourced as they were from all corners of the Empire, and highly-competent labour was still cheap.

**19.** The first part of the 20th century was inevitably a period of uncertainty and financial difficulty because of the two wars, during which cherished ideals could rarely be fully realised.

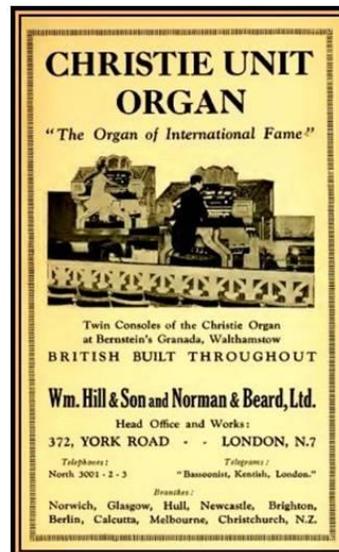


*The Wurlitzer Organ Factory, Charlton Kings Road, Kentish Town.*

*The organ in the foreground was installed at the Troxy Cinema Stepney and the one behind, at the Granada Theatre Edmonton*



*Metropole Victoria 1930s*



**Organs for 20<sup>th</sup> century amphitheatres**

Once again high-pressure organs were built to entertain the public, though this time not in amphitheatres but in cinemas; supplying parts for these kept many of the larger remaining organ building firms in work. After the second World War and its restrictions, another wave of Bach-worship brought about the 'baroque' organ, in reality a neo-romantic version of the organs familiar to Bach.



*Swedish Seamen's Mission, Rotherhithe  
Martensson*



*Royal Festival Hall  
Harrison & Harrison*

**Organs installed in London in 1953**

Here is one of the first of these in Britain; it arrived incognito in London in the same year as the Festival Hall organ was being installed. But these organs led eventually to a general rediscovery of the merits of mechanical actions in organs. However, towards the end of the century, romantic tonalities (often with vaguely French influences, thanks to the re-evaluation of Cavallé-Coll's organs there) once more became fashionable. And, once more, organs are being made with electric actions.



**The Concert Platform:**  
*'where most people see and hear organs these days'*



The global 'early music' movement, which started in London in the 1950s, has meant that small organs have become a quite common sight on the concert platform, and this is probably where most people see organs these days. But in fact attempts to rediscover authentic modes of performance have had very little effect on the organ world or on singing styles in general.

A spirit of deadly conservation of older organs has taken over in some quarters,....

### Inactive conservation of organs – the CCT way



*Evesham, Worcs*

*Edlesborough, Bucks*

*CCT publicity material*

....but since most of the ecclesiastical legacy is basically later-Victorian and Germanic in style and taste, the earlier classical organ is not properly understood, or in reality much appreciated either. As a result, German-Romantic organs are usually quite carefully restored (when they are), but English classical and proto-romantic ones are far too rarely fully restored back to their original state in terms of their original pitch, tuning or voicing regulation.

**20.** Organs for sale! In fact, in our own time the British church organ is once again under threat, as it had been in the later 16th century, but for different reasons. All church denominations are in seemingly-inexorable decline, about which most are in serious denial. So many churches were built in the prosperous 19th century, that for the last thirty years quite a number have been closing or amalgamating for lack of support. In addition, many churches now prefer to use guitars, drums and electronic keyboards rather than the organ to accompany 'songs' whose poor musical value does not in fact justify the use of a costly and complex instrument.

Recent laws on access for disabled persons and on provision of washing and toilet facilities in public buildings have led church councils to suggest that the space taken up by 'expensive' organs could be used for these. Another more insidious problem is that new or improved heating systems are sometimes lethal to organs of

conventional construction which use real wood. In addition, churches' acoustics are almost everywhere being stifled by acres of carpets, which do everything to wreck any chance of a 'real' organ sounding really well throughout a building.

In view of these developments, the present loss of the English organ heritage seems likely to accelerate, but fortunately the best of these organs are usually being saved, sometimes in the teeth of church authorities.

The unique qualities of good British organs are thus being appreciated in Holland, Scandinavia, the Baltic states, and in France and Italy, and even rather mediocre ones are finding new homes in recent comers to the European union.

New organs are being built in Britain for export, large instruments having been sent to the USA, Australia and New Zealand, and even some modest ones to other European countries, though not as yet to France, whose organ-building remains resolutely insular.

### French organs?



*Aubertin in Oxford*

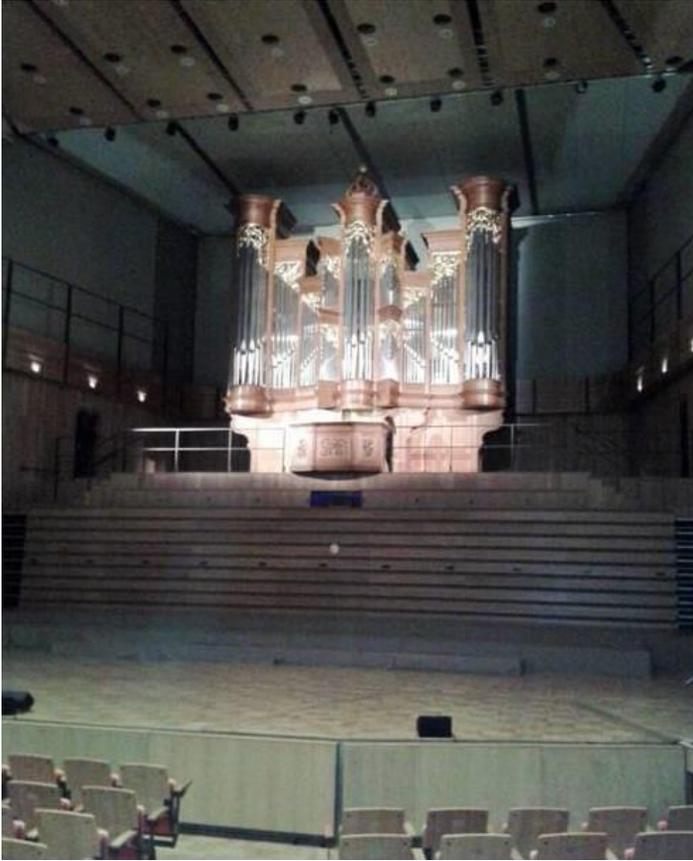


*English house organ c1775 in a church near Blois*

The number of substantial new organs now being built for churches in Britain has diminished to the same low level as at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century: a handful each year.

Or because concert organists, who have not usually been trained under what remains of the old church system, prefer to have the convenience of modern inventions such as electronic memories for stop-changing instead of learning to listen and register by hand? They also usually specify dull, repetitive and conventional European-eclectic tonal schemes rather than anything really inventive that might be based on British traditions.

If they, or anyone here today, think that there is no British tradition to be proud of, I hope that its real and very unusual history, as suggested in these last 20 paragraphs, will have shown otherwise.



**New French organ in the Elgar Concert Hall, University of Birmingham ; has this bucked the trend?  
*made by Boris and Marc Garnier, 2014***

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