

The Organ in St. Thomas's Church Newport, Fife

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AN account of a very large organ is almost bound to be interesting to readers of this periodical, even if it is not particularly well written; the same may be said of a description of what may be called an historic or an experimental instrument. It is rather a different matter when neither of these factors obtains.

This article deals with an organ of very modest size, built within this present half-century and situated somewhat off the beaten track of organ-lovers' pilgrimages. Yet if the written word be sufficiently potent to evoke the faintest simulacrum of a tonal masterpiece, it will not fail of its effect.

One word of encouragement may be spoken to those who hesitate on the threshold: this organ came from the hands of Willis.

The Parish Church of St. Thomas, Newport, Fife, is a modern cruciform building of modest size but fine proportions, overlooking the beautiful estuary of the Tay a mile or two eastward of the Tay Bridge. Newport itself is a burgh of between three and four thousand inhabitants, a quiet and pleasant "dormitory" for Dundee's more fortunate workers. Its growth is modern, as is shown by the fact that St. Thomas's Church itself dates only from the seventies of last century, when it was erected as a chapel of ease under Forgan, the rural parish church three miles south of Newport. It was fortunate for Newport and for St. Thomas's (subsequently raised to independent status as a parish *quoad sacra*), that the Rev. Dr. Thomas Fraser should have ministered there for an entire lifetime, from his ordination in 1871 to his death in 1913. Dr. Fraser was one of the leading members of the Church Service Society (founded in 1865 to "study the liturgies—ancient and modern—of the Christian Church, with a view to the preparation and publication of forms of Prayer for Public Worship, and services for the Administration of the Sacraments, the Celebration of Marriage, the Burial of the Dead, etc."), and we are, therefore, not surprised to find him lending his powerful support to those who stressed the importance of acquiring an organ for the new church.

The organ question appears to have been raised first by Mr. W. J. Pac, who then presided at the harmonium, on the 2nd of July, 1896. Although his plea evoked considerable sympathy, it was discouraged in view of the heavy financial burden then about to be laid upon the congregation in connection with the erection of a manse; the acquisition of an organ instead of a manse was held to be "inimical to the best and most permanent interests of the Church" (July, 6th, 1896).

Not even the manse was at once forthcoming, however, and in 1900 the introduction of an organ and the erection of a manse were conjoined in a proposal laid before a joint meeting of the Kirk Session and Managers on March 22nd. At this point, Dr. Fraser's whole-hearted devotion to the enrichment of St. Thomas's Church led him to propose a solution in which his personal interests were nobly disregarded; he stated that for his own part he was "quite agreeable to see the manse postponed if there should be any difficulty in carrying out the whole scheme (extension of church and procuring of organ)". Whether this gesture had a powerful effect upon liberality or not cannot definitely be stated, but at all events we find that matters had progressed considerably eighteen months later (Dec. 6th, 1901), when "Dr. Fraser submitted correspondence which he had had with Messrs. Henry Willis and Son regarding an organ for Newport Parish Church, and after consideration it was resolved to recommend to the General Committee that powers be given to the Organ Committee to enter into further negotiations with Messrs. Willis as to procuring an organ at a cost of £600 or thereby".

On March 13th, 1902, "Dr. Fraser reported as to the contracts made with Messrs. Willis for their supplying an organ, and with Messrs. Melvin, Glasgow, for their supplying a water engine. The contracts made were approved of".

The committee were scrupulous in matters of detail ("o, si sic omnes!"), for they took good care to consult Messrs. Willis on the question of wood-lining the stone walls of the organ chamber, boarding up the existing windows and positioning the heating pipes. (Not twelve miles away, a three-manual "Father Willis" was very effectively ruined by neglect of those very details—but that is another story!). On November 27th, 1902, it was further "resolved that Messrs. Willis should be asked to supply a (Stand-by) Hand Blower and that the Floor over the Engine Pit should be supported from beneath, having in view the great weight upon it.—Mr. Hyslop to supply a moveable Screen to be placed in the Arch in front of the Organist's seat, and to have a step of wood placed at the platform on which the stool stands" (a most necessary addition, be it said, if the organist was not to be perpetually reflecting upon the manner of Eli's demise), "also to provide a Mirror for the organist".

