

An organ transplant for St Margaret's Church, Topsham, Exeter

Sir Trevor MacDonald recently said that his favourite place in the U K was Topsham – he owned an apartment there for several years - and felt that the stress of London was left behind when he reached Topsham. Topsham is a thriving community on the southern edge of Exeter with a population of 4,000.

St Margaret's is a large Victorian church with an active congregation of all ages. The church is frequently used for concerts and other community activities. The fine musical tradition goes back to the late nineteenth century. Tony Yates has been organist & choirmaster since 1973: he was a member of the BBC Northern Singers and the choirs of Canterbury Cathedral and Chichester Cathedral. For several years he was a teacher of singing at Dartington College of Arts. Matthew Wright is the assistant organist: he is a senior lecturer in classics at Exeter University, and holds two piano diplomas. There is a mixed choir of 12 children and 20 adults, who sing a wide variety of music, including regular choral evensongs, and, once or twice a year, works such as Bach's St Matthew Passion, Handel's Messiah and the Fauré Requiem. Our vicar, Richard Jeffery, has strongly supported the choir in their work, and has been a driving force behind our efforts to enhance the music in our church

The original organ was built by William Thomas in 1827, rebuilt by Henry Philip Dicker of Exeter in 1860, rebuilt and enlarged by him and installed to the north of the chancel in the recently rebuilt church in 1877. Hele & Co. of Plymouth carried out a major rebuild in 1903. They added a new Choir organ and made alterations to the Great and the Swell. There were rebuilds in 1936 and 1967, resulting in a tracker organ, with electric action pedals, of 26 speaking stops. By 2002 the organ needed a complete overhaul, but it was not a particularly distinguished instrument; it was a quarter tone above standard pitch, and was not adequate to our needs.

We were planning to repair and improve it, when we had the offer of an exceptionally fine organ from the soon to be redundant Wesley Methodist Church, the Crescent, central Plymouth. It was built in 1959 by the well known firm of Nicholson & Co. Ltd. of Malvern, whose founder, John Nicholson, went to Worcester in 1840 and rapidly made a name for the excellence of his organs. Many of the most famous organs in the Midlands were built by the company, and organs have been installed in many countries throughout the world. The Company is now building a new organ for Llandaff Cathedral – the first totally new organ in a British Cathedral since Coventry in 1960.

The Plymouth organ was designed in consultation with professor Willis Grant of the University of Bristol, Mus. Doc., ARCM, FRCO, to meet all requirements for the performance of organ music, and for its primary purpose of accompanying the services of the church. The organ was finished by Roger Yates, who was considered to be one of the finest voicers in the country, and was dedicated on 8th July 1959.

The Plymouth organ filled a chamber 20 feet high, 16 feet wide, and 12 feet deep. If we were to increase the width of the Topsham organ chamber by a foot, there would just be room. An independent assessment of the instrument was made by Robert Langston, organist of Lincoln's Inn, who commented specially on the quality of the Great chorus. He strongly recommended that we acquire it.

Lance Foy, organ-builder, Truro:

"I know this instrument and have worked on similar organs built by Nicholson during this period. They are splendid instruments and this is a very fine example: the specification is comprehensive and the quality of construction is excellent. The organ is relatively modern: it is a class example of 1950s organ building and it should be preserved."

Michael Farley, organ-builder, Budleigh Salterton:

"It is rare for such an instrument of such quality to become available. There will be considerable removal and restoration costs, but an instrument such as this will last for centuries. I have inspected it several times and know it to be built of the finest materials – mainly solid mahogany. As it was built only 50 years ago, it is relatively new in organ-building terms. This would be a sound investment for future generations, and would give you a complete instrument – one which has not been altered, and which will last almost indefinitely with a minimum of maintenance."

In spite of the additional cost we felt this was a golden opportunity, and so in faith we bought the organ. From 2002 to 2009 we worked hard to raise over £100,000 to have the organ installed. We received money from 15 grant-awarding bodies, but most of the money was given by local people.

We chose Michael Farley from nearby Budleigh Salterton to install the new organ. We found no buyer for the old organ, so it was dismantled and removed in January 2009. The swell cornopean and clarion were soon installed in the church in St Miniver, Cornwall, and the great trumpet will go to Ashburton parish church, Devon. In February B & L Construction, a local firm of builders, began the rebuilding of the organ chamber. The new organ weighs three times as much as the previous one, so new foundations and a new floor were needed. To the east of the chamber a new wall, nearly 30 feet high, was built, and a ceiling constructed. The interior of the chamber was clad in oil-tempered hardboard to increase the resonance. The church architect, John Scott, oversaw the work.

