ST SWITHUN'S CHURCH

BATHFORD, SOMERSET

A REPORT ON THE ORGAN

MARCH 2018

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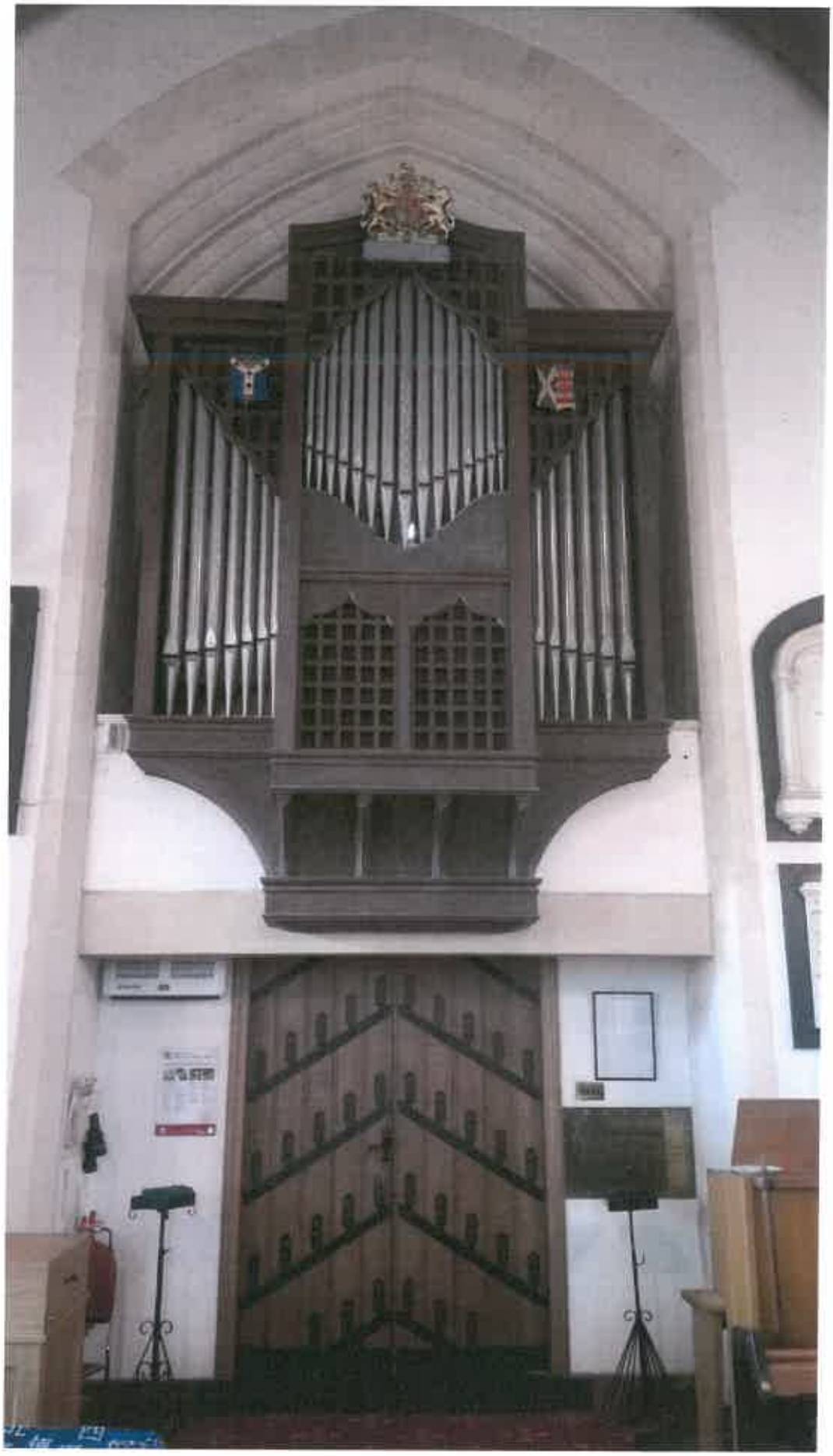

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St Swithun's Church, Bathford, Somerset

Report on the Organ

I visited the church on 7th March 2018 and carried out an inspection of the organ with my colleague Charlotte Groombridge.