The happy outcome was recorded on December 10th, 1902: "Submitted to the meeting, (1) Account to Messrs. Henry Willis and Sons for Organ, including Organist's Stool and Hand Blower, amounting to £601/1/6, and (2) Account to Messrs. T. Melvin and Sons for Organ Engine, amounting to £37/10/-". At the same meeting, thanks were, very fittingly, recorded to the Dundee, Perth and London Shipping Company "for having carried the Organ material from London free of charge".*

Dr. Fraser had no monopoly of generous gestures. On January 19th, 1903, there was a proposal to increase the salary of Mr. Pac, the organist, "now that an Organ had been introduced," but Mr. Pac desired that "instead of such increase being made, a paid Tenor should be appointed at a sufficient salary". This was apparently done.

* We cordially commend this idea to British Railways.

The ultimate total cost of the instrument and all its appurtenances was £651/13/3, of which £250 was presently defrayed by that munificent Scot, Andrew Carnegie.

By November of 1903, the tuning and supervision had been entrusted to Mr. John R. Miller, organ-builder, of Dundee. Mr. Miller was assiduous in this work, and at once suggested "that during the winter months a slow fire should be kept on continuously in the church for the benefit of the Organ". This was immediately approved and the Church Officer paid extra accordingly.

On April 25th, 1906, a salaried bass leader was added to the choir. On November 29th, 1907, Messrs. Willis offered to insert an additional stop at £100. What this stop was is not recorded, but it apparently was inserted, and a consideration of the stop-jams and the appearance of the draw-stop shanks inclines one to the supposition that it was the *vox angelica*, which appears, rather unusually, on the great.

The only alteration made to the organ since 1907 or 1908 has been the addition of two stops (*violone* and *violincello*), to the pedal department. This came about in the mid-thirties as a result of a specific legacy. Otherwise, the instrument is as it was conceived; the tracker action is unaltered, the hydraulic blower still operates and the trigger swell-pedal continues to alarm the visiting player.

Heard from the street outside the church, this organ has lured many a musician inside. Heard, seen and touched, it kindles the imagination. There are many things which it is not, but there is one thing which it is, effortlessly, almost arrogantly—an aristocrat.

SPECIFICATION :

GREAT		SWELL	
1. Open diapason	8	8. Open diapason	8
2. Dulciana	8	9. Salicional	8
3. Claribel flute	8	10. Lieblich gedacht	8
4. Principal	4	11. Gemshorn	4
5. Flûte harmonique	4	12. Flageolet	2
6. Fifteenth	2	13. Cornopean	8
7. Vox angelica (TC)	8	14. Clarinet	8
		15. Tremulant—(pistons)	
PEDAL		COUPLERS	
16. Bourdon	16	20. Great to pedal	
17. Open diapason	16	21. Swell to pedal	
18. Violone	16	22. Swell to great	
19. Violincello (sic)	8	6 composition pedals	
		Trigger swell pedal	

Manual compass: CC to G

Pedal compass: CCC to F

The draw-stops are ranged in a single row vertically on each side of the manuals, the only disturbance of this arrangement being caused by the addition of the two later pedal stops which have been placed to the right of the older stops at the foot of the right-hand row. The stop-jams are not angled, but parallel to the manuals in the old style. The swell pedal is on the right.

Under the swell manual are two unlabelled ivory pistons, which serve instead of a draw-stop for the tremulant.

The touch of both manuals and pedals is as heavy as one would ever wish to encounter; on full organ, it makes considerable physical demands upon the player. But it has all the traditional virtues of the tracker system and is not yet noisy.

