



The organs of St. John's Church Boxmoor

A commemorative booklet

compiled by Nicholas King



The Garrard organ of 1906 on the south side of the chancel. The left-hand bay is now occupied by the sanctuary wall and door into the choir vestry. The wall painting is a quotation from Psalm 150 - "Praise him for his mighty acts". (Graham Cossor collection)



A general view of the keyboards and stop jambs of the Garrard, including "ventil" (blind combination) stops at the top on each side. The patented swell expression pedals, described on page 4, can be seen at the bottom of the picture. (NADFAS record)



Mervyn Bury, Organist from 1972 to 1984, at the console of the Davies instrument in the north nave aisle. The switches for the adjustable divisional combinations can be seen protruding below the music desk. (NADFAS record)

Outside front cover: Chancel casework of the 2011 Nicholson organ (David Mitchell).



The Choir section of the 1906 Garrard organ (Graham Cossor collection)

A message from the Bishop of St. Albans, The Right Revd Dr Alan Smith

As a Patron of Music at St. John's, I am delighted to learn of the completion and dedication of the new organ in Boxmoor Parish Church. Having been a church organist in past years, I know the potential of well-crafted organs to lift both heart and voice and I trust that the new instrument will give pleasure to those who hear it and glory to God for many years to come.

The Garrard organ of 1906

In 1906, a new organ was built in St. John's church by Lindsay Garrard of Lechlade, Gloucestershire. This replaced an 1883 instrument, of which no record appears to survive.

The parish magazine of August 1906 records that the instrument was dedicated by the Vicar (then Revd William Kirk Weston) on the afternoon of 11th July.

“After the Prayers of Consecration, the Opening Recital was given by Mr. John Hartley, of St. Giles', Edinburgh, who displayed, with great executive skill, such of the organ as was complete. Miss Sarah Silvers sang two sacred songs with charming voice and expression. In the evening full choral Evensong was followed by an appropriate sermon from the Rev. C.M.O. Parkinson, Vicar of Rickmansworth, and a second recital by Mr. Hartley. On both occasions the performer was limited to the use of the Choir Organ and parts of the Great and Pedal Organ - the swell and its power of expression being unavailable. Mr. Hartley's powers of manipulation, however, are so resourceful, that he went through both his programmes unchanged, with extreme skill and satisfaction to all who heard him.

“The Choir, assisted by Mrs. Woodman, Mrs. Radlett and Miss Hythe, sang under Mr. Greene's direction, Stainer's Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in B flat, and the Anthem, 'Glorious is Thy Name', from Mozart's 12th Mass. The entire Service was beautifully rendered.

“The organ is gradually approaching completion, and it is estimated that about £30 more will enable the Committee to meet the expenses in connection therewith.”

It is curious that this account makes no mention of Douglas Jones, Organist of the church from 1902 to 1935. Mr Greene is understood to have been acting as Choirmaster at this date. The same source shows that the New Organ Fund, which had stood at £566 0s 1d in June, had amassed a further £573 1s 9d during the month, largely through donations of £400 by A. Carnegie Esq. and £100 from an anonymous benefactor, making a grand total of £1139 1s 10d (£1139.09). The instrument appears to have been eventually completed during 1907.

Garrard was a remarkable man of many talents. He had inherited a fortune from the family jewellery business, and had retired from the Fifth Dragoon Guards with the rank of Captain. Building organs was but one of several diversions, perhaps driven more by ambition than realism, which occupied his retirement; he is recorded as being “full of ideas and schemes for making money in business, which usually resulted in depleting his capital”. Among his talents was that of an artist - “a no mean amateur with the brush”. In later life

he was attempting to run a fishing company on the west coast, and he is last heard of as owning a failed yachting company in the West Country.

His organ-building talents were probably best represented by an instrument in Downside Abbey. There were also installations at Hertford College, Oxford; St. Mary Magdalene, Paddington; St. Andrew, Oxford; and some smaller instruments including St. Mary, Uffington. Whilst most of these attracted favourable comment at the time, particularly for their tonal quality, they rapidly proved unreliable and had mostly been replaced by the early 1960s.

The Boxmoor instrument appears to have been the second project of Garrard's short organ-building career, and to have been the last to survive in original condition. Its layout in the church was quite extraordinary. The main part of the instrument was built on an upper level in what is now the choir vestry, and stopped just short of the Dorcas window - this at the strict behest of the parish authorities of the day, who declined to have such a recent memorial (1896) entirely blocked from sight. A spiral staircase in the south-west turret led to an upper gallery to reach the organ for tuning and maintenance purposes; the area in which this staircase was housed remains extant and is now used for storage. Further pipes, also at this upper level, stood against the upper south window of the choir vestry; this area was re-modelled in 1969 and again during the construction of the new Hall in 2001/2.

The detached console faced south within this part of the instrument, along what is now the south wall of the sanctuary, with more pipes flanking it on each side on the chancel wall; to the east stood three further large pipes, entirely divorced from the rest of the structure.

In the second bay of the south chancel, the Choir organ was elevated above the choir-stalls, which (replaced in 1907) occupied the same position as today. The Pedal pipes were placed at floor level against the south wall, blocking the plain window, and were protected by a cage "to safeguard passers-by".

Garrard had wished to add seven further ranks, using the entire height of both areas, but had been thwarted in this by the church authorities. No fewer than eight air reservoirs were required, supplied by feeders actuated by two Kinetic-Swanton hydraulic engines.



A general view of the Garrard console.