The oak organ case, made in 1936 by Herbert Read, was increased in height by 30 inches, to conceal the tops of the display pipes. Two local craftsmen, Steve Ballamy and Cameron Stewart, did the work. The dummy pipes had deteriorated over the years, so they were stripped back to the bare metal and painted gold, by Eric Brant, another local man. Panelling to the west of the chamber was opened and re-carved in oak, to the designs of Hugh Harrison, church restorer, Devon. This allows the organ, especially the tromba and trombone, to speak out clearly into the nave.

The console is on a movable platform. The electro-pneumatic action was renewed. Much of the electrical work on the console and inside the organ chamber was done by

Chris Love, one of Michael Farley's men, who would often be at work by 7 a.m. The person responsible for the main structure of the instrument was Bob Crawley. I helped occasionally, when an extra man was needed for heavy lifting or for hunting for a particular-sized screw, and I was particularly impressed by Bob's ability to remember details of the dismantling in Plymouth seven years earlier. Bob is an organ builder of many years experience – he retires in November 2009 - and his experience was much in evidence when he would pause, deep in thought, considering what part of the organ needed to go in next. A mistake could mean half a day to install a wind chest and another half day to take it out again.

Maurice Eglinton of Hele & Co. looked after the organ in Plymouth for many years and the only weakness in the instrument that he ever noted was the wind supply. The blower for the organ was 50 years old, and was not powerful enough for the most extreme demands. The British Organ Blowing Co. of Derby calculated that it needed 25% more power. They were the company who supplied the original blower in 1959 but couldn't be persuaded to replace it free of charge! B.O.B. built a new, bigger blower, with an inverter to make the triple-phase motor work from a single-phase supply, and with a slow start, to avoid making the lights in the church go out. The blower is placed 7 feet below floor level, in a well-insulated pit. The organ has a midi recording and playback facility. There are 12 levels of memory, and a transposition function, up to 5 semitones up or down.

Manual compass 61 notes

Pedal compass 32 notes

GREAT ORGAN

SWELL ORGAN (enclosed)

1. Quintaten	16	24. Open Diapason	8
2. Open Diapason no. 1	8	25. Lieblich Gedacht	8
3. Open Diapason no. 2	8	26. Echo Gamba	8
4. Salicional	8	27. Voix Celestes T.C.	8
5. Stopped Diapason	8	28. Principal	4
6. Principal	4	29. Lieblich Flute	4
7. Gemshorn	4	30. Fifteenth	2
8. Twelfth	2.2/3	31. Mixture 22.26.29.	III
9. Fifteenth	2	32. Contra Fagotto	16
10. Mixture 19.22.26.	III	33. Trumpet	8
11. Tromba	8	34. Clarion	4

i. Swell to Great

viii. Tremulant

xi. Sub Octave

ii. Choir to Great

ix. Octave

xii. Unison Off

CHOIR ORGAN (enclosed)

PEDAL ORGAN

12. Contra Dulciana	16	35. Resultant Bass	32
13. Geigen Diapason	8	36. Contra Bass	16
14. Hohl Flute	8	37. Violone	16

15. Dulciana	8	38. Dulciana (Choir)	16
16. Viole d'Orchestre	8	39. Bourdon	16
17. Harmonic Flute	4	40. Quint	10.2/3
18. Dulcet	4	41. Octave	8
19. Nazard	2.2/3	42. Cello	8
20. Flageolet	2	43. Bass Flute	8
21. Tierce	1.3/5	44. Fifteenth	4
22. Clarinet	8	45. Flute	4
23. Tromba (Great)	8	46. Mixture 22.26.29.31.(Choir)	IV
iii. Tremulant	vi. Sub Octave	47. Fagotto (Swell)	16
iv. Octave	vii. Unison Off	48. Trombone	16
v. Swell to Choir		49. Tromba (Great)	8
xii. Swell Octave to Pedal		xiii. Choir Octave to Pedal	
xiv. Swell to Pedal		xv. Great to Pedal	
xvi. Choir to Pedal		xvii. Great to Pedal Pistons	

ACCESSORIES

6 combination pistons to each division	8 reversible couplers
12 General thumb pistons	12 General toe pistons
Sequencer	Balanced Swell Pedal
General Cancel thumb piston	Balanced Choir Pedal
Organ Blower and Rectifier by British Organ Blowing Co. Derby	

The inaugural recital, by Andrew Millington, Director of Music at Exeter Cathedral, and the Dedication of the organ took place on Saturday 17th April 2010. We are preserving a gem of an organ to the glory of God and for the benefit of generations of worshippers and music lovers. It is a statement of faith in the future.

The large size of St Margaret's Church, and the open nature of the chancel and nave have made the church an important concert venue within the area. The previous instrument was used for teaching, and this will increase when the new organ is in use. The Church has a policy of ready access to the organ, for students and for other organists. If you are in the area, please make contact. For further details of the instrument, or to arrange a visit, please phone:

Tony Yates: 01392 875276.