

The New Organ of St. Alphege, Montrose Avenue, Burnt Oak, Edgware, Middlesex
by John Shepherd. Article written in 2002

The original organ was a second-hand instrument by Alfred Hunter c1870. It was installed soon after the church was built in the late 1920s. There were two manuals and 11 speaking stops: Great 888442. Swell 8848(Oboe T.C). Pedal 16. The action was tracker throughout. It was housed in the gallery on the North side of the chancel. A good example of an early Hunter organ, it had a beautiful tone, though its position meant that it did not have the power to be as effective as one might have wished further down the nave. We tuned and maintained it from 1972 until it was completely destroyed by fire in October 1994. Unfortunately the young vandals, who deliberately set it on fire, were never caught.

After the fire we loaned the church a small two manual two rank extension organ which we had acquired some years earlier, and this did duty until a few months ago when the new organ first became playable. It was installed at the rear of the nave, and despite its mild tone was found to be quite effective in leading the singing, and as a result it was decided that a new organ should be placed at the west end of the nave.

The Vicar Rev. Hugh Moore was determined to have a good pipe organ to replace the one sadly lost. We went to see an available late Father Willis organ in Greenwich, but the tone was a bit harsher than the old Hunter, so this was rejected. He also heard several new organs which did not entirely satisfy him. We suggested building a new organ with some new and some second-hand pipes. As the building was in the Italianate style we did a rough design of a case in this style for a west end, position to one side of the window.

In 1996 we were told that the organ which we had looked after since 1967 in Manor Methodist Church, Bermondsey, would be available, due to the fact that there would not be room for the organ in their new very tiny building (about 50 seats). This organ was originally built by Father Willis in 1857/8 for the Surrey Chapel in Blackfriars Road. It was a very large circular non-conformist chapel, where Father Willis's father was in the choir. The organ was a comprehensive 2 manual instrument with 22 speaking stops: Great 16888442.2/3,2IV88 Swell 168842III16884 Pedal 16. When the Surrey Chapel closed in 1881 the instrument was moved to Manor Methodist Church, Bermondsey and existed as built until the church was bombed during W.W.2. Cecil Clutton wrote an article on it, called "Eighty Years" in The Organ Vol XV Jan. 1936.

Evidently the organ was badly damaged and many pipes were destroyed. However parts of it were put together and it was used in the hall behind the church until the new smaller church was built in the mid-1950s. In this building an organ was built very cheaply, incorporating all the remaining Father Willis pipes, together with other second-hand pipes, and a very unsatisfactory electro-pneumatic action and wind system, by an unknown North Country builder. It was fitted on a shelf at the front of the building behind an iron grille with mesh behind it and played from a second-hand drawstop console on the left side near the front. It was pretty loud in the 150 seater building, especially with Super and Sub Octave couplers on both manuals. There were 22 speaking stops: Great 1688844II8. Swell 8888844III88. Pedal 1616168.

The PCC of St. Alphege agreed to buy these Willis pipes from Bermondsey and we devised a scheme of building a new organ to house them. Our original idea was to have the organ to the right of the west window, but this was rejected, and instead it was proposed that the organ would be at the west end, but in the centre, so designed that it dipped in the middle to avoid the window being obscured. John Norman (the Diocesan Advisor) suggested that Didier Grassin be asked to design a suitable case, and this is the case which now adorns the organ.