The 1906 specification was as follows:

Great organ			Choir organ (* enclosed)	
Contra gamba	16		Salicional	8
Open diapason 1	8		Dulciana	8
Open diapason 2	8		*Lieblich gedackt	8
Open diapason 3	8		*Lieblich flöte	4
Principal	4		Viola	4
Octave	4		*Lieblich piccolo	2
Twelfth 2 23	2 ^{2/3}		*Clarinet	8
Fifteenth	2		*Orchestral oboe	8
Solo division			Tremulant	
Harmonic flute	8		Choir suboctave	
Stopped diapason	8			
Harmonic Flute	4		<i>Pedal organ</i>	
Trumpet	8		Contra bourdon (lowest 7 acoustic)	32
Clarion	4		Open diapason (wood)	16
<i>Swell organ</i>			Violine	16
Violin diapason	8		Great bourdon	16
Viola	8		Choir bourdon	16
Harmonic flute	4		Violoncello	8
Mixture	III		Principal	8
Contra fagotto	16		Trombone	16
Corno pean	8		Pedal octave (bottom octave only)	
Tremulant			<i>Couplers</i>	
Suboctave			Great to Pedal	
Superoctave			Swell to Pedal	
Echo division			Choir to Pedal	
Bourdon	16		Swell to Great	
Gedact	8		Swell to Choir	
Echo gamba	8		Choir to Great	
Voix célestes (two ranks, tenor C)	8			
Concert flute	4		Manuals CC to A (58 notes)	
Oboe	8		Pedal CCC to F (30 notes)	
Tremulant				

Some sources quote different names for some of the stops. It is unclear whether these may have been altered in the overhaul of 1935/6 (see below), or are simply a result of scribal discrepancies. All ranks were independent, except that the Pedal Principal was extended from the Open Diapason and the Pedal Violoncello from the Violine.

As with other Garrard instruments, contemporary accounts are complimentary about the tonal quality, reflecting the tastes of the period. The action of the instrument was however soon described as “sluggish”, since Garrard, who is recorded as having been “full of peculiar schemes and unorthodox ideas”, had departed from orthodoxy in several respects in favour of his own ingenious and experimental methods.

These included some very idiosyncratic aspects to the layout of the console. Both Swell and Great were designed in two sections - the main traditional chorus section in each of the divisions, and a sub-division of a “solo-cum-accompanimental” nature with each. On both manuals, either section could be used independently or coupled together. Above the angled stop jambs of the console were five more stops on each side, placed horizontally, acting as vents (“blind combinations”), somewhat in the French style of the period. On the left jamb, these were labelled Swell 8ft + Oboe, Swell *mf*, Swell *f*, Swell *ff*, Swell stops to combination pedals, whilst those on the right jamb were Great diapasons, Great-pedals, Full Great to 16ft, Full Great + reeds, Great stops to combination pedals. Eight toe combination pedals were also provided, duplicating the first four in each of these groups.

These additional stop heads and pedals did not move the normal stop heads, but cancelled out pneumatically any combination previously drawn by hand. There was a further combination pedal, on the extreme left, which removed any “blind combination” in use, and restored hand registration. One other combination pedal, placed centrally, reduced the pedal departments to *pp*.

There were further gadgets. At the bass end of the swell manual was a two-way rocking tablet marked “Swell-Swell Echo”, over which was a draw stop marked “Swell Divided”. When this stop was drawn, and the rocking tablet manipulated, either the “Swell” or “Swell Echo” section was brought into play, according to the selection made; if this was pushed in, both sections functioned together in accordance with the stops drawn by hand. At the treble end of the swell manual, there were identical controls for the Great.

The action was Garrard’s patented tubular-pneumatic system, with special sliderless wind-chests. In these, the usual sliders were replaced by membranes acting against outlets in the upright bars. The action of these membranes on the control of the pipe-wind was governed by the heavier action wind.

In 1912, Paul Waterhouse designed an additional case for the organ to cover a number of unsightly beams.

The instrument otherwise appears to have been unchanged until 1935/6, when following the appointment of George Cheshire as Organist a thorough clean and overhaul was carried out by Foskett & Co. It is understood that some tonal modifications were made at this point. At some stage, probably during this overhaul, the original hydraulic engines were replaced by a gas blower.

This was placed in the south aisle of the nave, where it achieved increasing notoriety for the fumes which it gave off over its lifetime.

In 1955 a Watkins & Watson "Discus" electric fan blower was installed, replacing the gas-powered system. Space was found for this within the southern area of the choir vestry, and the former gas-powered equipment was cleared from the south aisle of the nave, to the relief of all concerned.

By the early 1960s many parts of the instrument no longer worked, and a committee was set up to advise on how the situation might be addressed. Meanwhile, the instrument was reviewed in *The Organ* in 1963 in terms of mixed flattery:

"Some people would say that this organ is a monstrous freak; others would say that it fully illustrates the imagination, or the experimental and unorthodox characteristics, of its author... Most of the "odd" gadgets either fail to function or have their inactive periods, and without doubt one would need to be "au fait" with what works and what does not work before embarking on playing for a service... Quite frankly, the organ is strewn around the east end of the south aisle adjacent to the chancel and choir stalls; every conceivable corner and crevice (up and down!) has been utilised to accommodate the product of Garrard's amazing ingenuity, and one gathers the impression (rightly or wrongly) that the builder planned this fairly large organ in his mind, and then discovered he had grave difficulty in finding room for it in the church.

"May we imagine that we have advanced down the nave of the church and arrived at the altar rails; turning to the right, we can picture the location of the various parts of the instrument. Immediately in front of us at floor level stands the console, the player facing south and the bulk of the instrument. The console is surrounded by a very solid breast-high timber structure; just to the left of this console-box stand three large scale orphaned open metal pipes (the contra gamba) against the church wall; these were not functioning on the occasion of my visit. One may rightly assume that this lack of co-operation is a semi-permanency... [The writer then describes the sprawling layout of the instrument]

"This organ has the tonal pedigree of a very fine instrument; by far the greater part of the pipe-work is of spotted metal, and of beautiful quality. We know from other examples of Garrard's work that he used good quality materials, and that some of his pipe-work he obtained from the continent. In regard to Boxmoor, the first part of this statement is beyond dispute, and the second part almost certainly true. It would cost a mint of money to provide pipework of this calibre at today's prices. The Church Authorities should be warned to watch what happens to this pipe-work when they face the inevitable decision to rebuild this organ and modernise the specification; they want to ensure that they get all the pipe-work back...

"The overall sound of the instrument is severely hampered by low roofs and numerous arches, which deaden and break up the sound. The chorus reeds are

now raucous and somewhat irregular (if they speak at all)... The many diapasons are first-class, and there is a generous smattering of them over the various departments; the Great chorus, in particular, given more favourable acoustical aid, would be the envy of many an organist; there are three interchangeable unison diapasons (of differing quality of tone rather than volume), and two Octaves. From these, many variations are possible, and either with or without the contra gamba (a fine stop) and the upper mutations, pretty well any combination is acceptable. There is also a wealth of soft ranks over the entire organ; these are over-duplicated at the moment, but will furnish the tonal designer with a harvest of material in redesigning mutation ranks... The string stops are very fine indeed and generous in harmonic content; at Boxmoor even the two-rank Swell strings are of full compass. The variety of soft flute tone is also noteworthy; they need, however, general attention... The over-specification of this organ is really most exciting; the various tonal combinations are immense, and time spent at the organ would reveal many beauties not discovered by the writer...

