



THE HUNTER ORGAN AT
ST FRIDESWIDE'S CHURCH,
OXFORD

The organ at St Frideswide's church was built in a gallery on the south side of the chancel shortly after the church's consecration in 1872 and lay undisturbed – save for the installation of an electric blower – for over 130 years. Many organs are rebuilt or adapted once in every generation, incorporating fads, tastes and gimmicks of the age, but the instrument at St Frideswide's remains as it was completed by the London firm of Alfred Hunter in or around 1876.

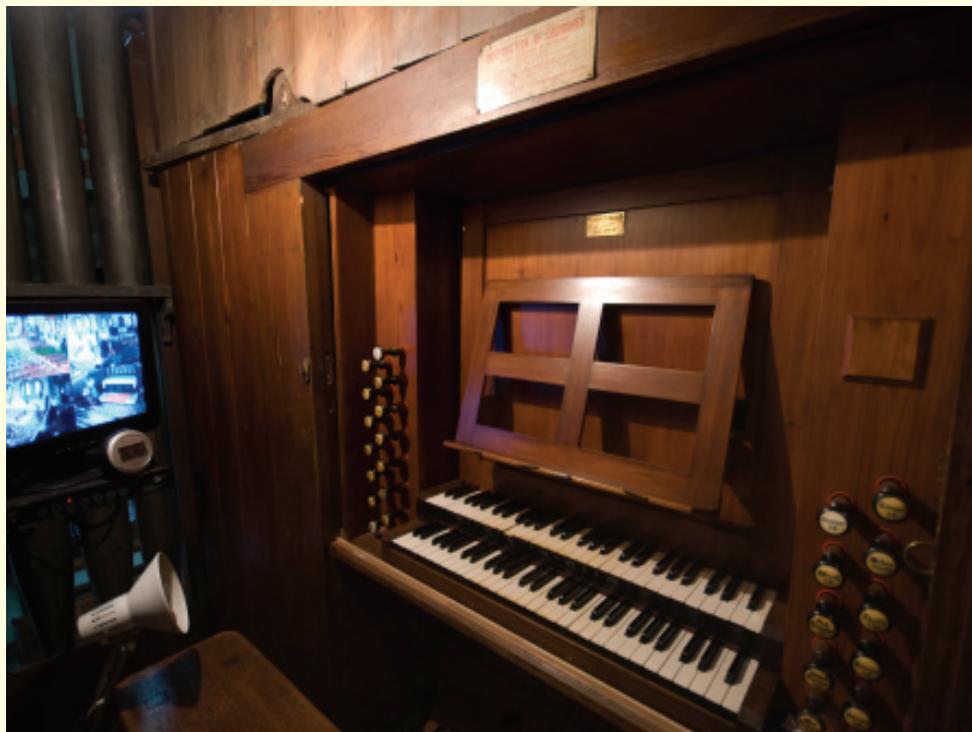
The layout is unusual, in that the organ is built at right-angles to the usual orientation, with the Swell and Great organs speaking towards the west wall of the organ chamber rather than northwards into the chancel as one might expect. All that can be seen from the chancel is the austere line of 16ft zinc pipes of the Pedal organ, behind which the organist is concealed. The restricted view from the bench must have made life very difficult for generations of organists. The console faces east and is reached by a winding staircase from the sacristy.

In 1876 there was no electricity in the church so the bellows were hand-pumped, and mechanical linkages of wood and wire caused the pipes to sound when the keys were depressed. An electric blower (fan) was fitted at some stage in the twentieth century.



Alfred Hunter (1827–1911) was apprenticed to the renowned organ builder George Maydwell Holdich (1816–1896). He set up on his own account in south London in 1865 and son Robert went into partnership with his father in 1882. In 1937 the business was acquired by the Liverpool firm of Henry Willis and Sons.

A question to ponder – why should a newly-built suburban church commission an organ from a London firm when a local builder could have done a perfectly adequate job?



The organ consists of three divisions, the Great organ, the Swell organ and the Pedal organ, and contains in total 17 ranks of pipes. The Great organ is so called because it contains the main set of principal stops (usually called a chorus) and sounds grand and imposing. Originally four more ranks of pipes may have been planned for the Great organ but were never installed. The pipes of the Swell organ, at the back of the instrument, are contained in a box with shutters that can be opened by the organist to increase (or swell) the volume of sound. The Great and Swell organs are operated by manuals. The Pedal organ, operated by the organist's feet, consists of only one rank of pipes – these are the largest ones, making the deepest sounds.

Most of the pipes are made of metal, though some are of wood. The shape of the pipe alters the quality or timbre of the sound produced. The principal pipes are flue pipes, with a simple cylinder above the pipe mouth: these make hard, bright notes. If a stopper is placed in the top of the pipe, a much softer, fluty sound is produced. The wooden pipes generally produce a mellower sound than the metal ones.

The heart of the organ is the bellows, a reservoir from which air is supplied to the soundboards on which the pipes sit. The bellows are made of wood and leather and nowadays are fed with air from an electric fan (the blower).

