

PIPES ARE CALLING

After a £2m restoration, some long-silenced organ pipes in York Minster are set to play once more. Specialists have begun reinstalling the elaborately decorated pipes, which date from the 1800s but have not played a note since 1903, into the huge instrument.

PICTURE: JAMES HARDISTY.

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Pipes play for first time in century

Minster's organ set to return to working order after two-year restoration by specialist firm costing £2m

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THE BEAUTIFULLY painted decorative pipes of York Minster's organ may have been a visual treat, but they have remained silent for more than a century.

However, after an extensive renovation, they are set to play once more.

Specialist restoration experts have now begun reinstalling the pipes, which date from the 1800s but have not played a note since 1903, into the organ's case.

Planning for the restoration of the huge instrument, one of the largest in the country and including 5,403 pipes, has taken years.

With just one restorer capable of the £2m job – Harrison and Harrison in Durham – and the specialists there already juggling huge workloads, the Minster's staff knew the once-in-a-century job was a long-term commitment.

Contracts were signed in February 2017, the organ, which was still playing before the restoration but at a lower sound quality, was removed in October 2018, and the painstaking job of cleaning, repairing and replacing parts began.

Parts of the organ began arriving back in York at the end of last year, and the final rebuild is expected to be finished by the end of next month, ready for the scaffolding to be removed.

"Then, in November, the voicing period – or the tuning – can begin," Robert Sharpe, the Minster's director of music, said. "Part of the organ will be able to be played in December, but it

won't be completely ready until early next year – hopefully in time for Easter."

Having the organ back and working will be both a relief and a delight for Mr Sharpe and his assistant director, Ben Morris, who both play the organ in services, especially with its newly-improved sound quality.

"When you come to the Minster for big occasions, where there are 1,000 or more people here, the sound quality will be noticeably different," Mr Sharpe said. "We are both very much looking forward to playing it once again. It's when you play an instrument of this scale in the Minster that the magic happens.

"Organ music has been at the heart of worship at York Minster for nearly 1,000 years and we hope this project will allow us to continue that tradition."

The decorative pipes that have been returned to the Minster this week are some of the oldest surviving pipes in the organ dating from 1832, when a new instrument was built following an arson attack in the Quire in 1829 which destroyed the previous instrument.

Silent since 1903, when the last overhaul took place, the majority have now been brought back into use. However, during

the work, it was found that about 30 of the original case pipes were beyond repair and they have been replaced, with the originals auctioned last autumn to help raise funds for the project.

The remaining originals were cleaned and repainted last year, when the new pipes were decorated to match the originals.

Scale of task

THE HUGE restoration project has also included replacing York Minster organ's mechanism as well as cleaning and overhauling the instrument.

A new music library has also been created underneath the organ, inside the screen which separates the cathedral's Quire from its Nave. Director of Music Robert Sharpe said he was delighted to see "all the amazing craftsmanship which has gone into refurbishing the organ coming together".

“When you play an instrument of this scale, the magic happens.”



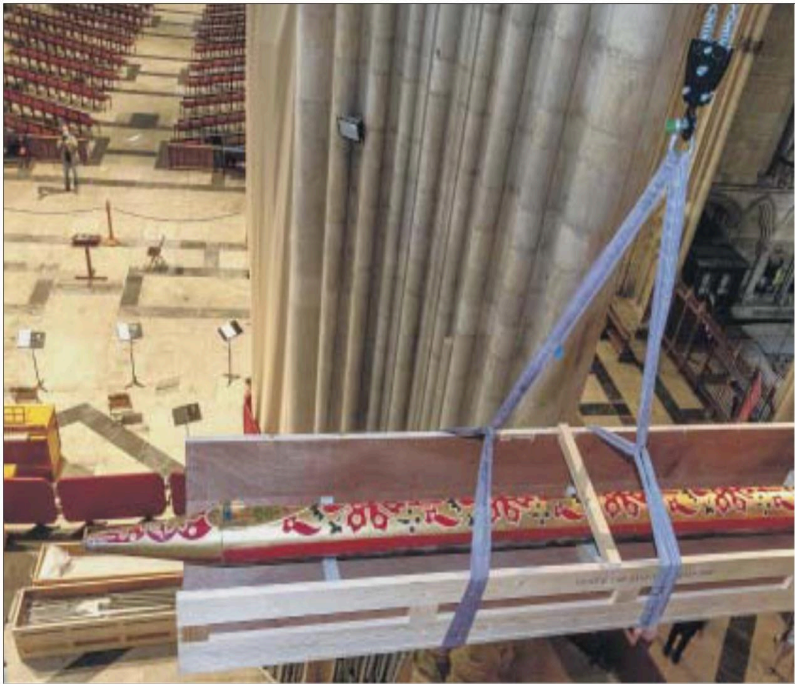
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PULLING OUT THE STOPS: Specialist organ builders Harrison and Harrison return some of the recently restored case pipes, along with the more decorative pipes, dating from the 1800s, to York Minster's Grand Organ.

PICTURES: JAMES HARDISTY





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COMMENT

Organ retention...
The true value of craftsmanship

THE EXTENT to which all the stops are being pulled out to restore York Minster's Grand Organ is testament to the level of craftsmanship that still exists.

Work which is integral to the repair and restoration of ancient buildings so they can continue to be cherished and celebrated, such specialist skills are priceless and their importance to the fabric of the nation should not be downplayed.

Without such craftspeople, and their willingness to train younger

people so skills pass from one generation to the next, Britain's iconic attractions would be much diminished.

And as the next phase of work begins to restore the organ's pipes at the Minster which date back to 1832, it's likely to be completed by spring of 2021. By then, let's hope York – and the rest of the country – is in a position to return to Yorkshire's greatest landmark and hear the organ played with the pomp and panache that is associated with the Minster.

Now that will be cause for genuine celebration.