

RESTORATION OF ST ANDREW'S CHURCH ORGAN: HOW I BECAME A REED ORGAN 'EXPERT':

The story goes back 20 years to just after we had moved to Carlton. It was the end of the era of the 'Managers Only' marquee at the GEC Sports Day in Coventry. Free drinks, with strawberries and cream and all the accompaniments that went with a pleasant afternoon out. Well plied with gin and tonics, Diana and I decided to give the races a miss and go and visit an antiques warehouse we knew of west of Coventry. There an organ caught our eye, and we bought it there and then, to be restored 'some time' in the future. The organ was pushed under the stairs and there it languished for over 15 years – interesting to look at but rather sorry in terms of performance.

When I eventually started work on it early in 2003, I had no idea what type of organ it was, how it worked or anything. From the Internet, we found out that it was an American reed organ and there is actually something of a cult following in America. Even more surprisingly, there is a cottage industry in North Yorkshire that supplies spare parts, of which replacement reeds are particularly useful. From the Leicester central library, I borrowed the one dusty book on reed organs, 'The History of the Harmonium and American Reed Organ'. This was really useful in describing the principles of the organ and enabled me to work out how the keys and stops should all be interconnected.

A marvellous aspect of these organs is that they are really maintainable systems – just the opposite of the non-maintainable throwaway equipment of today. So I found all that I needed was hardwood, wire, felt, glue and a never-ending variety of different screws. This was of course after litres and litres of woodworm killer and wood preservative had been applied. The exception to the simple maintainability is the metal reeds, which would be difficult to manufacture without industrial methods and hence the importance of the North Yorkshire operation.

It took me about six weeks to get our organ back together again, and most satisfyingly, I restored it to 100% working condition. During the disassembly I had discovered that the basic mechanism of the organ is mounted as a sub-assembly on what is called the soundboard. This sub-assembly is screwed onto the bellows box and can be removed as a single unit, making repair and maintenance a much simpler operation.

By an amazing coincidence, the organ in Carlton church is exactly the same type as our own organ. So all my experience was brought to bear on this organ and I was able to disassemble it and find out what was wrong in a few days. After applying even more litres of woodworm killer and

wood preservative, it took me about a month to repair. Only one reed was faulty and needed to be replaced. Most of the restoration entailed replacing all the wooden coupling rods, repairing springs and cleaning the reeds. The reeds, particularly the high note, small ones, are very susceptible to dust which can stop the reed vibrating.

Following a spruce up of the cabinet, the organ was restored to its rightful status and condition – 100% working and ready for its inaugural playing by Peter Rich at Communion on Easter Sunday.

WORKING PRINCIPLES OF THE CARLTON CHURCH ORGAN.

The organ can be best visualised as a giant mouth organ, where sound is produced by vibrating metal reeds. The bellows unit pumped by the organist's feet produces air. Mounted on top of the bellows is the soundboard, which acts as both an air seal and a resonance board, amplifying the sound produced by the reeds when the air is sucked through them.

In the organ's closed position, when no reeds play, the air is prevented from getting to the reeds by two independent mechanisms, the keyboard valves and the stops. When a key is pressed, this opens a simple valve on the soundboard, allowing air to be sucked through the reed and the note to be played. At the same time, air can be restrained from entering the reeds by some of the stops. These stops operate sealed flaps, which cover sections of the reed registers. When the stop is opened, this lifts a flap and allows air into the corresponding section of the register.

In total, there are 107 reeds in the organ, separated into three registers: the main register covering five octaves plus one note, a separate register for the Vox Angelica – or 'voice of the angels' stop - covering almost three treble octaves, and a sub-bass register, covering an extra low bass octave. More information on the stops and how to use them is displayed on an information sheet placed on the front of the organ in the church.

HISTORY OF THE ORGAN:

The organ was manufactured by the 'Dominion Organ and Piano Company' located in Bowmanville, Ontario, Canada. From the Internet again, I found out that Bowmanville has a museum with an active interest in its Dominion Organ heritage. I have been in contact with the museum and the curator has sent me some interesting information, including that the company took the name Dominion Organ and Piano Company in 1879, much earlier than I had previously thought from information in 'The History of the Harmonium and American Reed Organ'.

Apparently detailed information on serial numbers was lost in a fire in the 1930's. However, the information sent by the museum states that the serial number 6500 was issued in 1890. This is of great interest because the serial number of the Carlton church organ is 1053 – a number which is marked on both the back panel and the soundboard. Taken together with the start date of the company name, this indicates that the organ might be dated to the early 1880's.

The Dominion Company itself went bankrupt in 1936. In its heyday, pianos and organs were sold all over the British Empire and Europe and by 1910, 80,000 instruments had been produced – and we have two of them to this day in Carlton!

Larry Stagg Carlton Grange



The photograph shows the Carlton heavy gang accompanying the restored organ back to the church in the luxurious surroundings of Rob Edmunds' farm trailer. Featuring Bill Sharp, Murray Lockwood, David & Richard Swallow and Larry Stagg.