"The pneumatic devices to function [the two sections of the Great and Swell] have now ceased to work, but without doubt in the organ's hey-day it was a very flexible instrument. There are virtually five manual departments spread over three manuals, and for the year 1906 the departments were amazingly complete in tonal design. The various controls on this console, although numerous are in fact perfectly logical, but require a certain amount of patience to master them... None of those [on the Swell] now function.

"There are several reversible thumb pistons... which are now uncertain of their proper function, and apologetic when they are depressed. There are no normal thumb pistons per manual to provide graduated tonal combinations.

"The crowning glory of this console, however, is the two "Garrard Patent" expression pedals, placed on the extreme right of the pedal board. The shutters of these boxes are self-closing, and would be a veritable nightmare to the unwary or uninitiated. They may be locked in any position by depressing a small raised stud at the toe end of each pedal; when pressure by the heel is applied to the pedal, the shutter mechanism is released and closed instantly. The system is said to be satisfactory, when duly mastered. There is one outstanding virtue to these expression pedals, namely - they would cure for life those who are inclined to indulge in 'harmonium-treading' Swell pedals!"

The instrument was inspected in March 1964 by Revd Bernard Edmonds, the diocesan organ adviser. His report makes characteristic and at times amusing reading:

"I have known this organ for many years and have been hoping that this Moment of Truth might have been spared me and that I might have had peace in my time. The Committee may appreciate by dilemma by analogy. If there were a superb stained glass window, the masterpiece of an almost unknown artist, which had been got into a church the size of Colney Heath by the expedient of putting a

chunk in the east window, another in the west window, and the remainder in the vestry toilet, and the glass needs resetting and the church needs more light, what does A do then? Build a larger church to hold the window properly? Sell it to Carlisle Cathedral? Or re-hash it and spoil the completeness of the design?

“As this is ‘only an organ’ I know the answer... and I am rather tired of reiterating that a church is not just a building to hold an organ.

“This organ... is constructed of the very finest materials throughout to quite uneconomically lavish standards; it was very much in advance of its time and still has many points of interest. The passage of time has left its mark, however, and the pneumatic action is now completely unreliable and the console controls mostly fail to work. It has certain minor faults, a few redundant and unsuitable stops... a completely new action would be a sine qua non, with new or rearranged console.

“The chief difficulty, however, is the layout and size of the instrument, which is (physically) much too large for the building. It has been pushed into a space too small for it and sections of it are strewn all round the south choir aisle. One imagines that the lorry broke down outside the church en route for Liverpool Cathedral and they decided to leave the organ there. This compression and complication makes upkeep and repair a nightmare, and re-actioning expensive. The detached console is as large and unwieldy as a curate’s first sermon, and full of complicated gear; a much simpler and more compact console could have been made with electric action. It is probable that considerable attention might be needed to the interior leatherwork of the action; fumes from the previous gas-engined blower have been wreaking havoc inside for years.

[Edmonds then itemises various options to retain the core of the instrument, all of which he discards as uneconomical.]

“If I can help by pursuing the matter further I will acquire a bullet-proof waistcoat.”

Tellingly, where this report speaks of the quality of materials used in the organ, a handwritten note in the margin of the report adds “On taking it down, this was found not to be true. The appearance of fine spotted metal was a deceit; it was cheap continental look-alike.” The advice of the reviewer in *The Organ*, above, to the Parish Authorities was to prove misplaced.

In April 1965, various firms were invited to provide recommendations for the future of the instrument, which by then is described as being “in a bad state of disrepair”, and a fund was established to raise £4,000 as the projected cost of renovation. Matters did not however progress with any purpose until 1968, following the appointment of David Grant as organist; one factor in this may have been that the parish had recently spent a substantial sum on re-decorating the church.

The Davies rebuild of 1969

During the first part of 1968, an eclectic design was drawn up for salvageable parts of the Garrard instrument to be incorporated in a reconstruction. The surviving files for this work indicate that the project was predicated on the basis of a minimum spend, the work being overseen by a local sub-committee without any reference to external consultants or expert professional advice. Most of the pipes and actionwork were to be compressed onto a platform mounted on steel supports at mezzanine level on the south side of the choir stalls, with the largest Pedal pipes standing against the south wall. As a further economy measure, the instrument would not be given any protective casework; instead, the smaller pipes were to be mounted on plinths in front of the chancel and nave arches of the bay. The instrument would be played from a remote console, which was eventually placed in the north aisle of the nave with umbilical electric connections to the body of the instrument. The blower was to be moved from the choir vestry to a position underneath the pipework in the south choir aisle.

The files are significantly silent about any competitive tendering process which may have taken place before the work was placed in the hands of Alfred Davies of Northampton, and it would appear that personal contact may have been the main, if not sole, factor driving the award of a contract in the initial sum of £6,630. Davies was one of many smaller firms up and down the country whose main line of work had been more with cinema organs, then entering their terminal decline, and this price doubtless reflected a hunger to obtain any work that was going. A faculty for the work was granted on 19th July 1968.

In association with this work, wooden screens were constructed at ground level around the north and west sides of the aisle bay, a wall was built on the south side of the sanctuary, and the area in front of the chancel step was raised on a shallow platform. These arrangements remain in place today. The removal of pipes and console from the choir vestry meant that the Dorcas window could again be revealed in full.

There were five thumb pistons to each manual and five toe pistons to the Pedal (four divisional combinations and one "cancel" in each case), as well as toe pistons for Great to Pedal, Positiv to Pedal, Swell to Pedal and Swell to Great, and a "general cancel" toe piston. The four divisional combinations could be pre-set by means of a switchboard under the music desk.

The specification was as follows:

Great organ		Positiv organ	
Krummhorn*	8	Krummhorn	8
Mixture	IV	Posaune	8
Tierce*	1 ^{3/5}	Sifflothe*	1
Fifteenth	2	Larigot*	1 ^{1/3}
Twelfth	2 ^{2/3}	Tierce	1 ^{3/5}
Octave	4	Block Flute	2
Stopped Diapason*	8	Nazard	2 ^{2/3}
Open Diapason	8	Open Flute	4
Bordun*	16	Stopped Diapason	8
<i>Swell organ</i>		Bordun*	16
		<i>Pedal organ</i>	
Cymbal		Krummhorn*	
Clarion*	III	Posaune*	4
Harmonic trumpet*	4	Fagotto*	8
Contra fagotto*	8	Bombarde*	16
Fifteenth	16	Harmonic flute*	16
Twelfth	2	Choral Bass*	2
Principal*	2 ^{2/3}	Principal*	4
Rohr flute	4	Flute*	8
Open Diapason	8	Open Diapason	8
Salicional	8	Bordun*	16
Tremulant	8		16
		<i>Couplers</i>	
		Great to Pedal	
		Swell to Pedal	
		Positiv to Pedal	
		Swell to Great	
		Swell to Positiv	
		Positiv to Great	
		Swell and Pedal pistons coupled	
		Great and Pedal pistons coupled	
		Manuals CC to C (61 notes)	
		Pedal CCC to F (30 notes)	
		* extensions or borrowings	

Davies had proposed re-using some ranks from the original Garrard instrument. In the event, several of these proved to be beyond redemption when the Garrard was dismantled, and Davies drew a number of second-hand pipes from stock. Expert inspection of the instrument in 2003/4 detected that some of these were of apparent Scandinavian origin; quite how they found their way to this country

remains unclear. Others originated in redundant instruments from cinemas, and required very substantial re-voicing. A few new pipes were provided where needed to complete extension ranks.

The result can only be described as a tonal mongrel. Amongst the remarkable transmogrifications revealed on the reconstruction manifest is that the Swell Twelfth was re-fashioned from the former Voix Célestes (42 pipes) and Choir Viola (12 pipes), being completed by four new pipes; the Swell Fifteenth comprised 37 pipes from "stock" and 21 from the former Swell Viola; and 34 pipes of the Positiv Tierce were derived from the former Choir Dulciana. The Pedal Bourdon was re-worked from the Echo section of the former Swell; the pipes, which had originally been placed on the very front of the Garrard case because of their delicate sound, with pleasant paintwork decoration, had most of that decoration overpainted in white, and were submerged at the back of the new instrument, where their speech could be only of minimal effect.

Within the mezzanine layout of the instrument, a large area was given over to three air reservoirs and to a labyrinthine set of action boxes which resembled nothing so much than a telephone exchange of the 1950s. Access for tuning or maintenance could only be gained from a ladder being raised in the choir vestry, entailing a precarious climb over a high lintel step nine feet above floor level. Further access to the inside of the Swell box then involved crawling through a small low doorway. Modern Health & Safety authorities, had they existed then, would doubtless have outlawed these arrangements on the spot.

The files indicate that a new blower, again a Watkins & Watson "Discus" model, was installed. This was placed under the main pipework. The rest of that area was left open and used for general storage, including choir robes, two large metal cupboards for music, and sundry day-to-day detritus. The choir robes were moved to purpose-built accommodation in the choir vestry in 2003, and the music cupboards were dispensed with in 2006. Other storage continued in this area until the instrument was removed in 2011.

It will be apparent from even superficial study of the specification that the apparent complement of 39 speaking stops was in fact no more than 20, with several extended or borrowed from another department (some of them masquerading under different names) and the Swell reeds being a single extension unit. This contrasts with the 43 ranks of the original Garrard. The predominance of mutation stops (again reflecting a fashion of the period), the fact that there was only one stop of string tone and that there was no quiet reed, were further factors in reducing the versatility of the instrument, which whilst impressive enough on paper as a recital instrument was significantly limited in leading congregations or accompanying the choir. This is especially apparent in the composition of the Mixture ranks, in which the lower Swell was particularly prone to shriek:

Great Mixture IV		Swell Cymbal III	
C1	19.22.26.29	C1	36.40.43
C13'	12.15.19.22	F#7	33.36.40
F#'31	8.12.15.19	C13	29.33.36
C49	1.8.12.15	F#19	26.29.33
		C25	22.26.29
		F#31	19.22.26
		C37	15.19.22
		C49	12.15.19
		F#55	8.12.15

The original specification had proposed a conical 4' Spitzflöte on the Positiv (and therefore, by extension, the Sifflothe on the Positiv and the Harmonic Flute on the Pedal). In the event, the Spitzflöte became a Harmonic Flute, derived from Garrard pipes.

If the files are silent about the means by which the contract was placed with Davies, they are only too complete about the process of construction. Discretion requires that, even at this remove of time, a substantial veil needs to be drawn over the details of many months' disagreement and dispute. The supervising committee experienced increasingly grave discomfort as the project proceeded. Davies, for his part, perhaps not entirely without justification, objected to the penny-pinching attitudes and demands of the committee. There were delays, recriminations, accusations and counter-accusations; payments were delayed or withheld, and unsatisfactory work had to be rectified amidst argument about which party should foot the bill. Emergency meetings of the Parochial Church Council were called, often continuing late into the night as acrimonious correspondence flew to and fro. The top three notes of the manuals were never provided. The electronic linkage between the console and the shutters of the Swell box (facing down the south aisle of the nave) provided too remote to work effectively, and although hopes were expressed that this could eventually be converted to a mechanical linkage, this was never achieved (indeed, throughout the life of the instrument the Swell shutters - or those on which the engines had not already expired - remained largely ineffective). Problems of remote positioning meant that the 16' pipes of the Pedal, mounted against the south wall of the chamber, proved inadequate in speech, though this became academic when they soon failed to speak at all. The console, a primitive construction involving the use of much plywood, was redeemed only by the use of ivory work for the stop heads, and by the solid nature of the platform (worked by a skilled parishioner) on which it stood; its flimsy roll-top rapidly broke, as did the Formica covering of the guide rails. Stop heads failed to sit squarely in their sockets, and frequently worked loose, sometimes during the course of a service, causing unwonted amusement to nearby members of the congregation as they landed with a rattle on the floor or inside the pedalboard, whence they could only be retrieved with difficulty. Inside the instrument, the further use of plywood rather than quality seasoned timber, and of locally-sourced Dexion framework, testified to the cheap level of construction.