The organ was built in 1971 by William Hill & Son and Norman & Beard Ltd (Hill Norman and Beard). This company was the result of the amalgamation of two distinguished firms in 1916. Based for many years in London, it latterly moved to Thaxted in Essex; it went out of business in 1998. The firm's records are held at the British Organ Archive in Birmingham.

The organ contains some older pipework, probably from the preceding instrument which stood on the south side of the chancel. This was a two-manual organ with 14 stops, originally built by Henry Jones of London in the 19th century, and altered or overhauled in 1900 by Griffen & Stroud of Bath.[1] The opportunity was taken in 1971 to install the new organ in its present loft within the tower; the detached console was originally placed at the head of the south nave aisle, and was subsequently moved to the west end of the nave, directly in front of the organ.

An assessment

In the 1970s the firm of Hill Norman & Beard was following a policy of innovation, intended to make organs cheaper to build. The intentions were good, but unfortunately the results have not stood the test of time. On the positive side, the Bathford organ is constructed of good materials within a decent case; the installation is tidy (except for the electrical system) and the console is of good quality. However, the mechanism and wind system are rudimentary in design and the tonal conception is flawed. To make matters worse, the control system employs an early form of electronic switching which has proved unreliable and is now obsolete; this is the main reason why the organ has been out of action for the past two years or so.

If the organ were still in working order there would have been no reason to disturb it. Now that the mechanism has failed, however, my opinion is that it is not a sufficiently good instrument to justify the significant outlay that would be required to put it into good working order. I make this statement with reluctance: it is rare for such a verdict to be given on an organ that is only 46 years old, and I wish it were possible to give a more favourable assessment. Restoration would indeed be technically possible, but the organ's artistic and technical shortcomings would remain and there would be no assurance of its long-term reliability. The church deserves a better instrument.

In support of this conclusion, I will now give a description of the organ as it stands.

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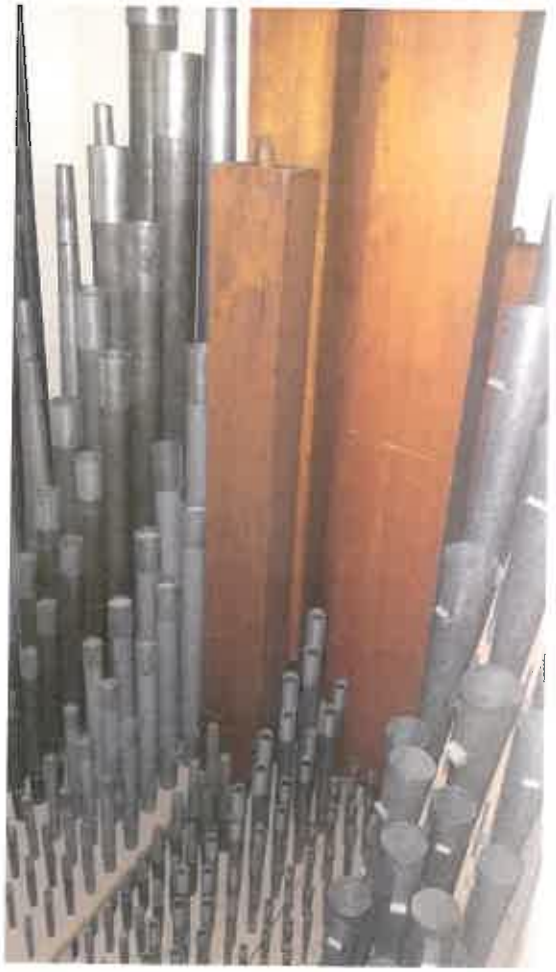
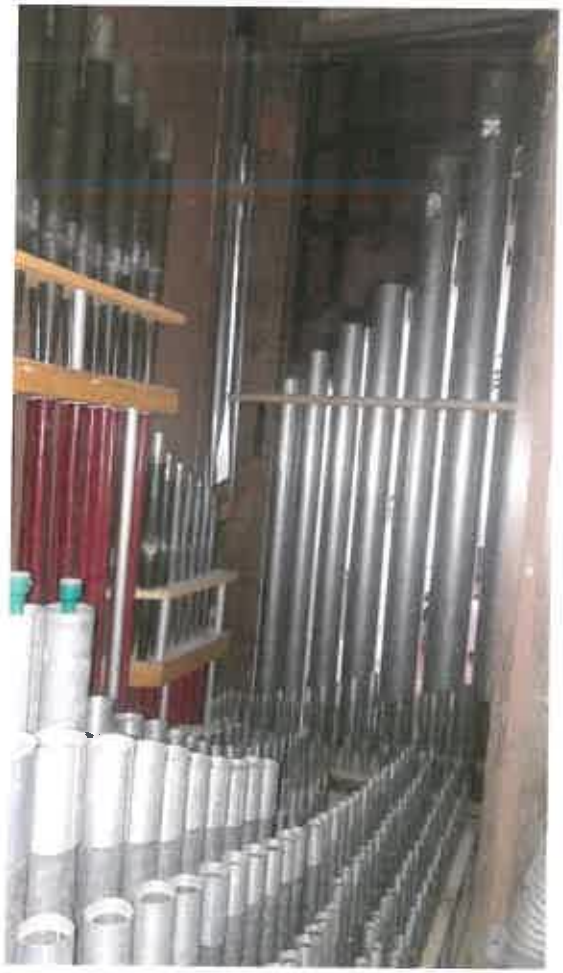
[1] Information from the National Pipe Organ Register (N08214)

