

Thaxted Lincoln organ rededication

The rededication of the Lincoln organ at Thaxted by the Bishop of Chelmsford, on 25 September this year, after its long restoration, brought together much that is endearing about the Church of England - dedication to its buildings, its music and instruments, gloriously combined with mild eccentricity. There were plenty of well-deserved congratulations from the parishioners and clergy (and hearty thanks from the organist community) to Sybil King and the restoration committee who had nobly steered this project through the many years of fund-raising.

The Henry Cephas Lincoln Organ, originally installed for the re-opening of St John's Chapel, Bedford Row, London, was purchased for £230 by Thaxted Parish Church in 1858, and installed in the North transept. (The local press reported a congregation of 1,500 for the opening service.)

Over the subsequent 150 years the instrument received very little repair or modification. It gained the distinction of a connection with Gustav Holst, who with his friend Ralph Vaughan Williams, played what he called 'his organ' regularly in the early years of the twentieth century. Holst first came to Thaxted in 1913 and became a friend of the vicar, Conrad Noel – the so-called Red Vicar, due to his pioneering beliefs in Christian Socialism. Noel re-ordered the church on his appointment, which didn't please the richer members of his congregation, and hung the red flag of the Internationale in the nave, which had outraged students from Cambridge breaking in at night to tear it down.

The organ remained in active use until the 1960s. Parishioners talked of it as an "old and well-loved friend" although because of its failing condition, it was rarely played. It was finally agreed that the point had been reached where restoration was necessary to prevent more serious decay: fund raising began in 2008, and restoration began in 2012 when parts were removed to the Nottinghamshire workshops of Martin Goetze and Dominic Gwynn; eventually the remaining structure was dismantled and removed to their workshop in 2013.

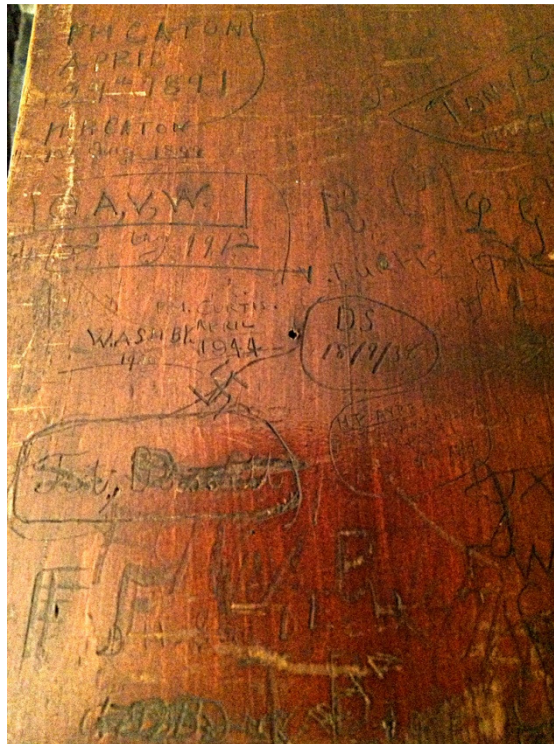


Hand pumping the organ while Anne Page and Paul Binski play the Hallelujah Chorus arranged for two players by John Marsh (1783)

Because it offered a tremendous historical opportunity for restoration and use as a late-Georgian organ, (the only unaltered 3-manual organ to have come down to us from the first four decades of the nineteenth century) the agreement was that it should be "restored to its original specifications (1812)".

Originally blown by hand, the pumping handle has been restored, and hand-pumping is still

an option (though an electric blower is provided). Generations of bored locals who had been roped in to pump the organ have left their mark in the casework, carving names, dates and initials while waiting for the next hymn – these have been preserved in the re-polishing of the case. It was decided after listening to the pipes that the original temperament would probably have been Sixth Comma Meantone (Silbermann) so this has also been restored.



The graffiti around the pump handle

The celebrations to rededicate the organ included two premieres of works specially composed for the occasion. Thaxted Organist and Director of Music Christopher Bayston set the words of Nicholas Brady's "Soul of the World" from *Ode to St Cecilia* (1692) (also used by Purcell) for the anthem sung by the Thaxted Church Choir during Festal Evensong, and after refreshments, Anne Page included *The Lincoln Trinity*, commissioned by the Restoration Committee from local musician Jake Walker, in her opening recital.

Anne's recital also included Handel, Bach, Boyce, Martini, and Voluntary 12 by Theophania Cecil. Cecil was organist at St John's Bedford Row when the Lincoln organ was installed there. Her music is in the late classical style, though not without chromatic interest – the final movement certainly tested the Silbermann tuning to its limits.

Nicholas Thistlethwaite has written a well-illustrated guide to the organ¹, and in it he says:

The value of this organ as a witness to another age and culture is beyond measure; the sounds it makes speak to us over the ages, from the time when Theophania Cecil first played it in 1821 to today – they are the same sounds. Its specification is peculiar to a moment of transition in the English organ and the music of the English Church.

¹ Nicholas Thistlethwaite and Dominic Gwynn, *The HC Lincoln Organ in the Thaxted Parish Church, Essex* (Oxford: Positif Press) ISBN 978 0 906894 56 9

And the splendid eccentricity I mentioned? Holst and Vaughan Williams, together with Cecil Sharp, were of course instrumental in the English Folk Revival, and the Red Vicar shared this enthusiasm. With the help of Holst, Conrad Noel introduced People's Processions into High Mass at Thaxted, a heady mix of banners, lights and flowers accompanied by music and incense. (You can see why the Establishment of the early twentieth century had no time for him.) The processions haven't endured, but on Noel's initiative, a Morris side was founded in the village in 1911, and this remains as the oldest revival side in the country. Highly appropriate then, that Thaxted Morris, under Squire Roy Page, graced this special occasion, dancing in the nave to fiddle and accordion while we partook of refreshments in between evensong and Anne's recital.



Thaxted Morris entertain us after Festal Evensong

Theophania Cecil's 12 Voluntaries are available as a download from the RCO website, along with an interesting introduction to Cecil and her times, as the first step in a project to digitise and make available music from the RCO's library. RCO members can download all 12 voluntaries free – non-RCO members can download Voluntary 1.

https://www.rco.org.uk/academic_resources_digitisedlibrary.php

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