

## The History of the Organ at St James' Prebend Street, Islington

The twenty page "History of St James' Islington", written by Peter Baugh in 1992, describes in some detail the opening of St James' Church on 5th May 1875 by the Bishop of London, John Jackson, in the company of the Master of the Clothworkers Company, John Bazeley-White, the Company architect F W Porter and the Vicar of St Mary's Church in Upper Street, Daniel Wilson. "Since the Church was not ready to receive an organ the hymns were played on a harmonium. It was expected an organ gallery would be built (that did not materialise)".

The National Pipe Organ Register records that a two manual organ by Gray and Davison of Euston Road was placed in 'a lofty chamber in the south chancel'. The date of installation can only be an educated guess. Gray and Davison had an enviable reputation and one of their organs can be found in the Ballroom at Buckingham Palace. While the new bells were the gift of Baroness Angela Burdett Coutts and the Westlake and Laver stained glass windows were given by the Heysham-Wood family and a number of other individual Clothworkers, there is no record of how the organ was funded.

A sole parish magazine from 1934 gives a glimpse of parish life during the height of the Depression. There were four services each Sunday, the main ones being a Choral Eucharist and a Solemn Evensong. A copy of 'Choristers Chirping', a magazine written for the choir by the organist of the time, Vernham Cartwright, suggests there was a very healthy choir of boys and young men and this may have been the reason for the first rebuilding and extension of the organ in 1937 by the Tottenham based firm, Monk and Gunther. Sadly, the choir did not survive the fall in congregational numbers in the 1960s and the choir stalls were sold.

The Clothworkers continued to act as patrons but just when the fortunes of the parish, under Fr Jack Holden, were beginning to revive, the Company let it be known that they would be ending their patronage on St James' Day 1989. But not before they offered the parish a series of very generous grants which included the cost of remodelling the sanctuary, the laying of new flooring throughout the nave and the opportunity to rebuild the organ which had become largely unplayable. The contract for the refurbishment of the instrument, with electric action, was awarded to Hill, Norman and Beard.

There was one complication however. At about this time, a team of very active bellringers sought the opportunity to increase the size of the bell chamber by lowering the ringing room floor as part of a big project to replace the old peal with newer, lighter bells. A lively debate followed because this change meant that the height of the organ chamber below would have to be reduced, limiting the size of the new organ and making tuning access more difficult. To the disappointment of Peter Macken the organist, the bellringer's proposal was agreed.

One of the concerns discussed with HNB in 1989 was the way the organ spoke solely into the short chancel resulting in a lack of power at the back of the nave. To improve transmission, and in keeping with the Organ Reform Movement principles current at the time, the pipework was 'opened up', giving more volume and a sharper quality to the voicing. On the other hand, the pedal division, buried at the back of the chamber, lacked definition. Despite the huge investment by the Clothworkers, the musical balance of the organ was poor and, critically, the rebuilds had lost sight of the distinctive warmth of its Gray and Davison origins.

Every new generation brings fresh insights and the development of the music ministry at St James' began to gain momentum after an experimental 'Year of Music' in 2012 when the Islington Proms concert series was first launched. Almost at once an appeal was made for funds to purchase a grand piano for St James' and the appointment of Anthony Hill as organist in 2013 led to an exponential growth in the numbers of people using the Church for rehearsals and concerts. However rude early critics had been about the style of the Church designed by Frederick Porter in 1875, Anthony was convinced that the acoustics of St James' for chamber and choral singing were first class.

To provide greater flexibility for such musical events, the PCC submitted plans for the re-ordering of the chancel and this was completed as part of the 140th anniversary of the consecration of the Church in 2015. Alongside these improvements to the interior, informal discussions were held with various organ advisers and their practical advice informed a series of extended discussions with organ builders from both pipe and digital backgrounds.

An important survey of the site by Christopher Batchelor, a former Managing Director of Harrison and Harrison, led to a major investigation to see if the reorientation of the whole organ to face the nave would allow for the scaling down of the pipework. His belief that a 90degree turn would enable the organ to be heard throughout the Church without working so hard was the key to all that followed. A question remained, however, whether the current specification would be adequate for the growth in music making we were seeking.