Pipework

The general condition of the pipework is good. It is a mixture of new and old, the latter either from the old organ or from the builder's stock. Unfortunately, through an idiosyncratic system of 'borrowing', an exceptionally small number of bass pipes is shared between the Pedal Organ and the manual foundation stops, a system which saves space and expense but must inevitably undermine the organ's tonal effectiveness.



Swell pipework



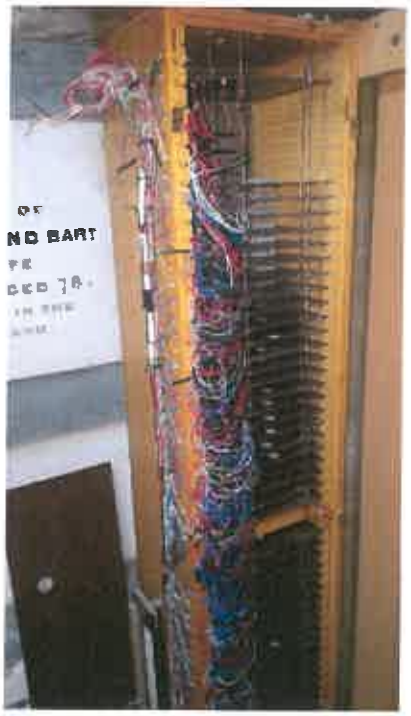
Great pipework; front pipes in background

Because of the organ's mechanical condition it is not possible to gain a proper impression of its tonal quality, but the sounds that I was able to coax from it, supported by an inspection of the pipework, suggest a pleasant but undistinguished instrument, lightweight in character and influenced by the classical revival of the 1960s. Although the organ is well placed to project its sound into the building, I suspect that it would struggle to lead and inspire a full congregation.

Wind chests and actions

The wind chests (on which the pipes stand) are very basic in design: the mechanism within them consists of a multitude of simple magnetic valves, one for each pipe. This is a far cry from the normal method of organ building in traditional style, with 'slider chests' in which the pipes belonging to each note of the scale share a common wind supply: a system which favours good musical speech and entails a much more straightforward mechanism.

In this organ, with each of several hundred pipes being supplied with wind individually, a multitude of electro-magnets is employed. The magnets concerned are crude in operation, with a detrimental effect on the quality and unanimity of pipe speech; after more than four decades they are becoming faulty, with notes seizing up or hanging on. Replacement of all these magnets would, in itself, be a considerable operation, and I cannot recommend it.

