



ROYAL
HOSPITAL
SCHOOL



A HISTORY OF THE GRAND ORGAN

In 1933, the Royal Mint produced only six or seven one penny coins, a decision taken due to the fact that so many had been produced in the years leading up to this, that quite simply no more were required. That decision makes this coin a real collector's item, and today, a good example would be worth up to £100,000. However, this would still not be enough to purchase another rare survival from that year, which is none other than the Grand Organ that resides in the simply cavernous chapel of the Royal Hospital School, Holbrook. Even if you possessed all six or seven coins, you would still be short by approximately £1.4 million, as the replacement value of this magnificent instrument is now in excess of £2,000,000 - such is the quality of materials used in its construction.

Special mention must be given at this early stage to the chapel in which the organ resides; in fact, I could write at great lengths about the whole school, such is its breath-taking situation overlooking the River Stour, but alas, space does not permit. The current 200 acre site occupied by the Royal Hospital School was gifted to the admiralty by Mr Gifford Sherman Reade in recognition of the Royal Navy protecting his tea ships during the First World War, and building work took place from 1933 to 1934. The chapel, while being large by any school chapel standards, with internal measurements of 220ft L x 64ft W x 62ft H, was rumoured to have originally been planned a third bigger again. The organ, again rumoured to have been an open cheque, is in fact still to this day incomplete by one stop; a pedal mixture was planned for the blank drawstop knob on the jamb.

The contract to build the organ was awarded to the world-renowned firm of William Hill and Son, and Norman and Beard Ltd at a cost of £7098. Some 43 years earlier the firm completed their magnum opus for Sydney Town Hall, one of only two organs in the world ever built with a full length 64ft stop. Job No. 2878 (you will find this number stamped all over the building frame) was always going to be grand in every sense of the word. From the thick ivory on the keys, which after 82 years of constant use still has decades of life left in it, to the four vast expression boxes of the Swell (on two levels), Choir and Solo divisions.

Unashamedly romantic, the organ has quite evidently been voiced to accompany the school singing, and while it can be arrestingly loud to the uninitiated, it can take the full resources of the instrument just to keep up - such is the gusto of the 'Holbrook Sound'.

With its seven to eight second reverberation time, being let loose on this instrument in an empty chapel can only be likened to letting a child loose in a sweet shop for the first time. Initially, draw full organ, play a chord, take your hands off and let those glorious sounds roll around the cavernous acoustic. Then, start exploring all the individual colours of this instrument - from the wonderful 16ft and 8ft strings, to the sparkling mutations on the Choir organ, including a Septieme at 11/7 pitch. You will also find this pitch in the Great Mixture, which has the unusual make up of 17.19.21.22, and can best be described as a marmite stop, love it or hate it. The Solo possesses, as you would expect, a mighty Tuba, but also a creamy smooth Orchestral Horn, both of which are on heavy pressure. On the flue soundboard you will find a beautiful Cor de Nuit, which when combined with the Unda Maris, produces the sound for which this acoustic was made. The Pedal Organ borrows a few stops from the manual departments, and, as is usual, has several extended ranks. The department is capped off by a huge Double

Open Wood 32', of which the bottom six notes are actually quinted, and a simply thunderous Double Ophicleide 32'. All of this sits behind the largest organ grill in Britain, possibly Europe, and hides extremely well the roaring beast that lies behind this cage.

Things have, however, not always been a bed of roses for the instrument. In 1983, disaster almost struck when a fire took hold and engulfed the Robson organ in the East end of the Chapel. Had it not been for the quick thinking of two pupils passing the chapel, it could have been a lot worse. As it was, the Robson organ was completely destroyed, and the entire chapel was blackened from the effects of smoke damage, including the inside of the Grand Organ. Because of this, the Grand Organ received only its second complete cleaning in its 50 year history to that point. The first had only taken place just six years earlier, when the school implemented a programme of work deemed necessary by failing leatherwork and electrical components. In 1984, a new two manual and pedal classically voiced instrument was built in the East end to replace the destroyed Robson organ. Again the contract was awarded to Hill, Norman and Beard. This instrument was itself cleaned in 2014, when the opportunity was taken to make certain improvements to maximise the egress of sound.

