

Historic organ restorations: are they the simplest or most difficult restorations of all?

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Perhaps I should begin by explaining the title of this paper: "Historic Organ Restorations, are they the simplest or most difficult restorations of all"? In reality, it is probably the simplest task for the professional organbuilder to restore a quality built pipe organ that has retained all of its original specifications. The difficulties lie when the specifications have been altered by stylistic changes over the years and hard decisions have to be made on reversing or retaining these changes. Some organists become very attached to their balanced swell pedal and do not care to return to the old trigger swell arrangement. They quite like the extra 2' stop on the choir division, and its proposed deletion based on historical grounds appears to be a loss rather than a gain. As Mark Fisher has already explained earlier today, the reconstruction of parts that have been removed or altered drastically requires considerable patience in research and execution. "It is a most difficult task".

I commenced my apprenticeship with Peter Conacher and Company of Huddersfield in 1952 and, after serving two years in the various organbuilding workshops, I was appointed to the voicing department. At that time the majority of Conachers' new work consisted of electro-pneumatic extension organs. These were usually located in fully enclosed chambers and invariably had detached consoles at varying distances from the pipework. Wind pressures were between 5" and 10" and the supply would be by numerous single-rise sprung bellows. Rebuilding of mechanical or pneumatic organs with electric actions was a major part of the yearly workload. Restoration work was a very minor activity, but, as I remember, it always seemed to involve some updating and modernisation. Tuning slides would be added to all 19th century instruments and the organ would be retuned to modern pitch. The trigger swell pedal would invariably be replaced by a balanced pedal and the straight pedal board replaced by a modern concave and radiating board. The money was regarded as being well spent with these improvements.

During my apprenticeship I had many opportunities to inspect and play some fine instruments in and around the north of England, but nothing had quite prepared me for my first visit to St Bartholomew's Church, Armley and the wonderful Schulze organ. The sound of the great chorus in that resonant building was an absolute inspiration and fired me with great ambition.

In 1957 I was appointed as Conachers' representative to Dublin and became acquainted for the first time with the Irish organbuilding scene, Telford and Telford of Dublin and Magahy of Cork being the best represented. In 1959 Conachers bought the Magahy business and I was sent to Cork as their manager. Although I did not realise it at the time, this was the commencement of my involvement with the restoration of historic organs. The facts were that southern Ireland in the late '50s and early '60s did not have much interest in spending money on pipe organs. The preservation of the existing organs was only encouraged if it was to cost much less than its replacement by an electronic instrument. Costs were minimised as much as possible, cleaning and repair became the order of the day and all work was done on site. These were major changes for an organbuilder who was used to having the full technological backing of staff and equipment at head office.

These basic restorations kept us busy and involved until I saw an advert for a representative position in Australia for Hill, Norman & Beard. I joined H.N. & B. in 1963 on a five-year contract and was sent

to Sydney when I first met up with their Sydney manager, Ted Pitchford. The organ building scene in Australia was very similar to the English scene. New organs were being built with either direct electric or electro-pneumatic actions, extension and duplexing being a regular feature. There was much rebuilding of mechanical and pneumatic organs with electric action, often with extended pedal divisions and extra reed choruses. Restoration work was fairly basic, with the usual additions of tuning slides, balanced swell pedal and tonal changes as considered necessary for the completion of the specification (and I say completion advisedly). Of course in the '60s there were very few consultants in the organbuilding business. Most alterations would be made either at the request of the organist with the agreement of the organbuilder, or with the advice of the organbuilder and the agreement of the organist. Many of us are probably a little embarrassed at some of the decisions we made at that time.

In 1969, Ted Pitchford and myself left H.N. & B. to form our own partnership. The first instrument to be restored under our joint names was the two manual and pedal Hill organ built in 1882 for the Congregational church in Newtown. This church had been redundant for some time and the organ had been vandalised. All the metal pipework had been removed with the exception of the facade pipes and the organ was covered in pigeon dirt. Fortunately the soundboards and action work were still intact, so the instrument was dismantled and subsequently sold to St Edmund's Anglican Church at Pagewood. New metal pipework was ordered from the English firm of Rogers Ltd to match the original great organ and some existing secondhand Walcker pipework was used to replace the missing swell pipework, along with a new trumpet stop from Palmer & Sons. Some basic restoration work was carried out on the manual actions, the pedal action was converted to direct electric and the 16' bourdon extended to 8' and 4'. The double rise bellows was repaired, gilding of the facade pipes and a new blower completed the project. The total cost was \$6244.00. Looking back 25 years ago I feel guilty that we did not re-leather the bellows or rebush the action and even more guilty for converting the mechanical pedal action to electric and for allowing the facade pipes to be gilded. These decisions come back to haunt you at a later date.

At the beginning of the '70s the restoration and preservation of old organs had a very low profile. There were no particular guidelines and most work was done on a needs only basis. Churches generally were only interested in spending the minimum amount of money necessary to keep the organ operational, but things were beginning to change. The decision to restore the Sydney Town Hall organ with its original action was a great boost to the industry. The costs involved were significant and, along with the installation of the new Beckerath organ at the University and the commencement of work on the new Sharp organ at the Sydney Opera House, the pipe organ scene became more busy and active. Suddenly the expenditure of reasonable amounts of money on restoration of an existing organ seemed justified when considered against the costs of buying a new one. Enquiries became more frequent with regard to the possibilities of purchasing good secondhand mechanical action redundant organs, and our first contract for importation of an organ from the U.K. came from St Paul's Anglican Church at Kogarah. The instrument was a two manual and pedal Conacher with nine speaking stops and was built for a Sunday School at Holthead, near Huddersfield in 1904. The installation of this organ was deemed to be successful and we have subsequently imported two more Conacher instruments, two Gray & Davisons and a lovely 1857 Bishop & Starr organ which is now in All Saints' Church, Ainslie in the Australian Capital Territory.

