

Organ surgery pulls out all the stops

Inside the anonymous workshop that is temporary home to the Grand Organs from three cathedrals

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IN A modern, pagoda-like building opposite an indoor climbing centre and down the road from an industrial estate, lie the innards of England's two most sacred organs.

The pipework and keyboards from the cathedrals of York and Canterbury are in thousands of pieces, laid out on racks and catalogued on computers. Across the floor of the vast workshop, a third organ, from Salisbury Cathedral, is also in bits.

No-one could remember when business had last been this good,

observed Andrew Scott, head voicer at Harrison and Harrison, the 158-year-old firm of organ builders to God.

"It's like a vast jigsaw puzzle, without a picture on the lid," he said.

The firm had thrown open its workshop doors to show the progress of its once-in-a-century refurbishment of the

Grand Organ at York Minster, one of the biggest and oldest in England. It had been five months since it pulled out the stops, literally, from the cathedral and transported more than 5,000 pipes to its base in Durham for cleaning, repair and, in some cases, replacement.

It will be another year before its staff can begin to reinstall it and some months more before it can be played.

Yet music was heard once more yesterday from some 70 Victorian, lead-and-tin case pipes that had been silent for more than a century.

Dating from 1934 but removed

from musical service in 1903, when the instrument was last fully refurbished, they had served since only as decorations. Their discovery and restoration as practical pieces is an unexpected benefit of the £2m refurbishment project.

"Over the next six to 10 months, we will be building all the new mechanism. Then it will be taken apart, taken to York and installed within the case at the Minster," said Mr Scott, whose team is simultaneously

and coincidentally working on the Canterbury and Salisbury organs.

They were, he said, like Rolls Royces and Bentleys, different but equally immaculate, though the workings of the Canterbury instrument are much newer.

His job as head voicer is akin to that of a monumental piano tuner, making sure that each pipe plays in harmony with its neighbours.

"I'll spend a further seven or eight weeks toiling away tuning and voicing the organ before we hand it back to the Minster," he said.

An unusual mix of ancient and modern techniques is being brought to bear on the organ –

hot animal glue is still used on the pieces but computer-aided design helps put them back together,

"Some of the tools I use are as old as the pipes themselves," said Mr Scott, who has been working on projects such as this for 25 years and whose kit includes a long brass rod known as a languid lifter, which adjusts the lips on the pipes, and "nicking tools" for finer adjustment.

Music power

THE RESTORED Grand Organ will have "more brilliance and power" when it is restored to York Minster, said its director of music, Robert Sharpe.

"It was altered in the 1960s and we're recreating things that were changed then, so it will have an extra dimension it hasn't had since those days," he said.

The organ is used for daily worship in York, but a chamber organ and a borrowed concert grand piano are filling in during its restoration.

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Andrew Scott, head voicer at Harrison and Harrison, organ builders



PIPING UP: Workers James Reeve, left, and Les Cooper, above, at Harrison and Harrison Organ Builders workshop where they are restoring more than 5,403 pipes and 102 decorative case pipes.

