

Saturday May 15
Visit to two 3-manual organs in Dulwich

Saturday 15 May 2010 must have been the first day of summer. Arriving at North Dulwich I was struck by both the warmth and the overall leafy suburban green. By the time I had walked through the delights of Dulwich Village (house prices seem to start at a million round here) it was raining: so then I knew it was summer. A special day then, and there was a very special pair of organs. The first was in the unusually named Chapel of Christ, Alleyn's College of God's Gift, a rare gothic style building of the early 17th century.

The unexpectedly matching gothic organ case of 1760 and the majority of the instrument it now contains were built by George England. The story from then on is that of the remarkable survival of much of the original pipework. The organ was enlarged by Lewis in 1888, given a pedal organ, changed to a C compass and the swell extended beneath the original Middle C. It was further enlarged by Norman & Beard in 1908 and given tubular pneumatic action. In 1969 Noel Mander gave it electro-pneumatic action and, as was usual at that date, a somewhat Teutonic specification.

Enough of the original work survived for William Drake to reconstruct the original instrument with its GG/AA/C short-octave compass Great and Choir. It is therefore both delightful and instructive to be able to hear and play such a wonderful survival. The Swell Organ no longer forms an unsightly backdrop to the case. It is now fits within the original case and fulfils admirably the joint function of an 18th-century short-compass third manual and a modern full-compass Swell Organ.

As Marilyn Harper, the chapel's excellent organist, demonstrated to us, the instrument is now also a very fine Bach organ with its new quint Mixtures and a fine 16ft pedal reed. The sound of the organ is incredibly vibrant and bears little relationship to the older rather delicate-sounding 'restorations' of similar instruments. This organ, like the Goetze & Gwynn 2006 reconstruction of the 1644 Harris & Byfield instruments we visited recently, has much in common with the northern French organs of the same period. The reeds, with their big basses, are similarly exciting, and the flutes and cornets have similarly wide scales. It is easy to imagine these organs leading the singing of the large congregations that packed the stalls and galleries of 18th-century churches. For the voluntaries, including those that were played during the service, there was a wide variety of charming imitative sonorities with their corresponding echoes on the third manual, vigorous cornets and fine plenos for the fugal movements.

After about 10 minutes walk we arrived at St Barnabas Church, a large and very fine example of contemporary architecture which replaces the Victorian Gothic building burnt down in 1992.

The altar is in the centre of the church and the organ stands (behind the impressive range of stalls needed to accommodate a choir of 80 members!) against the east window. It is contained in a finely proportioned case with metal pipes in the middle and burnished brass bass pipes outside.

The concept of this organ is interesting.

It owes much to the 19th-century Hill organ, but it has a positive organ, immediately above the player's head, which provides the now-fashionable secondary chorus. The decision to make a traditional organ of this type for this particular modern church is interesting and successful. The result is certainly an excellent instrument, and with its vibrant chorus work and precise mechanical action, this is another Dulwich organ well-suited to the performance of Bach, but also an excellent

vehicle for romantic music. I have no doubt that its full-bodied tone is ideal for leading congregational singing and there is more than enough subtlety for accompaniment.

Our small group of organ tourists was truly privileged to encounter two such exceptional instruments and to meet the organists. Marilyn Harper gave us a fascinating and beautifully played demonstration at Christ's Chapel, while William McVicker introduced us to both the architectural originality of St Barnabas and the organ. Our thanks are also due to Simon Williams, who sadly was unable to join us. He missed a real treat.

Information on Christ's Chapel organ - <http://www.williamdrake.co.uk/>

For St Barnabas - <http://www.tickell-organs.co.uk/specInfo/opus34.htm>

Peter St. John Stokes