

Ashfield Organ Mystery Deepens

Rod Blackmore

Originally written as a letter to the Editor, this contribution by Society Member Rod Blackmore is of appropriate length and interest to appear as an article, (Ed).

Chris Sillince's article "Forgotten Organ Rejuvenated" (*SOJ* Vol. 42 No. 2 p. 55) about the St. John's, Ashfield organ, entranced me.

In 1950 I commenced organ tuition with St. John's organist, Keith Noake. Shortly afterwards, the rebuild of the organ by the Wiltshires began. My lessons and practice were transferred to my home church, the Leggo at Haberfield Methodist. I attended the St. John's organ dedication in October 1950. The resumption of lessons and practice on the Wiltshire job was short lived: Keith Noake soon took the position of Cathedral Organist at Newcastle. Given the effort Keith had put in to having the St. John's organ rebuilt I often speculated as to whether he was disappointed with the result or whether it just was that the Newcastle appointment was more prestigious. Unfortunately, at a relatively young age and only a few years into the Newcastle appointment, Keith died. So we will never know.



Keith Noake with Newcastle Cathedral Choristers, 1951

Delving into my personal archives I retrieved a roneoed article written by Keith and the rector of St. John's about the rebuild. The article verifies that the Hill organ had tracker action at the time it was attacked by the Wiltshires. Thus, the quantity of lead tubing found under the floor must remain a mystery. The tracker action accords with my own recollection of the noisy operation of the organ.



Graham Hyde, Ashfield assistant organist at the Wiltshire console about 1957

Chris opines that "there is probably nobody alive now who can accurately recall how it sounded prior to the Wiltshire rebuild." I must confess to being still alive, but also that I had never been impressed that the sound was in any way remarkable. I much preferred the action and sound of my home-church (Leggo) organ which seems to have completely disappeared since it was removed from St. Mark's, Granville. I then went on to another Hill organ - Hunter Baillie Church Annandale - an organ to be immensely impressed by. I can recall going to hear another Wiltshire organ, at Homebush Methodist, and I know of the firm having built an organ at St. Thomas', Enfield.

The two depictions of the Wiltshire console at St. John's, as printed on the back page of the dedication Order of Service also come from my "archives."

A Century of Organ Music at St. John's, Ashfield

A historical account of the music of the Parish

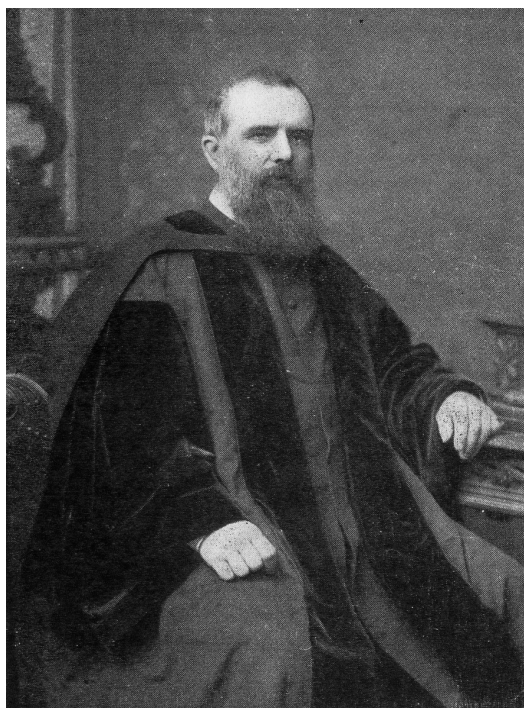
in connection with the Organ Dedication Festival 1950.

(written by F.A.S. Shaw, Rector and K.A. Noake, Organist & Choirmaster)

Organs have made a real contribution to the beauty of St. John's services for one hundred and five years. The first instrument was a keyboard reed organ known as a seraphine, presented by the Bishop's registrar, which served from the consecration in 1845 for a short time. Its place was taken by a harmonium later, which did duty until the advent of Dr. Corlette in 1867. Under his rectorship, Mr. Davidson of Sydney erected a pipe organ in the western gallery in 1871, where the choir sat grouped about it. This was a very good instrument, sweet toned, with one manual and pedal organ. It is, incidentally, still giving yeoman service at St. Bartholomew's church, Pyrmont to whom it was sold in 1882. Its stop specification was as follows:

Great: Open Diapason 8, Dulciana 8, Stopped Diapason 8, Principal 4, Flute 4, Fifteenth 2 (last five enclosed).

Pedal: Bourdon 16. Great to pedal



St John's, Ashfield Rector, the Revd Canon Dr J.C. Corlette

In 1875 the then existing building was enlarged by the addition of transepts and chancel, making the interior the size it is today. The little organ was found inadequate for the church and in 1881 Dr. Corlette commenced operations for the

improvement of the situation. After much discussion, it was decided to commission Messrs. Hill of London to build a completely new two manual and pedal organ. In this step, we of the present fervently applaud the wisdom and foresight of Dr. Corlette. At this period, Hill and Son was one of the foremost organ building firms in the world, completing at the time instruments for St. Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney (old organ), Sydney Town Hall (when built, the biggest in the world) as well as many other notable instruments in England and Australia. It was eventually decided to place the new organ in its present position in the north transept, with the console built in across the corner. Dr. Corlette was most meticulous in his planning, and was determined that the church should have the noblest organ that funds would allow. He and a Mr. Harrison drew up the stop specification which was as follows:

Pedal organ	Great organ	Swell organ
Open Diapason 16	Open Diapason 8	Bourdon 16
Bourdon 16*	Dulciana 8	Open Diapason 8
	Stopped Diapason 8	Pierced Gamba 8
Violoncello 8	Principal 4	Principal 4
Great to Pedal	Flute 4	Flautina 2
Swell to Pedal	Fifteenth 2	Bright mixture III ranks
	Swell to Great	Oboe 8

Composition pedals: 3 to Swell; 2 to Great.

