

St Mary's Church, Bathwick

Paul Hale

This is the story of a fine organ, recently restored after many years of fundraising. It shows what can be done when there is a determination to succeed and where there are some generous major donors to prime the pump. The organ at St Mary's, Bathwick (Bath), is a distinguished instrument by 'Father' Willis. It was built mainly in 1878 (a busy year for the firm, in which they also made large four-manual organs for Glasgow Cathedral, Plymouth Guildhall, and St Michael's College, Tenbury) but with the Choir Organ, the Pedal Violone, Principal and Trombone stops not installed until 1894. It is interesting to observe, when looking at the pipework, ranks representing different periods of the Willis house style, most evident in the three open wooden flutes, each of which is different, even the two Claribel / Clarabella flutes. The organ was made with tracker action plus a pneumatic lever fitted to the Great and its associated couplers. A page from the Willis order book is reproduced here:

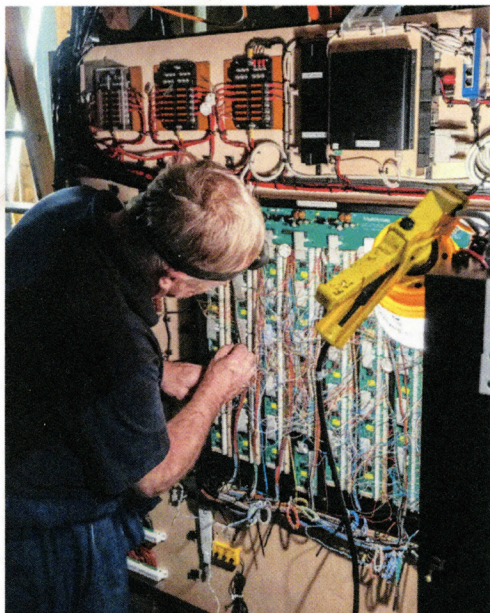


Image 2 | New processor boards being wired

*Specification and Estimate of an Organ
for St. Mary's Church, Bathwick.*

The Instrument to consist of three complete manuals from C♯♯4 to C♯♯8 and two Pedals from C♯♯♯4 to C♯♯♯8.

Great Organ		Metal	Weight	Shift
1	Double Diapason	8	56	
2	Open Diapason	8	56	
3	Open Diapason	8	56	
4	Claribel Flute (Clairabel) Wood	8	56	
5	Flute Harmonique	4	56	
6	Principal	4	56	
7	Tutti	3	56	
8	Flute	2	56	
9	Diapason	8	168	
10	Tutti	8	56	
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Swell Organ		Metal	Weight	Shift
11	Diapason Bourdon (Mod. Metal)	16	56	
12	Open Diapason	8	56	
13	Diapason Flute	8	56	
14	Salicorne	8	56	
15	St. Angelica (Imitating 8 Cornets)	8	44	
16	Flute Traverso Wood	4	56	
17	Principal	4	56	
18	Flute	2	56	
19	Diapason	8	168	
20	Diapason	8	56	
21	Flute	8	56	
22	Diapason	4	56	

Image 1 | St Mary's specification and estimate from the Willis order book

The Plymouth firm of Hele & Co carried out some significant work in 1904, on the instruction of Canon C. H. Hylton-Stewart, Rector of Bathwick from 1904 to 1916 and a noted organist (whose famous son, Charles (1884-1932), became Organist of Rochester and Chester Cathedrals, then St George's Chapel, Windsor). Hele fitted tubular-pneumatic action, considerably softened the Great pipework (according to the taste of the time), and replaced the Great Sesquialtera 17.19.22 with a soft Corno Flute. In addition, the firm fitted a tiny swell box around the Choir Clarinet and Orchestral Oboe, leathered the Swell Open Diapason's mouths, and added a rather ineffective Tuba extension of the Willis Trombone. Hele also supplied an Echo Bourdon rank 16ft/8ft at the back of the organ.

The mechanisms and console were doubtless fairly worn out by 1932 so a thorough rebuilding took place. The firm selected was Hill, Norman & Beard, who

revised the tubular-pneumatic actions and installed a new console – a console which remains today. It might have been HNB who added the set of Swell shutters facing west. I surmise the company flattened the pitch to near A=440 and transposed the open flutes by two notes, adding new top pipes. In 1949 HNB cleaned the organ once more.

By the end of the 1970s, the short-lived Exeter firm of Eustace & Alldridge (John Eustace being a former Willis voicer) were contracted to fit electro-pneumatic mechanism to the note actions, thus converting the HNB mechanism; to electrify the console; and to fit an early solid-state transmission. A Mixture stop was returned to the Great in place of the Hele Corno Flute. The original Willis Pedal Bourdon was replaced by a new 4ft Fifteenth and the Hele Echo Bourdon / Bass Flute regulated louder as the main Bourdon rank. Eustace & Alldridge transposed the Swell Hautboy

to 16ft pitch, with a new half-length bass by Rogers of Leeds (who supplied all the new pipework). Some releathering was carried out, with more in subsequent years. Unfortunately, much of the organ's wind supply was rerouted through reinforced plastic tubing, leaving only three original wooden Willis wind trunks in place. The Choir reeds' swell box was removed, and, most significantly, John Eustace revoiced the Great fluework, loudening it back to how he considered it would have sounded when 'Father' Willis left it.

In 1996 a previous employee of Eustace & Alldridge, Michael Farley, by then with his own company, electrified the stop action and fitted new pistons. Farley later repaired water damage in the Pedal area on at least two occasions. He also arranged for the unstable Swell reeds to be revoiced in Leeds. Since then the maintenance of the organ has moved to Harrison & Harrison, in whose care it remains.



