

## The organ in St James'

The organ presently in St James' was built by the local firm of Laycock and Bannister. This company's products are ubiquitous in the area, and many of them are of very high quality and durability. Until the 1920s, Laycock and Bannister built largely mechanical-action instruments, a practice to which they returned in their last years, and it is generally these instruments that have remained reliable.

The St James' instrument, though large, was not from the firm's best period. It suffers from a number of flaws:

- It is built into a stone chamber in the choir, which means that in order to be heard in the body of the church the sound needs to be very forced and artificially loud; therefore rather brutal
- It uses electro-pneumatic action to transfer the movement of the keys to make the pipes sound. Electro-pneumatic action has some advantages – and in its time was seen as a technological improvement over alternative methods – but is highly susceptible to wear and tear, weather and other factors. In short, it is unreliable.
- The air intake for the bellows draws on air from outside the church. This should never be allowed since it introduces air of a different temperature and humidity into a sensitive instrument that is otherwise at room temperature and humidity, thus ruining both the tuning and leather and wood components.

A number of years ago, Laycock and Bannister, mindful that the instrument had deteriorated and in any case was not one of their best, suggested a programme of restoration and improvement. The church was not in a financial position to undertake this work and instead opted to engage another company to put right the immediate problems. Had Laycock's suggestion been carried out the organ would probably have been serviceable today, although given the unsatisfactory design of the organ the work would probably not have represented a good long-term investment. As it was, however, a good deal of money was spent inadvisably to patch up the instrument in the short term.

From speaking to members of the congregation I have realised that people feel that the project of repairs was carried out relatively recently and that because of the amount of money spent on the organ it should be in good condition. It is therefore difficult to tell people that the organ is actually in a very poor state. A brief summary of its most significant functional problems is as follows:

- Pedals. Six notes are not working at all. Of these, two are due to mechanical breakages and the remainder due to electrical faults.
- Manuals. A number of notes on both manuals work erratically. This is due to electrical faults. In addition, there are several notes that are "sticking", or sounding when they should not do so. These are due to two different causes. Firstly, the keyboards themselves are damp and some of the keys are swollen, which means that they do not release easily.

Secondly, the “touch boxes” – that is the pressurised boxes in which the motion transferred by the pneumatic relay from the keys opens the pallets enabling air to go into the selected pipes and thus make the notes sound – are damp and mouldy, which means that air is leaking freely into some pipes.

- Several glue joints inside the Great soundboard have gone and many slides are loose.
- Rainwater has leaked through the roof and into the lower octaves on the left-hand side of the Great division, particularly the 8-foot Small Open Diapason and 4-foot Principal. Most open flue pipes have tuning sliders which are rusting badly.
- Several pipes from the Great Trumpet are damaged and leaning.
- The organ is very out of tune and I understand that it will not stay in tune. Apart from incidental damage to pipework this is mostly because, as noted above, the air intake for the bellows draws on air from outside the church.
- Leatherwork throughout the organ is perished. The dropper reservoir has been roughly repaired with a rag, the leather corners on the pipe reservoirs for both manuals are badly cracked and incidental leathering elsewhere is suffering from rot and mould. Again, this is probably largely due to cold, damp air being blown in from outside the church.
- A variety of carpentry issues: the wobbly organ bench is being supported by hymn books (uncomfortable for the organist and a possible safety issue), the music stand is loose and other parts of the console badly fitting. The whole area around the console is dark, damp, unpleasant and extremely cold. Inside the organ there is damp and potentially-rotting woodwork.

### **What can be done?**

In a number of churches in the diocese I have suggested that part of the organ (for instance, the Great manual) should be thoroughly repaired in order to provide a serviceable instrument in the medium term, along with the possibility of a full restoration at some future date if required. In the case of St James, however, this is not a reasonable proposition. In order to produce an instrument that would function even in the short to medium term it would be necessary to (a) re-site the blower mechanism, which in this case would entail replacing it as it is very large and designed for its outhouse (b) make good the church wall (c) replace the electro-pneumatic action to that manual with a solid-state system that was capable of expansion (d) re-leather a variety of components (e) solve the damp problems. This work taken together would be of such magnitude and cost (at a guess at least £50000-£60000) that I believe it unrealistic to even propose such a solution.

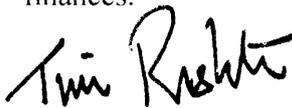
You have indicated that you would like the organ repairing and restoring to ensure stable and good performance in years to come. It is my considered opinion that the work involved would be so difficult and costly that the result would not be worth the outlay. Even if the organ were to function perfectly, it would remain an overly-large instrument that speaks into the choir rather than into the body of the church and as such is suited to the liturgical style of the Oxford movement rather than to the more congregational style of today.

I cannot see that the existing organ has any merit whatever or even that there are any parts of the existing organ that should be retained for re-use. My advice in this instance – advice that I have

never given to any church before – is to get a large skip and put the entire instrument in it, re-use the space that it has occupied as a prayer room or chapel for evening services, and install a smaller organ against the wall adjacent to the War memorial.

This weekend I had a message from a colleague in Holland that a fairly new, small, mechanical-action pipe organ by the well-known Dutch firm of A. Blank, is available and that it might be possible to buy it for as little as £14000 (well below the price one might have expected to pay). I have followed up this contact and requested more solid information, as well as asking whether it might be possible to reduce the price still further. The organ has only one manual, but would be ample to lead congregational singing and for concerts or any other use. I must stress that I have no personal knowledge of this instrument in particular – I have not played it before, nor have I been to look at it now – and it is therefore possible that the instrument has some fault or problem that is not immediately apparent. Given the reputation of its builder and given the simple design of the instrument, this is however unlikely. The cost for you would be £14000 or less to buy the organ, plus the cost of dismantling it, collecting it in Holland, transporting it here and re-erecting it in St James'. In other words, potentially somewhere around £16000 all told. Assuming that there is nothing wrong with the organ (and this is something that we could check in advance) I would imagine that this is an instrument that without significant work would give excellent service for a couple of hundred years and would be a real asset to the church. I have no financial or professional interest in this matter and would not be receiving any kind of commission or reward were you to buy it.

Whether or not you opt to follow up this possibility I strongly advise St James' to consider scrapping the present instrument and buying something more suited to its current needs and finances.



Tim Rishton  
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