The Revd Edmonds was brief and blunt in his assessment of the project. A handwritten note on his 1963 report (see above) simply adds :

“After many years’ argy-bargy and delay the organ was brought out into the south choir aisle with a specification of the very talented (evidently French-minded) organist. I did not argue about it as I had had over 10 years of it!”

An inaugural concert took place on 11th October 1969, given by the Aeolian Singers, conducted by Roy Abrams, with David Grant at the organ. It included Mozart’s Requiem, Bach’s Praise our Lord and unspecified organ music. The instrument was formally handed over on 5th February 1970 and dedicated by the Bishop of Hertford on 8th February 1970, when music included Mendelssohn Above all praise and majesty, Psalm 150 to a chant by Stanford, Wood O thou the central orb, Bach Prelude and Fugue in G, Bossi Giga and the Allegro from Vierne Symphony no. 2.

However, the instrument remained unfinished for some time, with Davies returning to the site on a fitful basis. Matters reached a head when the parish withheld the final payment due on completion, claiming that the instrument was not yet fit for purpose. After various proposals of informal mediation were rejected on each side, Davies took the PCC to court arbitration. At the last moment, the case was conceded out of court by the PCC. The resignation of the chairman of the organ committee soon followed, and that of the Organist a little later.

Davies then conducted some further work, including housing the Pedal pipes behind a mesh screen, fitting a wooden canopy over the Posaune pipes to improve sound projection and prevent dust falling into them, and providing a screen of coarse hessian material in the chancel arch to conceal what lay behind it. A further complication arose when several pipes were stolen in the summer of 1971 (as also from St. Mary’s, Hemel Hempstead). They were eventually retrieved by the police and returned in September 1971. Shortly after this, Davies went out of business; it was later found that they had been in financial difficulties even before work started on the instrument. This meant that the extended guarantee on the work lapsed, so that the parish was left with an instrument unsatisfactory even at the point of supposed completion, and without remedy for any further work. All in all, with modifications, the final cost had left little if any change from £8,000.

Maintenance of the instrument was taken over by the respected firm of Harrison & Harrison, Durham. Under the oversight of Mervyn Bury, who, previously Assistant Organist, had succeeded as Organist in 1972, some tonal modifications were made. The “cancel” combination pistons were changed to fixed level 1 divisional settings (the previous four adjustable pistons 1 to 4 becoming levels 2 to 5), and the “general cancel” toe piston was decommissioned, if indeed it had ever worked. No other significant work was carried out until in 1998, under the direction of Peter Twitchin (Organist from 1986 to 2006), the Twelfth on the Swell was replaced by a Voix Celeste (tenor C) rank supplied from stock by Harrison & Harrison. For a brief period during the appointment of Hugh Potten as Organist

(1984-1986) the console was positioned in the south aisle, instead of the north aisle, but this proved unsatisfactory in terms of eye-contact with the choir.

Exposed pipework was very much in vogue on Continental organs of this period, and often copied in this country. The fundamental flaw in adopting this concept for Boxmoor was that such instruments were generally based on tracker action, in which there was a direct physical connection (normally by a system of wooden rods) between the pipe and the keyboards of a console physically integrated with the main structure. Relatively little could go wrong with the simple mechanics of such a system. It was a different matter where electric action was concerned, unless suitable precautions were taken. Before very long notes and actionwork began to fail as dust and grit settled within the exposed pipework.

This was especially compounded when no measures were taken to protect the instrument during the substantial West End works of 2001/2, and the fire of October 2009 inflicted further smoke-laden damage to what was by then an instrument on its last legs. Meanwhile, the blower had burnt out in 1999, leading to dramatic evacuation of the church during the Sunday morning Eucharist, and was replaced by a renovated Watkins & Watson unit supplied by Stuart Fothergill, dating from 1938 and uprated at some stage of its history from 1hp to 1.5hp. One of the air reservoirs was replaced in 2003 following ingress of rain through the roof which caused damage to leatherwork.

Towards the future

Well before these more recent events, the period idiosyncrasies of the specification coupled with the poor level of workmanship meant that various parts of the instrument became unreliable, or failed altogether. Overhaul became due in 1993, and a report was commissioned from Harrison & Harrison, who advised that a thorough clean and renovation to set the instrument up for the next twenty years or so would cost in the region of £50,000, subject to closer inspection. This recommendation was dismissed by the Parochial Church Council, who at that stage had other designs on any available finance.

The condition of the instrument continued to deteriorate gradually; perhaps not noticeable week by week to those in the pews, but certainly requiring ever-increasing ingenuity on the part of those who played it. In 2001, as the £480,000 Hall project neared completion, a further report was commissioned. This priced preventative overhaul at £80,000, with clear messages that this could be no more than a short-term solution, and that any further delay could only lead to the need for complete replacement. This recommendation, too, was shelved. It was to prove the beginning of the end for the Davies instrument, though in retrospect it is probably as well that good money was not thrown after bad.

It was now clear that a long-term strategy had to be evolved; one which could be tackled with measured step, in the knowledge that funding would not be available readily until the outstanding loan payments on the new Hall had been

completed. At the same time, it was clear that the instrument was, if not yet quite on its deathbed, beyond recall. A committee was convened in 2003 to open consideration of the options, and a number of new and reconditioned instruments elsewhere were visited, of which that at the Church of Our Lady and The English Martyrs at Cambridge attracted particular attention as reflecting very closely our own requirements and situation. Formal progress was inhibited by the fact that the parish was in vacancy between Vicars; nonetheless the Parochial Church Council gave approval to an exploratory professional brief, and a selection of organ-builders visited the church to give their outline assessments, with the enthusiastic support of the Diocesan Organ Adviser, then Eric Pask. Those assessments left no room for doubt.

From one firm : “[We are] sorry we were not able to say the things you probably would have liked to have heard. We believed that to have advised you that the renovation of your existing instrument would be the correct course of action would have been unprofessional and would not be beneficial to the church, your advisers or [ourselves]. St. John’s has already been subjected to the inferior treatment of their organ. We feel so little of worth is now left of the original instrument that now is the time for a radical rethink. Our advice to you is to start again with a new organ.”