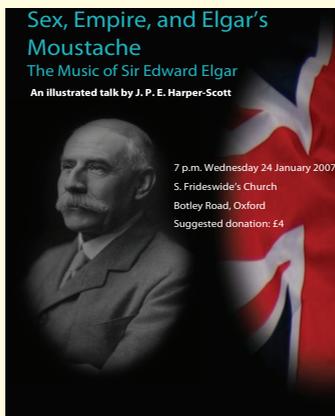


The organ suffered over the years from general wear and tear. The wires forming part of the linkages between the keys and the pallets opening the pipes were made of iron; they became rusted and worn and prone to breaking. The glued joints in the wood had deteriorated and the wood would twist with changes of temperature and humidity causing joints to leak or mechanisms to jam. Pipes had become corroded, due to exposure to moisture and incense. Rubber bands, string, pieces of coat hanger and strips of elastoplast had been used at various times to try and hold the organ together and keep it working. And, most worryingly, the leather of the wind reservoirs had perished and been heavily patched with duct tape, and could fail at any time.



St Frideswide's for the 21st Century Appeal

By 2006, it was clear that St Frideswide's Hunter organ was in urgent need of restoration. The Parochial Church Council decided to launch the "St Frideswide's for the 21st Century Appeal" to raise funds both for the organ and for work on the churchyard, of which the organ was by far the major part. The appeal was launched at the church's annual Gift Day in June 2006 to an enthusiastic response from the West Oxford community. At this and subsequent gift days, about £5000 was given by local residents, many of whom also expressed interest in attending future concerts using the restored organ. Other fundraising events organised by the church included coffee mornings, some including short organ and piano recitals, and talks by guest speakers on subjects such as the life of St Frideswide and the music of Sir Edward Elgar.



A similar amount was contributed from existing church funds, but St Frideswide's is a small church, so for all the generosity of local people within and outside the church, the appeal had to rely on various grant-giving bodies for the bulk of the funding. We are especially grateful to the Heritage Lottery Fund who contributed £50,000, without which the project could not have gone ahead, as well as the Diapason Trust (who contributed £5000) and the ON Organ Fund (£400).

The success of the appeal does not just mean that worship at St Frideswide's is enhanced; the organ is also used for concerts and recitals and is available for rehearsal and tuition. It is also a focus for school visits to the church.

St Frideswide's gratefully acknowledges the generosity of all those who contributed to the appeal, thus enabling this historic instrument to be enjoyed by future generations.

The firm of Peter Collins Ltd, of Melton Mowbray, was appointed to undertake the restoration. Their first action, in October 2008, was to deliver a loan organ, placed at the north side of the nave, so that musical accompaniment to worship could continue without interruption. Work began in earnest in April 2009 with the erection of a scaffold and the total dismantling of the structure. The larger pipes were stored in the church but everything else was taken off site for cleaning and restoration or replacement. The work took much longer than expected as the condition of parts of the organ was worse than expected. Ingress of water had caused many screws to rust and swell, making it difficult to remove them without causing further damage. Many metal and wooden parts could be re-used, but where they were too worn, replacements were hand-made. All leather covers and seals were replaced. A new blower has been fitted at the back of the instrument.

The east window in the organ loft has been boarded up. This is to stop sunlight weathering the new bellows leatherwork. Weathering of the leather is a much greater problem than in the past, because artificial materials are used



to treat the leather, and the leather does not last as long. In the past, urine was used to treat the leather, but this is no longer practised because of health and safety reasons.

At the manuals, the heavily worn ivory [white] key tops were beyond redemption and have been replaced with new ones made of bone. All electrical equipment has been moved away from the console and replaced, and a CCTV system installed. The zinc pipes that face onto the chancel have been cleaned and had a coating of wax applied to them.

The rebuilding was completed and the scaffold removed in March 2010. Let the final words rest with Peter Collins:

The organ was in a poor state when inspected, gaffer tape was securing gaffer tape in the case of the bellows! However the fine tone and solid construction were obvious. Our task has been to thoroughly clean the instrument, repair the broken action and return the pipes to their original bold brilliant tone. Our company is proud to be part of the history of this instrument and we hope it will continue to inspire our and future generations.

SPECIFICATION OF THE ORGAN

GREAT ORGAN (392 pipes in 7 ranks)

Open Diapason 8'
Stopped Diapason 8'
Dulciana 8'
Principal 4'
Flute Harmonique 4'
Twelfth $2\frac{2}{3}'$
Fifteenth 2'

PEDAL ORGAN

Open Diapason 16'

COUPLERS

Swell to Great
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Pedal Octave

SWELL ORGAN (616 pipes in 9 ranks)

Double Diapason 16'
Open Diapason 8'
Lieblich Gedact 8'
Gamba 8'
Principal 4'
Piccolo 2'
Mixture III
Cornoepan 8'
Oboe 8'

ACCESSORIES

2 combination pedals to Swell
2 combination pedals to Great
1 trigger swell pedal

COMPASS

Manual CC – g 56 notes
Pedals CC – f 30 notes
Mechanical action to
Manuals, Pedals and Stops



Supported by

The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund