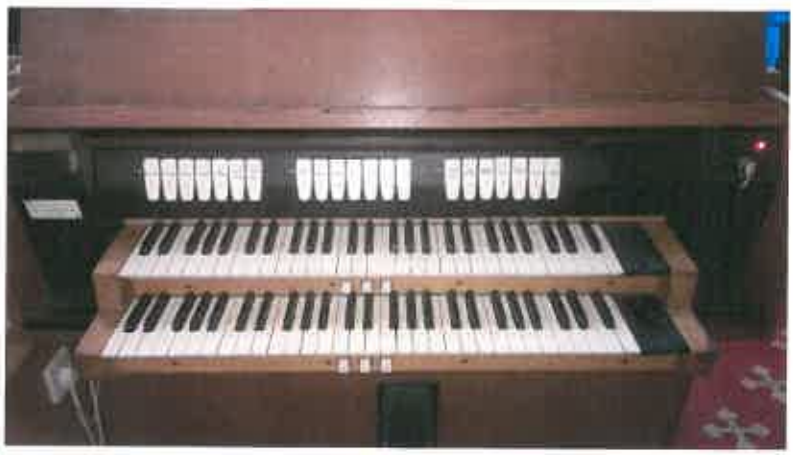


Electronic coupling system and cabling

As mentioned above, the electronic control system, never robust, is now obsolete and in a state of terminal decline. The cabling is somewhat chaotic. Piecemeal repairs will not cure the system's woes; total replacement would be the only solution.

Console

This is a neat, compact piece of work, well constructed and with an ingenious mechanism for retracting the keyboards. With renewal of the electrical components and a general overhaul it would continue to be serviceable and pleasant to use.



Wind system

Wind is supplied to the organ by a centrifugal fan, or blower: this was made by a well-known manufacturer, Watkins & Watson, and is of first-class quality. It has a very long life-expectancy if properly maintained.

Electric blower

The wind system within the organ is, however, rudimentary. There is no conventional bellows to control the output of wind from the blower; instead, the wind is controlled by a floating pan, or 'Schwimmer', within the main wind chest. Under present circumstances it is not possible to test the adequacy of this particular installation, but I have reservations about its design and doubt its efficiency.

Casework

The casework and front pipes are in good condition and suit the church well.

The way forward

Since, regrettably, I can see no future for the present organ, I feel that a realistic approach would be to look for a second-hand instrument by a good builder which could be restored and adapted for use in this situation, retaining the present casework which was of course designed especially for the church. With time and patience, it should be possible to find such an instrument. I would see this as an exciting and cost-effective way of giving a good home to a redundant organ and thereby providing the church with a musical instrument of real distinction.

It is impossible to give an accurate cost for such a project, as everything depends upon the size and condition of the chosen organ and the amount of work required in order to move and adapt it for its new position. I would hazard a guess that if the transfer were fairly straightforward the cost might be in the region of £50,000 plus VAT: excellent value for a good organ that would serve the church for many decades to come. (Old organs command a low resale value because of the cost of moving and overhaul.)

As for the present organ: the console (suitably restored) might be adapted and re-used for the replacement organ, and the excellent blower could be retained if its capacity proves adequate. Some of the pipework would be suitable for use elsewhere and would be worth preserving: it could be offered to an interested organ builder.

A final word on a related matter. I notice that the church is comprehensively carpeted and equipped with pew cushions. While this may add a sense of comfort, it has an adverse effect on the acoustics. The benefit of a benign acoustic is often underestimated: not only does it make music sound better, but it adds confidence to the singing and improves participation in the spoken parts of the service. I enclose a leaflet on this important subject, which may be of interest: it describes the principles involved and steps which can be taken to improve the situation

I will gladly answer questions on any aspect of this report.

M B Venning
Chairman

29th March 2018

St Swithun's Church, Bathford, Somerset

The organ was built in 1971 by William Hill & Son and Norman & Beard; it contains pipework from the previous organ, which was built in the nineteenth century by Henry Jones of London and repaired or rebuilt in 1900 by Griffen & Stroud of Bath.

			Feet	
PEDAL ORGAN				
1.	Bourdon	(12 pipes)	16	From 7
2.	Principal		8	From 6
3.	Gedackt		8	From 7
4.	Fifteenth		4	From 6
5.	Bass Trumpet		16	From 17
GREAT ORGAN				
6.	Open Diapason		8	
7.	Stopped Diapason		8	
8.	Octave		4	Bass derived
9.	Chimney Flute		4	Bass derived
10.	Fifteenth		2	Bass derived
11.	Fourniture	19.22	II	
SWELL ORGAN				
12.	Spitz Flute		8	
13.	Principal		4	
14.	Nazard		$2^2/_3$	
15.	Quarte		2	Bass derived
16.	Mixture	22.26	II	
17.	Trumpet		8	

Accessories

Three pistons to Great Organ
Three pistons to Swell Organ
Reversible foot piston to *Great to Pedal*

The actions are direct-electric
Manual compass 56 notes; Pedal compass 32 notes

Harrison & Harrison
March 2018