In 1975 we had the opportunity to restore the 1884 Hill organ in St Andrew's Scots Church, Rose Bay. We had long regarded this beautiful two manual and pedal mechanical organ of 18 speaking stops as one of the best church organs in Sydney. I remember how we had presented our specification of work covering the cleaning, overhaul and restoration of the organ and how threatened we felt when we were informed that the church had appointed a consultant. This was the first occasion that we had experienced what we felt at the time to be interference. However, to our relief, the consultant's details of work were basically the same as ours, although we were cautioned to ensure complete freedom and absence of friction in the action at all times.

There is no doubt that the establishment of the Organ Historical Trust of Australia in 1977 brought a wider awareness of the value of our organ heritage and the financial assistance that was made available through the Heritage Council of NSW encouraged many churches to consider raising the necessary moneys to restore their organs. The publication of The Gazetteer of Pipe Organs in Australia and the wonderful book by Graeme Rushworth, 'Historic Organs of NSW' have encouraged further interest in our organ heritage and these publications have become invaluable to the organbuilder.

The '80s was a wonderful period for the organ restorer. The lead up to the bicentennial celebrations focused attention on the cultural and heritage aspects of the nation, and the historic organs were among the beneficiaries. This was also the centenary decade for some of the finest local and imported 19th century instruments and many major restorations were carried out at this time. Now in the '90s, we can say that the guidelines for the full scale restoration of historic organs are firmly in place. Of course, each restoration requires its own specification of detail and this may vary to some small degree between different restorers and/or consultants, but generally the original wind

supply system will be retained, restored and reconstructed. This will most often include the releathering of the double-rise bellows and concussions and the repair and remaking of the wooden trunking. Where double-rise bellows have been cut down to single-rise, a new floating frame will be reconstructed to provide authentic wind response. If the hand pumping lever and feeder bellows are still intact, they will be retained and restored to working order.

Original soundboards and windchests will be checked for runnings and excessive murmurings. If full restoration is deemed necessary, the work will include the sealing of all table splits, the screwing of the table to the note channel grid, the flooding of the channels with hot animal glue and the replaning of the tables, slides and upperboards. Note, pallets will normally be releathered and refelted at this time. Corroded iron pallet guide pins will usually be replaced with phosphor bronze or brass.

For restoration of mechanical actions, all trackers, rollerboards, backfalls and square actions will be completely dismantled. Trackers will be checked for condition and, if badly worn or split, they will be replaced with identical straight grained timber following the individual shape and style of the original. Steel regulating wires will be replaced by phosphor bronze wires and all new or existing tracker wires will be rebound with cotton and sealed. New leather regulating buttons and cloths will be fitted throughout. Rollerboard arms, studs and metal square bushings will be checked and replaced with leather or with bushing cloth, depending on the original builder's design. Worn wooden squares and backfall centres will be rebushed with bushing cloth or, if unbushed originally, the wear will be taken up by using larger gauge wires. All wires will be checked for freedom in registers and the mechanism regulated for correct balance. Obviously, it is most important to see that no friction is introduced into the action. However, it is equally important - and in our opinion the restorer's duty - to repair worn mechanisms so that there is no looseness or false play in the action.

All pipework will be removed for thorough cleaning and all metal pipes will be rounded out on a series of metal and wooden mandrels. Damaged pipes will be repaired and the speech reset. Existing cone tuned pipework will be retained. Any old tuning slides will be removed and the pipes will be lengthened to their original pitch using the same metal composition. All wooden pipes will be cleaned and all splits repaired. All stoppers will be releathered and powdered. Reeds will be taken apart for individual cleaning and the tongues and shallots burnished on a fine emery block. Recurving of the tongues will be carried out for any corrections of speech during the regulation work.

Manual keyboards will have their existing ivory or celluloid key facings retained and cleaned if in good condition. For badly worn facings, replacement with grained celluloid is acceptable, provided that the original profile and thickness is retained. Original stop ivories are retained, recut and reinked. Any missing labels can be replaced by secondhand ivory if available. Mammoth ivory is now available from Germany without import restrictions.

An original parallel pedalboard will always be retained and the worn pedals refaced with matching timber. However, where an unoriginal, say concave and radiating board, has been fitted, there is still some question as to the retention

or replacement of this item, usually because of cost factors. I am sure the time will come when any unoriginal pedalboard will automatically be replaced. Likewise original trigger swell pedals will always be retained, but again, there is still some question regarding unoriginal balanced pedals. If they are well designed and are working efficiently, they have often been retained. If inefficient, then their replacement by the original style mechanism is necessary.

Original casework will be retained and repaired. If the polish or varnish is in poor condition, it will be completely stripped and repolished or relacquered. Original stencilling on casepipes will be retained and if in poor condition, will be repainted. This intricate and skilled work is best carried out by a signwriter. If the stencilling has been overpainted in the past years, it is a relatively straight forward task to strip away the old paint in order to identify the original patterns and colours.

Of course, all of the aforementioned is based on the presumption that sufficient moneys are available and there are many occasions when a historic restoration contract will need to be carried out in sections and over a period of years.

There has been a very positive change of attitude to historic organ restoration work over the past 40 years. The times are past when this work was only carried out as a last resort if one could not afford to rebuild and modernise the instrument. Curators of historic organs now appreciate their value as a heritage item and organists have learned to accept and indeed appreciate their integrity as a musical instrument.

As for the organ restorer, on reflection I would say that the most important attributes for the good restorer would be infinite patience and the desire to give full attention to detail. This is made much easier by sympathetic consideration from our consultants and organists, and if there were no deadlines from churches and various authorities, organbuilding could be almost stress free.