

Balancing act

Two recent Harrison & Harrison reconstructions of organs in Exeter Cathedral and the Freemasons' Hall, London, set **Ian Bell** weighing up the pros and cons of restoration work

Perhaps because, in Britain, the romantic organ and its associated mechanisms are rarely yet seen as being old enough to deserve the consideration given to 'real' historic organs, we have differed from some of our colleagues in the

USA in settling upon the degree of respect that we should bring to bear upon their treatment. This uncertainty is not helped by the extent to which so many of these instruments have been unsympathetically altered, and altered again. Why stop now?

For the recent reconstruction by Harrison & Harrison at Exeter Cathedral, treating what existed with a light and respectful touch was not, at first sight, a tough proposition to argue. It was already musically cohesive and attractive, and visually enticing, though these assets had certainly found themselves under threat a few decades ago. The image of quaint antiquity does not go too deep. The casework is among our oldest, made originally for an organ by John Loosemore in 1665, but its trademark tin display pipes – so unusual in an old English case – are actually replacements installed new by Henry Speechly in 1876, before which the façade followed the familiar gold-leafed style. The organ inside is even less ancient, having been provided by Henry Willis in 1891. Mechanically entirely new, the instrument retained only the façade pipes and 32ft Violone basses from Speechly's work of the 1870s, and for nostalgia's sake a couple of octaves of treble diapason pipes of 18th-century origin. Otherwise the four-manual 57-stop scheme fell squarely into the Willis house style of the time, and benefited from the robust design of tubular-pneumatic action that Willis had perfected in 1889.

This instrument served well until the mid-1920s by which time, forgivably, the mechanism was beginning to creak. Arthur Harrison was approached and expressed the view that it was wearing out rapidly, was much too tightly packed in, and should be radically replanned with some sections transferred to adjacent arches. After several years of argument, a rebuild by Harrison was eventually commissioned, the position, layout and size remaining exactly as before. That *sine qua non* of the time – a



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◀ The reconstructed organ in Exeter Cathedral

new Harrison console – featured of course, but behind that gloss very little changed, except for the incorporation of electro-pneumatic action. The Willis soundboards, layout and pipework broadly remained, and there was some revoicing including the reeds, which nevertheless remained on their earlier wind-pressures. No Trombas, no Harmonics, nor any of the other goodies with which Harrison usually refined what he found – and no enlargement, for which there was simply no space.

The organ was seriously damaged during a bombing attack on the Cathedral in 1942, and after post-war repairs soldiered on reliably until 1965, when – as with so many projects of that time – the necessary refurbishment of the mechanism was grasped eagerly by those involved, as being an opportunity for much more exciting reworking of the tonal scheme. The 1960s seemed at the time the dawn of a brave new world, and Harrison's then tonal director, Kenneth James, was not someone to hesitate long over the ethics of perking up some tired old pipes. On paper this did not amount to very much – the usual sprinkling of mutations replaced gentle stops on the Choir, and the mixtures all edged upwards in pitch. Reeds were further revoiced, some with new shallots, and one of the Great flutes gave way to a pert new Sharp Mixture. Intriguingly, when all was finished it was noted admiringly in print that the pipework had become 'open-tipped' and 'un-nicked', though there is now no evidence of how this minor miracle might have been achieved.

What has happened since, at Exeter as elsewhere, is that sanity has prevailed and the chance has quietly been taken by the organ builders at subsequent cleaning operations to nudge the startled components of the tonal structure back towards their comfort zone, retaining a certain lightness of quality, but ensuring that no single stop is allowed to make an unseemly fuss all on its own. The recently completed major reconstruction has allowed head voicer Andrew Scott to complete this rehabilitation, and everything once more sits in well-blended harmony – lively, but relaxed. This is not a noisy organ: the addition 14 years ago of a modest diapason chorus in the nave Minstrel Gallery was both necessary and well-judged, and removed any need to



▲ Harrison's site team, flanked by chairman Mark Venning (l) and managing director Chris Batchelor (r)



▲ The 1933 Exeter console, brought up to date

shout louder from the screen. Equally tastefully managed, and tidily planned, was the addition in 2002 of a remarkably civilised half-length 32ft reed, running down seamlessly from the sturdy Trombone with no hint whatever of its stunted proportions.

All of this has now been set in the context of a complete mechanical renewal – framework, soundboards, swell boxes, wind supply, indeed everything apart from the console, which was brought up to expectations a few years ago, as the first stage of this major work. All of this had to be planned with the organ still assembled, and serious

congratulations must go to the senior designer at Durham, John Richardson, for his achievements here. It all works beautifully, and the action draws no attention to itself, which is surely how it should be.