The second near disaster to befall the Grand Organ came in 1998 when, following a long sustained period of wet weather, the blowing chamber in the basement flooded. The water was not high enough to short the motors, and disastrously, water passed up through the wind trunking and into the 32ft Ophicleide. Inevitably, much damage occurred, and the whole Ophicleide wind chest was subsequently re-palleted, along with other adjacent chests, and all bellows releathered.

Much other work has taken place on the instrument over the years, and the school has had the foresight to recognise the importance of the organ - not only in fulfilling its accompanimental role in school singing, but as a teaching instrument, and world class recital instrument. A substantial amount of the instrument still runs off its original electro magnets, and the front Choir soundboard actions still have the original leather. None of the main slider soundboards have ever been overhauled, and the pipework continues to stand majestically. Most importantly though, it still retains its original specification. I don't think that even in the days of computer-aided design the instrument could have been laid out or built any better than it was in 1933. It is a true testament to the original builders that it still sounds, looks and works as well as it does.

So, what now for this Grand Old Lady? Well much of the same, I hope. It now has a grade one historic organ certificate from the British Institute of Organ Studies, and a new director of music, who, much like his predecessor, Peter Crompton, is keen for the organ to be heard and played by as wide an audience as possible. The School was awarded Accredited Institution status by the Royal College of Organists (RCO) in 2020 in recognition of its outstanding provision for organ tuition and are always happy to hear from potential organ students.

As for the current tuner and author of this article - well, he will be seventy in 2033, when the organ will celebrate its centenary. What a fitting anniversary, all being well, and perhaps one of them will be permitted to retire!

Andrew Stevens, *organ builder*

THE STOPS

GREAT ORGAN

Double Open Diapason 16'
Open Diapason 1 8'
Open Diapason 2 8'
Open Diapason 3 8'
Clarabella 8'
Octave 4'
Principal 4'
Wald Flute 4'
Twelfth 2 2/3'
Fifteenth 2'
Mixture IV
Contra Tromba 16'
Tromba 8'
Octave Tromba 4'

Swell to Great
Choir to Great
Solo to Great

SWELL ORGAN

Contra Viol 16'
Open Diapason 8'
Stopped Diapason 8'
Salicional 8'
Vox Angelica 8'
Gemshorn 4'
Lieblich Flute 4'
Nazard 2 2/3'
Fifteenth 2'
Mixture IV
Double Trumpet 16'
Trumpet 8'
Trompette 8'
Clarion 4'

Tremulant

Octave
Sub-Octave
Unison Off

Solo to Swell

CHOIR ORGAN

Double Dulciana 16'
Open Diapason 8'
Orchestral Flute 8'
Viole da Gamba 8'
Dulciana 8'
Muted Viol 8'
Spitz Flute 4'
Harmonic Flute 4'
Octave Quint 2 2/3
Tierce 1 3/5
Septième 1 1/7
Piccolo 2'
Oboe 8'

Tremulant

Octave
Sub-Octave
Unison Off

Swell to Choir
Solo to Choir

SOLO ORGAN

Harmonic Flute 8'
Cor de Nuit 8'
Viole 8'
Voix Celeste 8'
Unda Maris 8'
Concert Flute 4'
Orchestral Oboe 8'
Clarinet 8'
Orchestral Horn 8'
Tuba 8'

Tremulant

Octave
Sub-Octave
Unison Off

PEDAL ORGAN

Double Open Wood 32'
Open Wood 16'
Open Diapason 16'
Bourdon 16'
Violone 16'
Dulciana 16'
Octave 8'
Principal 8'
Bass Flute 8'
Ophicleide 32'
Ophicleide 16'
Trumpet 16'
Posaune 8'

Solo to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Choir to Pedal