It has sometimes been complained, not altogether unreasonably, by readers of *The Organ* that organs are too frequently described as wholly without blemish and composed of monotonously perfect registers. Very well. St. Thomas's organ has blemishes. The tremulant is too fast, and usually fades out of action altogether after the first thirty seconds or so. The composition pedals are cumbersome and the draw-stop movement is both extensive and heavy. These are blemishes if you like—but they represent the sum total.

The instrument is placed on the north side of the chancel with ample head-room and a speaking front into the transept as well as into the chancel. Until the insertion of the two newer pedal registers, the transept front displayed the bourdon pipes, which are seldom considered very decorative, but these are now concealed by the impressive violone, and the general effect is traditional and handsome, although there is little woodwork in the case. The chancel front contains part of the great open diapason and the dulciana. The console is built-in and stands high behind the cantoris choir-stalls.

The great open diapason is of large scale and fully equal to its work in the matter of leading congregational singing; it does not, however, stand apart from the chorus work, but binds the upperwork into an impressive whole. Although the treble is "kept well up", this characteristic is less marked than in much of Willis's work, and one chiefly carries away an impression of solidity and perfect regularity throughout the scale, with neither "flutiness" nor "stringiness" perceptible.

The principal is a perfect match, being neither apologetic nor aggressive, while the fifteenth adds sparkle without a trace of shrill.

The two flutes are characteristic old Willis productions, in no way eccentric or even striking the hearer as at all unusual when they are first tried, but again, as in the case of the diapason work, it will be found that familiarity breeds the very opposite of contempt; their unforced regularity of tone makes them as welcome in combination as in solo work, and the player who, like myself, has long been in the habit of regarding the addition of flute tone to diapason as pernicious will probably revise his views in this one instance.

Now comes the dulciana. This is by no means the retiring stop commonly encountered under that name. As has been said earlier, its larger pipes are used, together with those of the open diapason, to form the chancel front, and the affinity with the diapason is tonally as well as visibly apparent. On a larger organ it would almost certainly be labelled "small open diapason" or, at all events, a third diapason. Used as such, it is extremely valuable; as an accompaniment to the swell it is distinctly limited, being too heavy for anything except the cornopean—and even then the box requires to be half open. This unusual nature of the dulciana inclines me to the belief that the *vox*

angelica was the stop offered and inserted by Willis in 1907; the said vox angelica is a very mild string-tone not markedly differing from the swell salicional. Its usefulness will be obvious.

When the swell is examined, the critical organist will at once note what is absent—all 16ft. registers, all mixture-work, all celeste ranks, the 4ft. reed and even the normally inevitable oboe. Glancing at the couplers, he will be still further depressed by observing the absence of both octave couplers. With a resigned shrug, he will draw out the swell open diapason, place his fingers on the keys—and sit up very abruptly.

There are two stops on this small organ which I personally have never found equalled on any other instrument however large. This diapason is one of them. Nothing less than the superlative title of masterpiece will describe it. No doubt it inclines very slightly to the class of geigen tone, but only enough to make it perfectly clear that it is not a flute. If "organ tone" *pur et simple* means "diapason tone", then this is organ tone *in excelsis*. The most enthusiastic "tone-painter" or experimenter among visiting organists will find, to his own astonishment, that he is perfectly content to go on playing for ten minutes at a stretch with both hands on the swell and nothing but this one stop drawn; he may even neglect to operate the swell pedal! In the writer's own novitiate, it was the complete self-sufficiency of this remarkable diapason which convinced him that Bach's chorale preludes for manuals alone were not in fact products of the great man's "off days"!

