The Organs in Chelveston Church

Some notes by Tina and David Hackett, and Robert Shaftoe

We tend to assume that 'every church has an organ', but we should remember that this is a comparatively recent situation. Chelveston Church was built about 1320, and certainly for the first six hundred years and more, there would have been no organ: these were introduced gradually from about the fifteenth century, but only in cathedrals and other major religious foundations.

"Under the Greenwood Tree", our favourite Thomas Hardy novel, gives us a realistic picture of rural choirs and church bands (which usually included serpents and other amazing instruments).

The arrival of the organ (and organist) in Mellstock was greeted with mixed feelings by the parishioners, and we can only speculate what happened in our own church at this time. We do believe that there was a 'singing gallery' at the west end, however, as notes of the 1909 restoration mention the removal of a wooden structure. No trace of this remains today.

In 1860, the first organ was bought at a cost of £150, and was placed at the west end, presumably in the singing gallery. By 1877, the organ had been moved to the eastern end of the south aisle, where the Lady Chapel is today.

At around the turn of the century, we have a report that "The old organ was very dilapidated indeed, and the schoolmaster at that time was the organist. Much was said regarding the necessity of a new instrument, but nothing was done until one day the schoolmaster-organist went mad. His first action was to procure a heavy hammer, and smash up the organ. This was an effective way of making a new instrument imperative, but drastic, especially as the schoolmaster ran amok with a razor afterwards." [1] (NB This is not a very good life for an organ!)

This incident was presumably the reason for the commissioning (in its original form) of the present organ, which was built by Phipps of Oxford, and is dated 1909. This was apparently built in the present location, in the transept at the east end of the south aisle.

The date of the above picture is unknown, but the church is evidently decorated for harvest festival. Note the gas-lamps, and the old altar-rail and reredos. It will also be seen that the front pipes were installed in a somewhat ungainly structure, obscuring the masonry arch.

This is seen more clearly in a more recent picture, c.1980

As built, the new organ was somewhat large for a church the size of ours, and in fact for the diocese in general. [(2)] The largest of the diapason pipes were carried forward of the transept arch, on the somewhat precarious outrigger shown above. Most of the organ was built using the oldest (mechanical) system of rods and levers – the 'tracker' action – connected directly to the keys. However, these front pipes, as well as the pedal bourdon pipes, were controlled by the indirect 'pneumatic' system, whereby air is admitted to the pipe by a pneumatic motor – a sort of small bellows – which opens the valve.

The organ was evidently in a poor state (as was the rest of the church) when Fr Roger arrived. The diocesan organs advisor visited soon after, and commented that the first priority must be to dry out the church somehow, in order that not only the organ, but other church furnishings could be saved from further rapid deterioration.

Happily, this was achieved by the efforts of Fr Roger and many volunteers, and the church was saved. However, the condition of the organ gradually continued to deteriorate, and in 1976 the firm responsible for occasional tuning gave up, and offered to accept a sum of money to clear the organ away. Fr. Roger discussed this with the writer (newly arrived in the parish) who felt that this was unacceptable: we agreed that once this one was lost, it was very unlikely that the parish would ever be able to afford a new organ. So it was that Fr. Roger entrusted the future of this organ to a new volunteer, to do what was possible to keep it in playing order.

What did we find? Due to the attention of mice and other small creatures, most of the pneumatic motors were unserviceable, and those controlling the pedal section had been almost completely eaten away. The tracker action, though, is just a collection of bits of wood and wire that pull down or push up, and no more difficult to make or mend than a harpsichord. There were plenty of other problems as well – many of the pipes did not speak at all, many were just a miserable wheeze, and there were plenty of examples of that joy of all organists – the cipher. This occurs when, once sounding, a note cannot be stopped – which makes playing for a service difficult to say the least.

The main problem was the quantity of rubble and plaster that had fallen down from the transept roof over the years. This had entered the pipes, and the works in general. In some cases, pipes were so full of rubble they were incapable of speaking at all. The dust and grit had gradually worked its way down into the action, causing jamming of the hundreds of moving parts. One particularly vulnerable arrangement occurs when a wire tracker passes through a piece of wood, such as the interior of the windchests. The holes are conical, to minimise friction, with the wide part at the top. The smallest piece of grit will jam this completely! And there are well over a thousand of such places in this organ...

Rubble was still falling from the ceiling, so the first job was to improvise a shelter-roof. This was made from whatever materials could be found, but it was the prototype for the present more substantial arrangement.

Then the pipes were removed, emptied out, and stacked (reasonably) neatly.

The principal tool employed at this stage was a small vacuum-cleaner, seen here in the windchest. Well over a hundredweight of dust and rubble was removed!

The pipes themselves were cleaned, a job requiring considerable quantities of Brasso. It was well into the winter of 1976 by now, so the woolly hat was very necessary – no heating in those days!