Before the present scheme was agreed on we submitted a larger scheme with new Swell strings (those on the post war organ were thin scaled Viol d'Orchestres, there were none on the original organ), also Swell 16' reed, Great Double, Mixture 4 ranks and Trumpet and Pedal Open 16. This scheme was not affordable. Various delays ensued - to begin with there was the need to raise a great deal more money, as the insurance pay out was far short of the figure needed to build the new organ. Then there were delays with regard to the specification and the design, and the granting of a faculty. Other delays followed, largely due to hold ups with suppliers of parts. In October 2001 we took delivery of the framework and chests from P & S Supply Company, and the organ has only just been finished. The pipes were brought over from Bermondsey and stored in the old organ gallery (rebuilt after the fire) in 1998, to save and preserve them. Our only regret was that the Father Willis Pedal Open (the only pedal stop on the original organ) had to be left behind. It would have been extremely difficult to have got it out of the church at Bermondsey, and impossible to have got it in to St. Alphage (because no door leads directly into the church). Moreover it would have deepened the organ by several feet, and would have cost several thousand pounds extra to have incorporated them. Apart from this almost all of the surviving Willis pipes have been used, though many of the wooden and metal pipes needed restoration. The former Great Double Diapason has been used as the Pedal Principal 8. Some of these pipes were originally front pipes; these have been repaired, but are now inside the organ. We rescaled this stop two notes (using the two lowest Open Diapason bass pipes, The fifteen largest Willis Diapason pipes were discarded as they were not in good enough condition to be reused (they were damaged and poorly repaired after war damage) New front pipes of 80% tin have replaced the old ones. Only the lowest 15 pipes in the towers speak, the smaller ones are dummies, in order that as many as possible of the original Diapason pipes could be retained inside the organ. The lowest five notes of the Great Twelfth are new pipes using old Father Willis metal from the Great Double Diapason which were not needed for the Pedal Principal. These replaced odd pipes put in after the war. The Twelfth and Fifteenth were combined as a 2 rank Mixture in the post war organ, but have now been separated. Some of the extreme trebles of the Swell Mixture and Fifteenth are new replacing odd pipes put in after the war. The Swell Mixture composition is unaltered apart from the fact that we divided it so that there could be a Fifteenth. This was originally a 17th rank but has been transposed to 15th. The upper two ranks remain unaltered. It goes up much higher before breaking than a usual Willis Mixture. The Swell Oboe and the upper 18 notes of the Pedal Trombone were second-hand Gray & Davison pipes of c1900, from the post war Bermondsey organ. The lowest octave of the Trombone has new boots and second-hand full length resonators. Everything else in the organ is new except for the bellows weights and the recycled ivory key coverings and the ivory stop knobs (re-engraved). The tracker action was made by Eric & John Shepherd & Nick Hillman using modern components by A.J & L Taylor Ltd, (not the more traditional materials that we have used in the past). The stop and piston actions are electric. We have made an effective swell box, the shutters of which are controlled mechanically. All the wind trunks are of wood, and these together with the passageboards, stays and ladder in mahogany have been made by us. The console is in mahogany. The case in oak has been made by Renatus of Bideford, Devon.

Great		Swell		Pedal	
Open Diapason	8	Open Diapason	8	Bourdon	16
Claribel Flute	8	Stopped Diapason	8	Principal	8
Dulciana	8	Principal	4	Trombone	16
Principal	4	Fifteenth	2	Couplers	
Harmonic Flute	4	Mixture (19, 22) 2 Rks.		Swell Sub Octave	
Twelfth	2.2/3	Cornopean	8	Swell to Great	
Fifteenth	2	Oboe	8	Swell to Pedal	
		Tremulant		Great to Pedal	

10 General thumb pistons. 5 thumb pistons to Swell. 5 thumb pistons to Great
5 toe piston to Swell 5 toe pistons to Pedal
S = Set thumb piston. 0 = General cancel thumb piston

Reversible thumb pistons for Swell to Great, Swell to Pedal, Great to Pedal.
4 + stepper thumb pistons 1 – stepper thumb piston. 1 + stepper toe piston
1 – stepper toe piston. Reversible toe piston for Great to Pedal.

Sonic Services piston capture system with 30 Divisional Channels and 99 General
Channels fitted 2018, and additional pistons added.

Gt & Ped combs coupled. Gens to Toe pistons. (press button switches)

Tracker action throughout. Electric stop action.

Compass of manuals CC to c 61 notes.
Compass of Pedals CCC to f 30 notes.
(radiating & concave)

Wind pressures: Manuals 3.1/4". Pedals 3.3/4". Daminato blower.

Composition of Mixture:
19, 22. Bottom C to Treble G (44 notes). 12, 15. Treble G# to Top C (17 notes).

The layout of the organ is Great above the console, with the Swell behind, and the
Pedal is divided at either end of the organ at right angles to the manual chests.

We are very grateful to Didier Grassin for his design of the case, and the layout,
Nicholas Hillman our colleague who has worked with us for 14 years for his excellent
work on this organ throughout the duration of the work, Kevin Rutterford for making the
new front pipes, and the Trombone boots, Don Wherly for making new treble pipes and
tuning slides and Keith Bance for his work on the scaling and voicing of the new front
pipes and the Pedal Trombone.

The tonal finishing and regulation, and voicing of the new treble pipes etc. has been
done by John & Eric Shepherd. This accounted for several weeks of work. Care has
been taken not to alter the voicing or overall balance, though a lot of faulty speech had
to be attended to.

The organ sounds well in the acoustic at St. Alphage. We were pleased to have been
able to build this organ, our first new one with tracker action, (though we have done a
lot of tracker work on existing organs), in our 75th Anniversary year (2002)

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