It would, perhaps, be impossible for the rest of the swell organ to equal this astonishing monarch, and no doubt it does not do so, but nevertheless, like a disciplined court, it provides a not unworthy setting. The gedacht is an old-world specimen, typically restrained; the salicional is restful and only mildly stringy—not quite as soft as the vox angelica on the great. The gemshorn is admirably scaled to fit into the diapason chorus; the absence of mixture-work or even an octave coupler might lead one to wish that the flageolet had been given slightly more brilliance, but a listener at the west end of the nave would probably not agree. The corneopane is a fine specimen of the old English low-pressure reed, with a thin fieriness which the writer for one finds more exhilarating than the smoother brilliance of many reeds on much higher pressures. It shows little sign of irregularity even today. The clarinet needs no introduction to Willis connoisseurs; it is a classical "woody" example, and is perfectly voiced for its enclosure. The full swell in this organ must, and does, mean just what it says; the writer has repeatedly experimented with the elimination of the gedacht or the salicional or both, but has come to the conclusion that no good purpose is thereby served. The crescendo is what we have come to expect of a Willis full swell; no more need be said.

Last of all come the riches of the sumptuously-completed pedal department. True, there is no pedal reed. Neither are there three manuals nor a tuba. Remembering that Willis were quite prepared to let this organ forth upon the world with a pedal department of but two stops, what complaint can we have today, confronted with four?

No doubt all of our tonal experts and designers at the present day, asked to

specify a smallish two-manual organ and limited to two pedal registers, would automatically write down:

Pedal	ft.
1.	16
2.	8

Then they would wrangle fiercely over the filling-in of the blanks. Someone would say, "Not a nasty, bumbling bourdon anyway!", someone else would insist on a nice clear violone with an extended 8ft., a third would hold out for extending the great flute chorus downwards and the battle would be on. Messrs. Willis in 1902 thought otherwise, and in went a general-purpose bourdon and an open wood, both of 16ft. pitch. Messrs. Willis were incontrovertibly right. Nothing would ever have compensated the world for the loss of this open wood. It is everything that would send three-quarters of our modern cognoscenti into screaming hysterics. It is of huge scale—about nineteen inches externally at EEE—and it has not the faintest excuse for being labelled a diapason, since it is obviously *sui generis*. Bach presumably never heard anything like it, but from all we can gather of Bach's general outlook, he would certainly have known how to use it with overwhelming effect. We have often been told that the presence of a reed is essential to a "real" pedal organ. It is difficult to disagree with this, but on this particular instrument one misses the reed less than one could ever have imagined possible. Held in reserve for, say, the final entry of a fugue subject, this open wood electrifies the most blasé; definition is adequate, but majesty is royally disbursed; the building quivers and organist and hearers alike find their hearts chanting an atavistic "Io, triumphe!"

To add anything to this *multum in parvo* pedal department must have been the greatest artistic problem ever to confront the firm of Messrs. Miller of Dundee (now, unhappily, no longer in independent existence), but they rose nobly to the occasion and inserted the metal 16 and 8 feet registers previously mentioned. These must be pronounced a complete success, firm yet "velvety" and perfectly calculated to bridge the gap between the two original wood registers. For some reason not clear to me as yet, these newer pedal stops appeared to possess one note less than the pedal board, E being the highest note available at the time of my visit. Darkness approaching, I could not carry out a sufficiently close internal inspection to clear up the problem, but as the violone and its offspring have a private tubular-pneumatic action all to themselves, and as I could dimly make out a leaden tube isolated and disconnected at one end, I leave the matter to Sherlock Holmes—or the readers.

The present organist of St. Thomas's is a player worthy of his privilege. Mr. Samuel P. Guttridge, Mus. Bac. (Dunelm), F.R.C.O., has presided here since 1922, and in his eighty-seventh year continues his splendid work. A classical player, an enthusiastic teacher and a reverent churchman, Mr. Guttridge is surely the doyen of Scottish organists.

In concluding, it may be of interest to note that Mrs. W. J. Pae, widow of the organist whose enthusiasm had so much to do with the erection of this

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organ, and herself an organist, still resides in Newport and, like Mr. Guttridge, finds that advancing years have no power to diminish an organ-lover's ardour. In her house there is a two-manual chamber organ built by Messrs. Miller of Dundee for Mr. Pae shortly before the first World War. It has a rather charming case with two side towers extending almost from floor to ceiling; the blowing is done by one of Messrs. Melvin's small hydraulic engines which inhabits a cupboard off the kitchen.