

The Sounds Heard before . . .

One of the interesting aspects of the Hartford Hundred Group of Parishes is that its five churches, while similar in function, are so different in their details. The differences extend to the pipe organ in each church: those that play them will no doubt agree that a certain amount of mental adjustment is needed when going from one to another, particularly when playing for consecutive services.

Details of each instrument are to be found in the National Pipe Organ Register (NPOR, www.npor.org.uk), and the entry for each instrument has recently (December 2020) been updated. (At Essendon, for example, the organ was previously said to be sited north of the chancel! At Brickendon, however, there is still said to be an octave coupler, which has not been true since about 1977.) Some additional pictures have also been added. With regard to the organ builders themselves, it turns out that at least ten firms, including distinguished builders such as Walker, Willis and Binns, have been involved in major work to the Group instruments, with others involved with, for instance, regular tuning.

During the collection and collation of the updates, however, another question arose: what organs (or other instruments) were in use before the ones now present? It turns out that clues to some of the answers may be found in the British Organ Archive (BOA) held as a special collection at the University of Birmingham at Edgbaston.

Bayford

This is a Walker rebuild (of what?) from 1874. The previous instrument was a 3-stop Scudamore organ, the 'Douglas' model, supplied by Willis in 1860 for the previous church building and reinstalled when the current building was put up in 1871. It was long assumed that some or all of the Willis had been incorporated into the Walker instrument, but recent conversations with the organ tuner and examination of the pipework show that this is unlikely. The 'Scudamore' reference denotes a style of low-cost pipe organ having very few stops but voiced and sited so as to support congregational singing.

Brickendon

The building itself dates from 1932, so has a shorter history. The original supplier of the pipe organ was a company derived from one founded by Thomas Casson (1842–1910), which went into abeyance during the First World War; its successor was the Positive Organ Company (1922) Ltd. The instrument at Brickendon was installed in 1938 according to NPOR and was their Casson model opus 1117, with two full ranks of pipes (plus a truncated rank giving a melodic bass). Between 1932 and 1938 it seems likely that the French single-manual harmonium still on site would have been used. By 1977 the organ was not in a good state, so the firm of E. J. Johnson ingeniously revised the electric action and used the existing pipes to derive a total of six speaking stops, retaining the small single-manual short-compass console.

Essendon

A barrel organ was presented to the church in 1851. Installed on the west gallery, it came with three barrels with ten tunes each, had open and stopped diapason stops, a principal and a double diapason. The builder may have been a Mr Pilcher, from London, who was paid for a tuning visit in 1856. (As an aside, another part of the Pilcher family emigrated to the USA where not one but several organ-building firms of that name emerged over time.) Later in the 19th century Gray and Davison maintained the organ until the arrival of the Willis. A picture on display in

the church shows an instrument, presumably this barrel organ, mounted in the centre of the gallery at the west end.

Neither the barrel organ nor the west gallery was retained after work in 1888 when most of the church was demolished and rebuilt as a larger edifice. A new two-manual organ (a No. 9 model, costing £376) was supplied by Henry Willis in 1888, when the whole church was rebuilt. However, in 1917 it was damaged by blast from a Zeppelin-dropped bomb exploding nearby and after WW1 it was repaired and restored by Henry Jones of London. In about 1989, the local organ builder Saxon Aldred installed a 3-rank mixture to replace the Swell clarinet. The church organist at the time was Frank Bradbeer, who had been the “Bradbeer” in Grant, Degens and Bradbeer, the organ builders.

Little Berkhamsted

There was at least one instrument here during the 19th century, but we have neither the specification nor the name of the builder. However, Gray and Davison moved an organ in 1857, cleaned it in 1865/67 then between 1878 and 1882 moved it to the transept and altered it (details unknown). They may also have built the instrument originally. The dates may be compared with those for work on the church itself during the century: in 1831 the north aisle was added; in 1857 the outside was clad in Kentish ragstone; in 1897 the church was treated to a restoration. The present organ is a 1911 work by the north country firm of J. J. Binns, later restored (date unknown) by George Osmond of Taunton.

Ponsbourne

The church of St Mary was consecrated in 1849, enlarged in 1858 and then again in 1887.

An “improved” barrel organ costing £52/12/6 and playing 30 tunes was supplied by Gray and Davison in 1848. In 1850 the same firm supplied a barrel and finger organ for £82 (the 1848 organ being taken in part exchange). In 1858 J. W. Walker built the present instrument (with the 1850 organ taken in part exchange). When the chancel was demolished and rebuilt to its present form in 1887 the organ had to be taken out; then, when reinstalled, it was also turned through 90 degrees so that the console faced on to the new chancel rather than the north transept as previously. It was restored by Mander Organs in 2013.

Gray and Davison were again involved with this church between 1966 and 1972, when they held the tuning contract. (However, the firm went out of business in 1972/3 and was finally wound up on 30th April 1975.)

Woodhill

For completeness we should note that within the area of the Group there is a sixth church, St Mark’s, Woodhill. Originally (like Tolmers/Ponsbourne) a chapel of ease for St Etheldreda’s, Bishop’s Hatfield, this is now used by another denomination. The first organ here was transferred up the road to Hatfield Hyde in 1888 when a second hand replacement was obtained (probably made by William Hill using parts from earlier instruments – see NPOR entry D02215). When St Mark’s ceased to be an Anglican church in 1976/77 this organ was moved to Stevenage Holy Trinity, at the south end of the Old Town High Street.

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