

29 December 2004

Report following inspection of the organ on 21 December

I'm sorry to have taken some days over this report: Christmas has got in the way!

You have told me that the organ is about 100 years old, built by Richardson of Preston and re-built by Laycock & Bannister some 40 years ago. An electric blower was added in 1951.

The organ has two manuals and ten stops (8,8,4,2 on the Great manual, 8,4,11,16 on the Swell manual and 16,8 on the Pedals). The manuals (4½ octave compass) have mechanical action and the pedals (CC-F') have electro-pneumatic action.

At the time of my visit all notes on manuals and pedals functioned perfectly on each stop. The action was not unduly heavy; indeed it felt an ideal and comfortable weight when the manuals were not coupled. Trackers were not entirely straight, but in no worse condition than is to be expected and were not compromising performance. Those pipes that were readily visible appear to be in good order. The organ as a whole appears (on a superficial examination) to be sound and in good working order.

Areas of concern about the organ

I understand that there are three main areas of concern about the organ.

1. Pedal action. The electro-pneumatic action to the pedals is reported to be unreliable. This is a common problem with this type of action, and from your descriptions it seems to need addressing here.
2. Organist's sitting position. The bench is uncomfortably placed, unstable and not adjustable. The carpentry around the console (for instance the music stand and lid) is crude and somewhat dysfunctional.
3. Voicing. The instrument is neither particularly strong nor especially bright in the church, which restricts its usefulness in some situations.

Current situation

In connection with the anniversary celebrations, some £3000 has been raised for work to the organ. One organ builder has suggested possible work to the instrument and sent a tender that considerably exceeds this amount. There has been a suggestion of replacing the organ with an electronic instrument.

Recommendations

When taking decisions of this sort the first priority is always to pray about it. Major work to an organ in a church is a major decision for the congregation. It demands a wisdom and far-sightedness beyond our own resources. It is fundamental that the church acts in accordance with God's will! Secondly, set out clearly the present and projected musical needs of the congregation and how the organ will serve these needs. Will the organ be used primarily for accompanying hymns, for playing together with other instrumentalists, for accompanying a choir or soloists, or does the church's ministry extend to public concerts? Thirdly, if you want a definition of water, don't ask a fish. The church organist, the minister and the treasurer are all essential figures in determining the needs of the church, but by virtue of their respective functions none of them can have complete objectivity. All will be so involved in the daily management of their respective areas that it will be impossible to view the situation from a sufficiently wide perspective. Similarly, an organ builder (or electronic organ salesman) has pre-determined ideals and standpoints. It is essential to appoint an advisor who is both qualified, experienced and genuinely impartial and who can help the church to formulate its needs and ensure that these needs are properly met.

Existing organ or new electronic? The first decision must be whether to retain the existing organ or not. This is your decision – but personally I am in no doubt whatever. I have rarely seen an instance where it is more evident, in my opinion, that the existing instrument should be retained. This instrument has survived a hundred years with little maintenance, and the only part of the instrument now giving significant problems is the “modern” electro-pneumatic action to the pedals. The parts of this instrument that retain the original action will survive another hundred years. I paraphrase a section of my recent book:

Taking a short-term (20-30 year) view, electronic instruments are cheaper to buy and maintain than traditional ones. For a church building that is likely to be closed down or demolished in a number of years, or that suffers so badly from damp or fungal attack that major renovation is needed before valuable equipment can responsibly be stored there, an electronic instrument is the most sensible option. Some churches that presently have no instrument at all argue that the large outlay required for a new pipe organ cannot be justified by the current congregation in the light of other calls on the church's budget, and that the decision should therefore be deferred to the next generation of worshippers and an electronic substitute bought to “fill the gap”. For all the protestations of classical organists, electronic organs are generally fairly reliable and often exceed their expected life-span of 20 years or so.

For most churches, however, there are three solid arguments against the use of electronic organs:

1. The sound. Modern electronic organs (unlike their predecessors) make an excellent first impression. Most people - organists and others - are very impressed by their first encounter with an advanced digitally-sampled instrument. The sound resembles a recording of a large pipe organ, and the instrument offers a tempting array of stops. Within a short time of use, however, the sound palls and becomes wearisome. However good the digital sampling, most electronic instruments have a flat, unyielding and unnaturally-perfect sound that gradually begins to offend the ear. Even the most advanced instruments that now artificially introduce “imperfection” or variation in order to make the sound tolerable, cannot resolve the fact that the sound is created by loudspeakers and lacks the enduring freshness of a “real” instrument. At its best, the

electronic organ is only a recording played through speakers. This is why it can be difficult to distinguish between a recording of a pipe organ and a recording of an electronic organ - both are recordings: the difference is far more pronounced in a "live" situation.

2. Long-term economy does not always favour the electronic organ. Even the smallest mechanical-action pipe organ costs substantially more than the cheapest electronic organs but will have a life expectancy at least ten times as long - several hundred years. The electric- or pneumatic-action pipe organs built in the first half of the 20th century had a life-span that was shortened by the technology used, and many congregations that have experienced these instruments have forgotten that more traditional organs built in the preceding four centuries are still in use. An advanced electronic organ that offers so-called "realistic" sound and probably a range of stops and equipment far in excess of the church's needs will often cost almost as much as the smallest and simplest pipe organ. While salesmen will allege that the electronic substitute "offers far more" its advantages are a chimera, its advanced facilities unnecessary and its cost taken over a long period is far greater.