After cleaning and a few adjustments, the organ was reassembled and tuned – and was once again playable. There were a few missing pipes, and two or three which had been crushed beyond recognition by falling masonry, but the local organ-builder Robert Shaftoe very kindly donated suitable replacements. There were a few compromises: The pneumatics of the pedal organ were beyond the resources of the team, so the pedals could only be used when coupled to the manual pipes. The only reed stop on the organ, the Horn 8', was far too loudly voiced for the situation, and badly out-of-tune: this was disconnected. Otherwise, the organ mostly worked, and it was certainly a better option than sending it for scrap.

Other issues also remained: there was serious woodworm damage in the hidden parts of the structure, especially the blower-box, and movement of the frame prevented the swell-shutters from working. These were therefore removed and stored separately. (This also improved ventilation – if a swell-box is accidentally left shut, dampness can result). Nevertheless, we had an instrument that worked, and could be kept going until something better could be done.

In November 1990, the Organs Advisor for the Diocese (C.H. Davidson) paid another visit, by which time there was some hope for a professional restoration. He recommended [(3)] that we should commission a report from the organ-builder Robert Shaftoe, who was already well-known to us.

In March 1991, the writer met Robert in the church, to discuss and recommend the way forward. His report [(4)] was complimentary about the general design and construction of the organ, whilst recognising the problems. In fact, he said that if it had not been for the rubble-fall, the woodworm , the mice, and some corrosion, the organ would still be playing well! His report give the detail of the work proposed, which he believed that, given reasonable maintenance, would ensure at least another 87 years of life.

Apart from the necessary rebuilding and replacement of unserviceable parts, we made one important recommendation: Robert agreed that the 'Flying' front pipes – the like of which he had never seen – spoilt the impressive mediaeval feel of the church. He also expressed personal nervousness at sitting underneath the structure! We therefore redesigned the front of the organ.

Some of the larger pipes were moved to a new location on the east side of the organ (by the window) but some of the largest Open Diapason pipes – which were too loud for the organ and the building anyway – were not used. They were additionally over-scaled (too wide) and could never have received enough wind from the existing windchest. The lowest pipes of the Open Diapason are now shared with the gentler Dulciana.

This scheme was estimated to cost £5,700, not including the redesigned front. I do not have a record of this additional cost, but it was relatively small, and we all agreed that it would enhance the beauty of the church, as well as improving the balance of the organ from a musical point of view.

The Restoration was carried out from January to May 1992. A detailed report is available [(5)], and is a tribute to the thoroughness and quality of the work, as well as the sheer amount. Robert is a fine craftsman. It was during the work that he noticed that some of the pipes were not new when the organ was built in 1909 – notably those in the Swell Horn Diapason, Flute, and Principal, and the Great Open Diapason, Clarabella, Principal, Flute, and Fifteenth. He noted that although the Swell Horn (reed) was evidently new in 1909, it was almost certainly designed for a much bigger organ – the treble pipes are marked 'Trumpet'. Fortunately, he was able to tame it somewhat, to make it more appropriate for a village church.

The swell-shutters were replaced after the box was stabilised, but interestingly Robert remarked that (apart from the obvious ability to change volume gradually) their effect is generally negative – as is often the case. He remarks: "Difficulty was experienced with some pipes, especially in the middle of the Horn Diapason. Fitting shutters does sometimes cause pipes to go off-speech, more commonly in the 4' octave. For some unknown reason, the swell box acoustic of this organ is particularly difficult." He would prefer the organ without them!

So we now have an organ that is appropriate for the needs of the church, and which, with suitable care, will last indefinitely. It is not an 'important' organ, but it is a good one, and we are fortunate to have it. Let's look after it!

(1) Report in local paper (Northampton Chronicle, c.1910) Interview with W H Simpson (Church House, Mary Helen's father.)

(2) Letter from C H Davidson to Fr. Eric Buchanan, 13 November 1990

(3) Letter from C H Davidson to Fr. Eric Buchanan, 5th July 1991

(4) Report from Robert Shaftoe to David Hackett, 16th March1992

(5) Report from Robert Shaftoe to David Hackett of work carried out , May 1992

Glossary

8’ (or 8ft) – Standard pitch, corresponding to the notes on the piano. The name derives from the fact that the lowest note on the standard organ keyboard – the C two lines below the bass clef – is produced by an open pipe about eight feet long.

Couplers – devices enabling the stops on one keyboard to be played from another. They only work one way – thus ‘Swell to Great’ means that the Great keyboard (the lower one) plays both sets of pipes, but the Swell keyboard only plays its own.

Reed Pipes – most organ pipes are simply whistles, like a recorder, but reed pipes have a sort of brass spring (as in a mouth-organ) to generate the tone. This is then amplified by the pipe, which just acts as a resonator.

Appendix – Specification of the organ

Great Organ:

- Open Diapason 8’ (Bass now shared with Dulciana)
- Dulciana 8’
- Clarabella 8’
- Principal 4’
- Wald Flute 4’
- Fifteenth 2’

Swell organ:

- Horn Diapason 8’
- Salicional 8’
- Hohl Flute 8’
- Principal 4’
- Flute 4’
- Horn 8’

Pedal Organ:

- Bourdon 16’

Couplers:

- Swell to Great
- Swell to Pedal
- Great to Pedal