Image 3 | The refurbished console



Image 4 | Chancel front pipes regilded

When I surveyed the instrument, in November 2017, I found to my delight that it sounded magnificent in the nave, every inch a Willis, except for the 1980 Great Mixture, which ran too far up the manual compass at a high pitch (C¹ 22.26.29, F#¹⁹ 19.22.26, C#³⁰ 15.19.22, C#³⁰ 8.12.15). The Swell Mixture was a little odd, too, at 17.19.22 to F⁴² then 8.12.15 to the top. The Great Fifteenth was perhaps a touch over-bright, following its 1980 rebalancing, and the Twelfth was rather too soft.

Three leading companies quoted for undertaking a complete refurbishment of the instrument, the figures being in excess of £300,000. Nothing daunted, St Mary's set to – with the enthusiastic leadership of Organist Gary Desmond – raising the funds over a period of several years, and were able to award the contract to Harrison & Harrison (who had first quoted back in 2005), who carried out the work during 2023.

Being Harrison's, no stone was left unturned. A condensed list of work might be this:

All pipes cleaned and restored.

Tuba / Trombone rank revoiced, also Great Trumpet and Pedal Bourdon.

Swell Organ Diapason (which had been leathered by Hele) revoiced; Hautboy returned from 16ft to 8ft pitch.

Great Mixture composition revised downwards.

Wind system (reservoirs and trunking) completely replanned, remade, and replaced.

Slider soundboards – top overhaul.

Slider soundboard lever-magnet actions replaced by H&H actions using chest magnets.

Slider machines replaced by slider solenoids.

Pedal chests overhauled with new lever-arm magnets.

West-facing Swell shutters given an independent mechanism from the chancel-facing shutters.

New processor-based electrical control systems with a complete re-wire and comprehensive new capture system for the pistons.

Console: new manual keyboards using the old ivory; pedalboard overhauled; two swell pedals installed; new drawstop solenoids; new adjustable bench; 'Stepper' pistons added.

Painted pipes in both pipe fronts were restored and regilded.



Image 5 | Nave case pipes before restoration

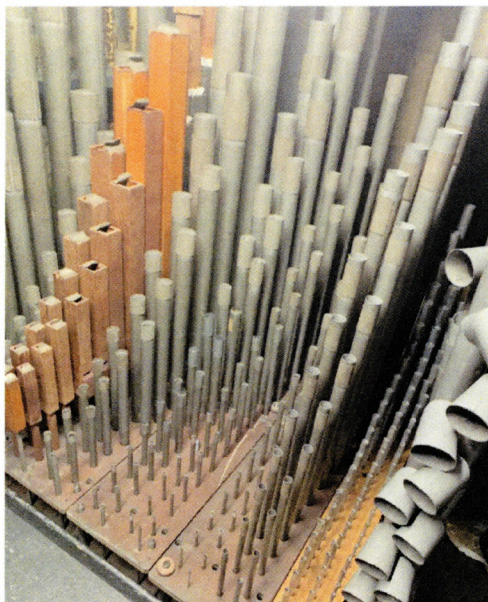


Image 6 | Great pipework cleaned, with revised Mixture

The result of all this work is abundantly evident as the organ – fine in the first place – now sounds more tonally integrated, with every pipe both giving its best and immaculately regulated by the Harrison & Harrison voicers. Actions are silent and prompt, the wind system greatly improved, and the console once more a joy to play.

Reader of *Organists' Review* will be able to hear this for themselves were they to make a pilgrimage to Bath on Friday 7 June, when Emeritus Organist of Bath Abbey, Peter King (whose article in the March *OR* on Jésus Guridi was so interesting) will be giving the Opening Recital at 7.30pm.

Heartiest congratulations to St Mary's, to Gary Desmond, and of course to H&H, for having pulled off this project – an exceptional feat for a parish church. Let it be an example and an inspiration to others as to what can be achieved.

Specification

Great Organ

Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason I	8
Open Diapason II	8
Clarabella	8
Principal	4
Harmonic Flute	4
Twelfth	2 ² / ₃
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 15.19.22	III
Trumpet	8

Swell Organ

Echo Bourdon	16
Open Diapason	8
Gedeckt	8
Salicional	8
Voix Celeste (tenor C)	8
Principal	4
Suabe Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture 17.19.22	III
Cornopean	8
Hautboy	8
Clarion	4
Tremulant	

Choir Organ (unenclosed)

Claribel Flute	8
Gamba	8
Dulciana	8
Flute	4
Viola	4
Piccolo	2
Clarinet	8
Orchestral Oboe	8
Tremulant	
Trumpet (Great)	8
Tuba (ext. Trombone)	8

Pedal Organ

Acoustic Bass (ext. Bourdon)	32
Open Wood	16
Bourdon	16
Violone (from Great 16ft)	16
Principal	8
Bass Flute (ext. Bourdon)	8
Fifteenth	4
Trombone	16



Paul Hale is a professional organ consultant, recitalist and choral conductor.

Whilst Organ Scholar of New College Oxford (1971-4), Paul Hale began to write about the organ – his first published piece was in *Organists' Review*, of which he was later to become Reviews Editor and then Editor (1990-2005). A noted recitalist, lecturer and choir trainer, Paul is well-known in the UK, in Europe and in the USA. As well as being an Organ Adviser for the Dioceses of Southwell and Lincoln, Paul is an accredited member of the AIOA and has designed many new and restored organs throughout the UK. He has been a diploma examiner for the RCO, and has been awarded honorary fellowships by the GCM and the RSCM, and the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth 'Thomas Cranmer Award' for his contribution to church music. More information is available at www.paulhale.org.