3. Churches traditionally choose "real" objects rather than imitations. Plastic flowers on the altar would save mess and expense but they are regarded as inadequate and unworthy of God's house. The short-term disposable imitation is out of keeping with the biblical concept of using fine and enduring materials for the Temple.

Most churches that have bought electronic organs have done so not out of choice but because of the potential cost of restoring the over-large pipe organs that they have inherited from a period in which church organs were not well designed. In many cases this decision has been made on faulty premises and has been regretted later.

The regular organ tuner has suggested repairs, and his firm has sent in a quote for a complete restoration of the action, repairs to the chests and cleaning and overhaul of the rest of the organ. The quote is far beyond the church's means. A firm selling electronic organs has offered an electronic instrument twice the size of the existing organ for half the cost of the projected repair. The logic seems inescapable. There can only be one solution. Or can there?

In this example the church's decision making is being driven purely by competing sales pitches representing materialistic or commercial interests. It is vital that the church itself, assisted by a genuinely-impartial advisor, sets out its own needs clearly and finds the solution that properly meets these needs. This is not necessarily a solution that commercial companies will offer unprompted.

Why, for instance, should the congregation require an electronic organ with twice as many stops as the existing pipe organ? This is sheer consumerism: a company trying to sell a "bigger and better" gadget. Are you sure that all the work proposed by the organ builder is actually necessary, or is the best use of the resources available?

Replacing action, repairing leaks, cleaning mechanisms or correcting faults can be an expensive process, but it is very important to do such work thoroughly. While it can be sensible to replace the action to one manual whilst leaving another manual for a later stage, it is very foolish to replace just one stage of the action (for instance from the keyboard to the touch box) while leaving another stage (for instance from touch box to chest) with the old action. If this is done it is likely that troubles will soon emerge in the old section of the action. People will naturally blame the work that has just been carried out and feel that they have wasted their money. They will then be unwilling to pay for another stage of restoration, which they will then see as "pouring good money after bad". Where any major work is done, this work should always result at least in complete sections of the organ being entirely functional and reliable. Cosmetic changes

designed to "improve" the character of an existing instrument are seldom successful. Adding a mixture stop to a dull organ will not brighten the overall sound: the instrument will simply sound like a dull organ and a mixture stop playing at the same time!

The instrument you have is essentially a good one for the church and is a valuable long-term asset. To throw it out for a substitute that will in turn be thrown out in a few years would be madness.

What can be done

Let us look at the areas of concern listed above:

1. Pedal action. The ideal solution – to restore a mechanical action to the pedals – would not be possible with the existing pedal board and would in any event be far beyond the financial means of the church at present. The only practical solution is to replace the electro-pneumatic action with a solid-state system. An action of this type would be supplied by J.A. Taylor & Co in Ramsbottom and could be installed without problem by any one of several local firms.
2. Organist's sitting position. This is purely a matter of carpentry. To build a satisfactory platform under the organ bench, some form of simple height adjustment and a more satisfactory music stand/lid for the console is a simple job that could be undertaken by any local craftsman.
3. Voicing. The dullness of the sound is mostly due to the fact that most of the pipes have been enclosed in the vestry area. The organ plays directly into the vestry; the congregation hears it "second hand". As a general rule of thumb, each member of the congregation should be within direct line of sight of the pipes. Re-voicing the pipes would make little difference; adding extra stops would be inappropriate because if they served the purpose of being more dynamic then they would by definition not blend well with the rest of the organ. The only cure for this would be re-designing and reconstructing the vestry. A thorough clean of the organ would perhaps make a small difference.

All these three jobs (apart from re-building the vestry) could be carried out within a total budget of about £3000.

Conclusion

My personal professional recommendation – and I stress that the ultimate decision here is a prayerful and spiritual one – is that the money available is used to address the three issues as above and that the organ is otherwise left untouched. This would answer your specific concerns within the available budget, secure a valuable and essentially-reliable instrument for the future, and be (particularly in terms of the carpentry) a clearly-visible and tangible result for the congregation's donations.

The question of who will play the instrument in ten years should also be addressed. Now is perhaps the time to have an organ student – something that has been successfully tried elsewhere in the deanery. In Embsay, the 16-year-old organ student has just taken over the post of Organist. In Kelbrook, a recently-retired lady began learning 6 months ago, now plays very competently for occasional services and is likely to take over as organist in due course. Buying an electronic hymn-playing machine would not be appropriate at this time because you have a good organist and organ. If the parish needs something of the sort in ten years, today's technology will by then be completely outdated and redundant (think of the computers of ten years ago) and prices by then will be lower than today. Today's gadgets are not particularly good (ask the Methodist Church in XX!) and would certainly not be a good investment for some undetermined point in the future.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Tim Rishton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Dr Tim Rishton