

From EDOA Newsletter Sept 2006

EDOA Visit to St Peters Church, St Albans – 14th June 2006

Our visit to the new Mander organ at St Peters Church, St Albans took place on a pleasant cool evening, very comfortable after the mini heatwave of the preceding few days, and very different from the oven-like conditions we were subsequently to endure in July, in which your correspondent was driven to accompany a service in shirtsleeves! (*Speaking of extreme temperatures, you should try playing at Bayford in January, when all sense of touch disappears from frozen fingertips, but I digress.....*)

We were welcomed by the organist, Alex Flood, who related the history of the organs at St Peters, starting with an old style case at the west end, which was then shoe-horned into a cave on the south side of the chancel, extended to the other side of the chancel, and eventually moved to its final position in the second bay down on the north aisle, during the 1970s. Whilst keeping things going musically for many years, the limitations of the instrument were many and in the last couple of years it was decided that the only possible way forward would be for a totally new instrument to be built. Quotations were obtained from the great and the good, and following a trip to the USA to inspect their most recent work, the contract was placed with Mander Organs.

Alex demonstrated the range of sounds of the organ with a set of variations by Samuel Scheidt, each with its own non-authentic registration, followed by the Toccata Giocosa by William Matthias. Several members and visitors were then able to try it for themselves, with the usual variety of pieces



offered.

The organ is in a handsome case of stained oak in modern English style, with carved pipeshades incorporating a great deal of free space for the sound to escape. As all three soundboards are on the same level, the depth is necessarily greater than one might expect. It therefore fills this bay of the aisle completely and also has the front part overhanging into the nave. Apparently this is one of the few swell boxes which Mander have made in which the height was sufficient to prevent the need for any mitreing of the reed pipes, such is the benefit of the level layout and height of the aisle. The swell box has two sets of shutters, one in the conventional manner on the front of the box and under direct mechanical linkage to the swell pedal, and the other on the left hand wall facing into the congregation, this being electrically linkable to the main shutters as desired. Thus, a flexible amount of expression is possible. The tremulants are of a gentle waving type which Mander have developed over the years from historical examples.

As already mentioned, the new organ occupies much the same space as the old, but it is very spacious internally, partly due to health and safety concerns, and the quality of the workmanship is easy to see. No doubt there will eventually be 5mm of dust, bat droppings, condensed incense, etc, but for the time being it is almost as good to look at internally as externally. And there is the added benefit of ample room for the Hoover to be plied without elbowing the tuning stoppers down or bending the pipework.

The organ has a wide specification, spread over three manuals and pedals, with suspended tracker action and mechanical coupling. Heard in the empty church it sounds bright, clear and bold but without excessive bottom end. There is a noticeable drop off in volume when seated at the console compared to elsewhere, so over-exuberant registration is a distinct possibility!



More comprehensive write-ups, technical specifications, etc, can be found in the various articles in the *Organ press*, but it was refreshing to be able to visit a state of the art instrument from a modern organ builder of worldwide reputation, and with very few of the compromises which normally dog the English church organ (lack of money, lack of space, lack of money, etc, etc). Perhaps the sound will mellow after a few years, but for the time being it suits my neo-classical ears very well and I look forward to hearing it again.

Jeremy Ewen