From a second : “The best that can be said about [the 1969 organ] is that the organ has remained usable (albeit with an increasing level of faults in recent years) until the present day, and in the hands of capable musicians has provided adequate support for the church’s choral programme. In all other respects, however, the rebuild was regrettable : the whole operation was conducted on the cheap, and the mechanism in no way reaches the standards expected in a good organ. An illogical layout and an unsatisfactory use of the extension principle militate against a good musical balance... In short, it has become a second-rate instrument. It is now in poor condition... and I cannot recommend major expenditure on it. I give this verdict with reluctance, since I always hope to find virtues in every organ, and even this instrument can make some pleasing sounds. However, I think it is important that the Parish has a full understanding of its shortcomings. Limited work (such as overhaul of the console and replacement of the electrical systems) would improve the organ’s reliability but would not be a good investment. If the Parish requires a good instrument, the only solution is a fresh start.” [The report goes on to itemise various faults, with no quarter given.] “It is no pleasure to write such a condemnatory report, but in our opinion the fact must be faced that this is not a good instrument. From a strictly technical point of view, it could be rebuilt and made to work adequately, but this major operation would not achieve musical results commensurate with the great expense involved. The basis for a good instrument is lacking.”

And from a third : “A heavy reliance on sharing and extension is not the basis for a great musical instrument; the use of off-the-shelf combined vertical pallet magnets with integral plastic tip countersinks is not a good organ building recipe; the absence of formal casework requires, if anything, heightened awareness of

internal design issues and attention to external detail. The present organ is open to criticism on all these counts. Leatherwork from this time... is beginning to de-nature and is due for replacement. The Swell engine is similarly affected. The coupler system [relies] on good electrical contact at key relays and ladder type switches for the action to work reliably - which inevitably they don't in time. The console is ... a creature of its time, now shabby and not really doing justice to the rest of the organ even as it stands."

If any doubt remained, it was dispelled by the Quinquennial inspection of the church in 2004, which recommended unequivocally that the Parish must consider the replacement or rebuilding of the instrument. The Parochial Church Council swallowed hard when it read a report within its papers for the March 2005 meeting

"It is difficult to find any players who regard their experiences at this instrument as satisfactory. Able players will always find a way around problems with this organ, as with any they play. The parish should not misinterpret the professionalism of such players in producing sounds which are acceptable to the untrained ear as indicating that there is not cause for considerable concern; nor can it assume that such skills will always be to hand... The instrument is unworthy of the church... If the present situation is again sidelined... the PCC is unworthy of its responsibility to address the matter squarely.

"Most authorities agree that what we already have is such a dog's dinner that rebuilding it would be throwing good money after bad. One of the three consultant firms has costed a rebuild... at a cost of around £220,000 including VAT... this might last us about 25 years, around £9,000 per year, plus the responsibility of having, in effect, transferred the problem to the next generation. The Diocesan Organ Consultant views this bid with considerable caution and would regret our taking it as our preferred choice. Translation : it is probable that if we applied for a Faculty in this wise, it would be refused.

"A second-hand organ is fraught with dangers. Setting aside the fact that every organ needs to be designed and voiced for the building in which it will be used, we would incur unquantifiable risks of future repair and modification. No church is likely to be disposing of its organ without good reason, unless it has been declared redundant; and churches with a sustainable level of music are not churches which readily become redundant. Would one buy a fitted kitchen from a completely different house simply because the owner had become fed up with it, or had passed on?

"An acceptable electronic instrument... would be unlikely to sustain our future involvement in external bookings, and is unlikely to be appropriate to our present ethos... The PCC will of course be aware of the embarrassments which have occurred at St. Mary's following their decision to ' go electronic', and the subsequent enforced reversal of this decision through a consistory court.

“The overwhelming view of all experts is that we must now build anew. The cost will be roundly £300,000, increasing the longer that we defer... Wise husbandry by future generations, such as has not characterised the care of the present instrument, would put this figure on the upper rather than lower side.

”If we do not bite the bullet, or if we duck the issue, our successors will judge us appropriately for having hoped that the problem will go away yet again. It will not. Nor is it putting it too strongly to say that our predecessors having taken such a view bear much responsibility for our now facing these grave issues. Frankly, the decisions of the late 1960s were ill-judged. The PCC has already ducked the consequences in 1993 and in 2001; if it does so again, there will be no options left.”

Formal reports were accordingly commissioned from the three firms which had provided the most comprehensive and convincing recommendations from the preliminary round of visits, and a robust outline specification was drawn up to meet both the liturgical and ever-increasing secular uses of the building. In all of these it was accepted that resources were more likely to stretch to a versatile two-manual instrument than a limited three-manual instrument; in any case, with modern playing aids available at the console there was little if any justification for the additional expense of a third manual. The new instrument would exploit the full depth of the existing chamber, with the passageway between the nave and the choir vestry being moved right up against the south wall; this would also enable the south window which had been blocked since 1906, and which was unknown to most of the congregation, to be unblocked.

In September 2005 the PCC considered these three reports. One was discarded fairly quickly; although the cheapest bid, there was strong evidence that the builders were trying to sell us what they wanted to offload, rather than listening to what we felt we needed. Shades of repeating the 1969 fiasco were compounded by the fact that they arrived nearly two hours late to deliver their pitch. The other two reports ran very close in their proposals. One, the most expensive of the three and for the fewest stops, seemed to be over-priced for an instrument of 26 stops, and had also been accompanied by more than a tinge of salesmanship rather than listening. The middle bid, for an instrument of 33 stops including two oak cases, came from the firm which had been most assiduous in ascertaining exactly what we required, and which from discreet enquiry elsewhere had attracted unreserved recommendations as to the quality of their workmanship, value for money and customer care. That bid was only then revealed to the PCC as being from Nicholson’s of Worcester, who had been responsible for the Cambridge instrument which had so stimulated those responsible for the music of St. John’s after visiting it in 2003.

The Nicholson organ of 2011

Many meetings involving substantial hours from several people at this point were accompanied by the decision to set up an arm’s-length charity to support the musical mission and outreach of the church, and Music at St. John’s was born.

Although a primary objective was to raise funds for a new organ, there was (and remains) a wider brief to nurture and sustain a wide range of musical and artistic activities within the local community. In due course, Music at St. John's achieved charitable status, and later became a limited company. A detailed business plan was drawn up which envisaged completion of the new organ within three years (then the waiting list at Nicholson's) through a range of fund-raising activities and applications to charitable bodies.