My own doubts are merely nit-picking. This is not the first recent reconstruction where Harrison & Harrison have chosen to renew everything except the pipes, and more are planned, not least at King's College, Cambridge, next year. To climb inside the organ – now gleaming, polished, organised, and accessible – is both impressive and, for me at any rate, faintly



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▲ Grand Temple restoration in progress: (top row) regilding the 1933 cases; (bottom row) head voicer Andrew Scott at work; assembling and decorating the new casework

unsettling. Once inside, it no longer looks or feels like an organ that has any history, other than in the older pipes. The past, including any atmosphere of Willis, has been wiped clean. I realise that this sounds unappreciative, but it is really just a question. Does it matter? Would some dark paint rather than polish, or traditional stays for the old reeds instead of racks, be worthwhile, or just silly? Food for thought.

Much stricter, in conservationist terms, was the firm's concurrent restoration of a very different Willis, in the Grand Temple of

the Freemasons' Hall in London. Completed in 1933 as the Masonic Peace Memorial commemorating the 3,500 Freemasons killed in the Great War, this monolithic art deco building houses 25 Lodge rooms, of which the Grand Temple, seating 1,720, is the stunning centrepiece, known (I am told) throughout the international world of Freemasonry. The Portland stone is richly embellished in mosaic, marble and gold leaf; and gold also entirely covers the twin cases of the 44-stop three-manual organ which was among the last significant and entirely

new organs produced under the direction of Henry Willis III, himself a proud Freemason.

Packed very tightly into twin tapering chambers – which have every appearance of being an afterthought as far as accommodating an organ was concerned – it unhelpfully projects its sound eastwards, away from those who need to hear it, and into deliberately absorbent acoustics designed to have no reverberation. In his house magazine *The Rotunda*, Willis made clear his despair at the task with which he was faced, while adding that by means of

'special treatment' the difficulties had been dealt with. The special treatment included raising the wind-pressures on site, to unprecedented levels for a Willis organ of this size, including the entire Swell being increased to 300mm pressure, and the Great and Pedal reed rank to 450mm. It is clear that the blowing plant had to be modified at a late stage to handle this, but the result did justify the means, in the sense that the organ does deliver a very solid punch – albeit one without a lot of clarity.

This was, however, 1933 and the scene is set by the fact that the Great Organ has two 16ft stops and three unison diapasons, but only a solitary Fifteenth as upperwork; and the Swell possesses the only Mixture, of very narrow scale and based on 2ft. The tutti out in the silent building certainly has plenty of rotund bluster, but little to cut through a large body of singers.

The organ was part of the generation of instruments that came after the visits to the USA – and particularly to Ernest Skinner – that Willis made in the 1920s, from which he brought back a number of designs that were to appear in his subsequent achievements. The pipework all stands on pitman soundboards (previously unknown here, but perfect for this building), fed by vertical Skinner-style regulators; the console, with its capture system and general pistons, had the couplers operated by rocking tablets on a 'coupler rail' above the top keyboard. All of

these things were curiosities in the UK when Willis brought them back, and many, it must be said, did not catch on and remain rarities. What better reason to preserve them?

The organ remained entirely unchanged, with all its mechanisms still in use and unaltered, for 80 years – a notable achievement for any electric action. The policy behind the present restoration, readily pursued by Harrison & Harrison, has been one of cautious and pragmatic conservation – up to a point. Inside the chambers everything has been fully restored and retains exactly the original style, as left on the day it was made. The beautiful mahogany console, again, perfectly retains its outward appearance, fixtures and fittings. The cases and their pipes have been freshly gilded; the blowing plant completely stripped down and restored as new. None of the past atmosphere has been lost, and it looks – and sounds – exactly as it did, but without the dirt and bruises.

That policy paused when it came to the electric components: the switching and combination systems. Storage of piston settings for several players was a basic request, as was the possibility of the organ being occasionally 'played back' by tour guides to the increasing numbers of visitors that the building is attracting. Yes, ignoring these goodies the original equipment could have been restored, but only with some risks. This organ needs to work reliably

without hesitation, and often with no chance of a prior rehearsal, under the hands of numerous players who are neither all primarily organists nor primed to cope with the occasional quirks of vintage machinery.

Furthermore, the electrical systems did have to handle some additions. Entirely separate from the Willis organ, and mounted in a new, perfectly matched case, placed centrally on the east wall, is a new section speaking directly along the main axis of the room and formed of an unforced diapason chorus plus trumpet and, by request, a new Grand Tuba – a very commanding voice indeed. So we have the clarity and dash of theatre that the surroundings invite, all without interfering in any way with the sound and construction of the original instrument. A reasonable compromise, or a betrayal? Certainly more food for thought. ■

The inaugural concert on the restored Freemasons' Hall organ will be given by Thomas Trotter at 7pm on 30 September; open to the public.

For the past 20 years Ian Bell has worked full-time as a professional organ consultant, following 33 years in organ building. Projects where his advice has been commissioned include the Royal Albert Hall, St Paul's Cathedral, London, Washington National Cathedral and Auckland Town Hall, NZ.

▼ The Grand Temple in the 1980s