After many lengthy debates, the PCC decided to explore ways to enhance the current specification with some digital stops, voiced to blend with the Gray and Davison pipework. While Christopher had to withdraw from the Project at this point because of current IBO rules on hybrid instruments, the skills of Paul Mortier of MPOS were sufficient to allow the Diocesan Organ Adviser, John Norman, to recommend this development to the Diocesan Advisory Committee "in our case" because of the very limited space available in the organ chamber.

After a full Consistory Court case had ruled in favour of the Project, the organ was removed from St James' in August 2021 and a new wood and steel platform constructed which would not only allow a proportion of the organ to extend into the south aisle, but would also permit the whole instrument to be located on one level not two as before. This has enabled the creation of a new cupboard beneath, a real bonus in a Church as compact as St James'.

With the assistance of Rhidian Jones and our other organ consultants, a new specification was devised although the number of additional stops was limited by the size of the jambs on the console. The most significant additions have been in the pedal department where a modern equivalent of the 32' Acoustic Bass in the 1937 rebuild has been restored and a 16' Contra Trombone and a Mixture have been provided to give substance to the full chorus. The Monk and Gunther clarinet has been replicated and some familiar mutations have been added.

There can be no doubt however that, thanks to Paul Mortier and MPOS, this remains a good quality pipe organ, restored and reorientated, with a very limited number of digital stops added, to form a versatile Gray and Davison style instrument which is now ready for use in a Church dedicated to the highest standard of musical performance.

John Burniston

### What thinking lay behind the rebuilding of the organ at St James'?

There are always physical constraints on organs. This rebuild is largely the result of exploring what could be done if those constraints were relaxed a little.

From 1877 the organ had been located entirely within the organ chamber, with one side of the Swell box completely blocking the arch to the south aisle. This meant that almost all of the sound from the organ spoke indirectly into the Nave via the Chancel. In 1989, to increase the overall volume, the pipework had been 'pushed' by increasing the wind pressure, opening up the pipe tip holes and cutting the pipe mouths higher. Additional stops had been added, particularly at higher pitches (eg the Great Seventeenth and Swell Mixture), to try and add some clarity in the Nave, but they didn't sit comfortably with the other stops.

But what if the all of the pipework didn't have to be inside the chamber? From that question flowed the rest of the organ as it now is. If the Great pipework could be moved from the chamber into the south aisle, then it could be revoiced closer to its original sound. It wouldn't have to be 'pushed' as hard, yet would still be able to be heard well enough to lead a congregation.

This rearrangement would also enable the Pedal Bourdon (the one remaining 16' pedal stop) to be moved from underneath the organ where it had previously been squeezed. Secondly, and probably more importantly, it would allow the Swell box to be moved so that it no longer blocked the arch to the nave.

The relatively underspecified Pedal department and the desire to use the Swell division to accompany musicians in the Chancel led to another change. Even if the Great pipes were moved, there still wouldn't be enough room in the chamber to fit a more complete Pedal division, or even reinstate the 16' Open Diapason that had been lost in an earlier rebuild. To better carry out accompanying work, the Swell division would need some more gentle stops for which there simply wasn't enough space.

But what if some stops could be provided digitally? That would allow people to still have the indefinable experience of listening to air resonating in pipes, but this would now be supported by a solid foundation in the Pedal division on an instrument now able to perform a wider set of roles and repertoire. Using twenty years of experience building combination organs, these ranks could be voiced to blend seamlessly with the pipe stops.

The design of the new pipe display in the south aisle is a celebration of the interconnection between music and mathematics. I like to show complete ranks of pipes since people don't always know that an organ consists of more than just the impressive pipes on the outside of the case. Within the constraints of the sloping roof in the south aisle there was space for 8' and 4' ranks if they were placed one above the other, while the roof line is reflected back to create the dividing line. The curves formed by the pipe mouths are the result of the interaction between St James' and the geometry inherent in all ranks of organ pipes.

So by slackening one constraint (moving the Great pipes) and allowing for some alternatives within the remaining constraints (adding some digital stops) it has been possible to produce an instrument both closer to the original Gray and Davison instrument and one able to successfully cover a much wider range of roles.

Paul Mortier, MPOS