Meanwhile the formality remained of applying for a Faculty for the work; and here an unexpected obstacle arose when the PCC was required to submit all of its proposals to an independent consultant before they could be approved, despite the professional experience of those who had guided the musical aspects of the project thus far. The parish was fortunate in securing the services of Paul Hale, Rector Chori of Southwell Minster, who visited the church early in January 2006. After a very detailed inspection, his report, coming entirely without prior knowledge of the situation, entirely endorsed the proposed course of action and the choice of preferred bidder. Armed with this convincing document, the Faculty was eventually granted on 20th December 2007.

Before signing a contract, the parish had to be convinced that the business plan was realistic. At a time when national recession was starting to bite, the chief problem was that funds from external charities, on which the business plan relied heavily, were fast drying up. Further refinement of the specification followed recommendations from a change of Diocesan Organ Adviser, and reflection by a newly-appointed Director of Music. The delay at this point also meant that the price of the project escalated in line with inflation and with the rocketing costs of materials. The contract was signed on 26th December 2007 in the sum of £328,850, subject to VAT and indexation, with the intention of completion during 2010. A further £30,000 was budgeted for local costs of renovating the organ chamber, associated works, and contingencies.

Vigorous fund-raising activities were meanwhile well under way, and the organ fund made steady progress, if not as fast as might have been wished. Some of those activities actually incurred losses, which in terms of the project was unfortunate, even if consonant with the wider outreach remit of Music at St. John's. The continued effects of the recession meant that towards the end of 2009 it became necessary to re-examine the financial viability of the project. Several high-level discussions resulted in a modified specification embracing the use of some second-hand pipes in the instrument rather than new (it had already been decided that most of the Pedal pipes from the previous instrument could be re-cycled), and a reduced contract price and delivery span were negotiated.

Through all of this, the 1969 Davies instrument continued to decline fast. Fewer and fewer elements were reliable, and the Pedal department came down to just three isolated notes working on one stop. It would clearly be a matter of fortune whether the old instrument would keep going until the new could be installed.

A marginal benefit of the contract with Nicholson's was that they would provide an acceptable electronic instrument for the period of installing the new instrument, and contingencies were discussed for this to be made available sooner should the need arise.

In due course it became possible to confirm a timetable for the work, which would occupy several months, and to prepare the ground for much inevitable disruption. The old organ was to be used for the last time on 6th March 2011, when there would be a special farewell; it would then be dismantled so that the organ chamber could be renovated, and so that final measurements could be taken for the new instrument to be built at Nicholson's factory before coming on site during the summer. The last Christmas of the old organ showed all too clearly that it was in its death throes, and in mid-January all but three stops failed terminally, a few weeks ahead of its planned final use. Rapid recourse was necessary for several weeks to piano, then clavivona, accompaniment for services until Nicholson's were able to release and deliver the Rodgers electrone which graced worship and concerts in its inimitable way from late March to late October.

The remains of the Davies instrument were aired for one final time at the end of the morning service on 6th February, with some emotion, as befits the passing of a enfeebled friend of many years' faithfully-attempted service. Dismantling started promptly, bringing with it many further discoveries of the poor quality of workmanship; salvageable parts were sold to a dealer, and some other materials attracted useful, if modest, scrap value. Pipes being re-used in the new instrument were collected by Nicholson's, and by the end of the spring a bare organ chamber stood re-decorated and ready to receive its new instrument. The unblocking of the south window revealed remnants of the original 1894 decoration of the church, part of which has been preserved for posterity. The opening doors in the west side of the screen were moved (together with revised provision for the audio equipment of the church), a new door was installed between the organ chamber and choir vestry, and the inner wall of the choir vestry was re-plastered. In conjunction with the re-decoration which had necessarily followed the fire of 2009, this has resulted in minor but significant improvements to the layout of the choir vestry.

Visits took place to Nicholson's factory whilst the instrument was under construction there, including a Parish Outing with a full coach of 50, for many of whom it was their first close contact with all the intricacies of what actually goes into an organ - so much more than just keyboards, pipes, and some wiring. On 8th August Nicholson's came on site to install the instrument - first the building frame, the new 3hp Laukhuff blower and the largest pipes, then the casework, actionwork and other pipes, and from 19th September the console. Finally, the independent consultant gave his approval of the work on 19th October, and following final adjustments the instrument was handed over for use on 27th October.

The specification of the instrument is:

Swell organ (enclosed, except no. 1)			Couplers		
1	Solo Trumpet (from 32)	8	26	Great to Swell	
2	Tremulant		27	Swell to Great	
3	Clarion 4	4	28	Swell to Pedal	
4	Trumpet 8	8	29	Great to Pedal	
5	Contra Fagotto (extended from 6)	16	30	Great and Pedal combinations coupled	
6	Hautboy	8	31	Generals on Swell toe pistons	
7	Mixture	IV	Great organ		
8	Fifteenth	2	32	Solo Trumpet	8
9	Nason Flute	4	33	Tremulant	
10	Principal	4	34	Corno di Bassetto	8
11	Voix Celeste (tenor C) 8	8	35	Full Mixture	IV
12	Salicional	8	36	Tierce	1 ^{3/5}
13	Chimney Flute	8	37	Block Flute	2
14	Open Diapason	8	38	Nazard	2 ^{2/3}
15	Octave		39	Fifteenth	2
16	Sub Octave		40	Open Flute	4
Pedal organ			41	Principal	4
17	Solo Trumpet (from 32)	8	42	Stopped Diapason	8
18	Fagotto (from 5)	16	43	Viola	8
19	Trombone	16	44	Open Diapason	8
20	Octave (extended from 25)	4	45	Bourdon	16
21	Bass Flute (extended from 24)	8			
22	Principal	8			
23	Bourdon (from 45)	16			
24	Subbass	16			
25	Open Diapason	16			

Accessories

Multi-level piston capture system including stepper system; 96 levels for generals, 16 for divisionals
 Six thumb pistons to Swell
 Six thumb pistons to Great
 Six general thumb pistons
 Reversible thumb pistons for Swell to Great, Swell to Pedal and Great to Pedal
 Advance and retard stepper thumb pistons in keyslips, and for the use of page-turners
 Setter thumb piston
 General cancel thumb piston
 Six toe pistons to Pedal
 Six toe pistons to Swell (or General with stop 31)
 Reversible toe pistons for Great to Pedal and Swell to Great
 Advance stepper toe piston
 Balanced swell pedals to Nave and Chancel shutters

The console is mounted on a mobile platform with socket positions in the north aisle and central Nave for versatility of use according to requirements, and is equipped with an adjustable organ bench. The speed of both Tremulants is adjustable at the console. The ivory stop heads are from the Davies console, skimmed down and re-engraved. In conjunction with modern console aids, the Great to Swell coupler is especially useful in providing the flexibility of a three-manual instrument within a two-keyboard layout by reversing the relative positions of the two keyboards.