*"Voiced like a violin"

The price was "not to exceed four hundred pounds in London" (a study in the times, then and now!). When the contract was finally signed, Dr. Corlette sent a letter to Hill, exhorting him in somewhat whip-cracking terms, to build, as it were, a masterpiece. He did, in fact, put the firm on its mettle. The organ was finally installed in 1885 with the stop specification somewhat altered. The pedal Diapason had, most unfortunately, to be omitted because of lack of space, and the "Bright Mixture" was reduced from three ranks to two. The 16ft. Bourdon was omitted from the Swell, also. A little time after the installation, a Gedackt and Celestes were added to the Swell. The specification now became as it has been over the years.

The Hill organ in its original state served nobly over a period of some sixty-five years, but about 1945, the present organist, realizing that the instrument badly needed rebuilding, inaugurated an "Organ Rebuilding Fund." The pedal board

was worn out, and the whole tracker action had become noisy and clumsy. That it was playable and preserved its beautiful tone after all its arduous service, is a tribute to the craftsmanship of the original builders. After many enquiries and formulations of various schemes lasting over several years, the whole matter was placed before the church wardens and Parish Council, the Fund having grown to reasonable proportions in the meantime. After another long period of discussion and enquiry, Messrs. R.A. and D.A. Wiltshire were entrusted with the work of rebuilding. This included a completely new action (electric), detached console, addition of 16ft. Open Diapason to the Pedal organ, complete regulation of the whole of the tonal side and provision of additional couplers and control mechanism. The console provided food for very much thought concerning its position. The ideal was finally fixed as behind the pulpit, facing north. This would enable the organist to judge balance of tone accurately, and to control the choir with far greater efficiency. The pipes themselves are beautiful examples of fine craftsmanship and only needed adjustment; the reed, of course, requiring the most attention.

Unique features of the rebuilt instrument

Every individual organ presents its particular problems. In our case, the fact that the whole organ is in the church and not in a separate chamber, made it imperative that perfectly silent working of the action should be achieved. The builders were obliged to invent mechanism based on entirely new principles in several cases. These concern:

Pallets. Usual type employed with tracker action would have been far too noisy, new type supplied.

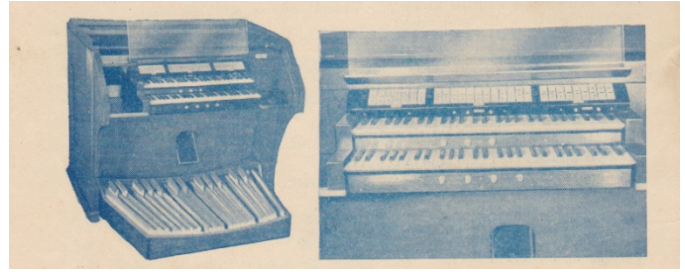
Slider Engines for stop control. To get over the noise of fast moving sliders, an ingenious electrical mechanism was evolved, based on the principle of artillery recoil control mechanism. This causes the slider to move very quickly until the last 1/8" of travel, when it moves up gently to the peg.

Pre-set piston mechanism. This enables rapid setting of any combination of stops, couplers or tremulant at the console, with push buttons.

Swell pedal. Provides a sensitive response, and makes the shutters open fully to give maximum crescendo. Interior of swell box has been hard varnished for tone improvement.

Wind supply. Two HP motor is now connected to the blower through V belts to avoid belt slip. Old style wind reservoir has been replaced by a "pressure equalizer", and new soundboards have been used for pedal and screen.

The pipes of the Pedal Principal have been bearded for prompt speech, and the rank extended in open pipes to provide the new Open Diapason (16 ft.) There is now a full range of couplers which will increase the utility of the pipes many times over. The new console uses the illuminated type of stop tab, placed over the swell manual. Including couplers, cancel tabs etc, there are now thirty one registers.



St John's, Ashfield, Wiltshire Console, 1950.

Specification of the rebuilt organ, 1950

Great: Open Diapason 8', Dulciana 8', Stopped Flute 8', Principal 4', Wald Flute 4', Fifteenth 2', Swell to Great, Swell to Great 16', Swell to Great 4', Great Cancel.

Swell: Open Diapason 8', Pierced Gamba 8', Lieblich Gedackt 8', Celestes 8', Octave 4', Flautina 2', Mixture (17,19), Horn 8', Swell to Swell 16, Swell to Swell 4, Tremulant, Swell cancel.

Pedal: Open Diapason 16', Bourdon 16', Principal 8', Pedal to Pedal 8, Pedal to Pedal 10 2/3, Swell to Pedal, Great to Pedal, Pedal cancel

Accessories

2 adjustable pistons to Swell and Great organs.

1 piston, full Swell; 1 piston, full Great; 1 piston, full organ with couplers.

2 foot pistons to Pedal organ.

1 reversible foot piston, Great to Pedal coupler.

Balanced swell pedal.

Music rest in clear Perspex.

It will be agreed that the rebuild has been most ably carried out, and every detail arranged in the most practical manner possible. We wish the young and very enterprising firm of R.A. & D.A. Wiltshire continued successes in their worthy contribution to Sydney organ building.

St John's, Ashfield Organists (revised), 1942 Keith Alexander Noake, 1951 Michael George Dyer, 1957 Allan Jenkins, 1958 Jack McKelvie, Ron McIntosh, Charles Boyd Bell, ca 1960-1963 and 1969-1973 David Rumsey, 1982-1991 Charles Brewer, 1991-2007 Eric Roberts.