The composition of the Mixture ranks is:

Great Mixture IV		Swell Mixture IV	
C1	15.19.22.26	C1	19.22.26.29
D15	12.15.19.22	C13	15.19.22.26
F#31	8.12.15.19	C25	12.15.19.22
A#47	1.8.12.15	C37	8.12.15.19
		C49	1.8.12.15

The instrument was dedicated by the Bishop of Hertford on Sunday 20th November 2011, when music included Vaughan Williams O clap your hands, Weelkes Gloria in excelsis Deo and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor attributed to Bach. This was followed by an RSCM Regional Choirs' Evensong in the afternoon, including Bruckner Locus iste, Stainer Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis in B flat (which had been sung at the 1906 dedication), Bairstow Blessed City, heavenly Salem and Balfour Gardiner Evening Hymn, with Boëllmann Suite Gothique before the service, the third movement of Elgar Sonata in G as a middle voluntary, and the Finale from Vierne Symphony no. 1 afterwards.

The inaugural recital on 22nd November (St. Cecilia's Day) was given by Paul Hale, comprising

- War March of the Priests - Mendelssohn
- Voluntary in D, op. 6 no. 6 - Stanley
- Fantasia in G BWV572 - Bach
- Adagio - Albinoni
- Two Trumpet Tunes and an Air - Purcell
- A Festival Toccata - Malcolm Archer (commissioned for the occasion)
- Introduction and Passacaglia - Alcock
- Folk Tune - Whitlock
- Pièce Héroïque - Franck
- Chant de May - Jongen
- Carillon-Sortie - Mulet

Author's footnote

I first played the organ of St. John's church in 1981, and have been increasingly involved with the music of the church since 1989. It has been a great privilege to be so closely engaged in developing a fine instrument with which the musical traditional of the church can be carried forward; an instrument which should endure for far longer than either of its predecessors. All of us are no more than custodians of our heritage for future generations, and it is gratifying that we have been able to seize the opportunity to exercise that responsibility so fittingly.

I am grateful to all who have assisted me in researching the history of the organs in St. John's Church. Particular thanks must be expressed to Graham Gibbs, Eric Pask and Trevor Boyce, as well as others who have contributed knowingly or unknowingly during this work. I also acknowledge material drawn from the NADFAS report on the effects of the church, and to back issues of The Organ. Photographs are credited against each caption.

The files are elusive, and sometimes contradictory, about some of the detail. Resultant interpretations of fact are mine alone, and apologies are offered for any errors arising from this detective work.

Nicholas King
Director of Music
November 2011

Dismantling the Davies organ. Contractors assist Peter Garner (on ladder) and Trevor Boyce as the Contra Fagotto pipes of the Swell department are removed.

To the left can be seen Bourdon pipes which had been re-worked from the original Garrard.
(David Mitchell)



Pipes for the Swell Chimney Flute of the new instrument laid out on the work-bench at Nicholson's factory near Malvern. (David Mitchell)



Pipes for the Swell Chimney Flute of the new instrument laid out on the work-bench at Nicholson's factory near Malvern. (David Mitchell)





Pipes from the former Pedal Open Diapason at Nicholson's factory, having been de-mitred and cleaned in preparation for installation in the new instrument. (David Mitchell)

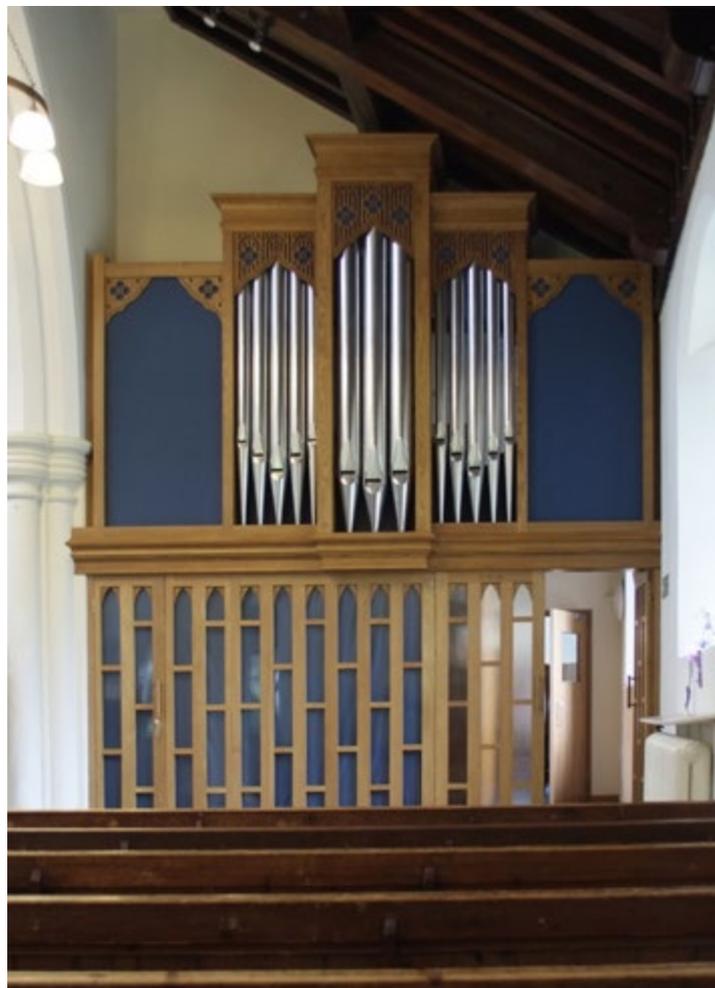


Pipes for the Swell Chimney Flute of the new instrument laid out on the work-bench at Nicholson's factory near Malvern. (David Mitchell)

The console of the 2011
Nicholson organ.
(David Mitchell)



2011 Nicholson organ
on the West side.
(Job Rombout)



**"Published by Parish of Boxmoor, St John's the Evangelist
Station Road, Hemel Hempstead, Herts, HP1 1JY"**