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# I

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## The English organ in 1820

### CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The English organ of 1820 was a lineal descendant of the instruments built in the latter part of the seventeenth century to make good the depredations of, first, religious fanatics and, then, fire. The type of organ which evolved in these circumstances under the joint (though sometimes conflicting) influence of 'Father' Smith – who learnt his craft in north-west Germany and practised it first in Holland (Freeman & Rowntree 1977: 103–12; Rowntree 1978: 10–20) – and Renatus Harris – heir to the organ-building experience which the Dallam and Harris families acquired during their exile in France (Bicknell 1981: 6–9; Cocheril 1982) – endured with some modification into the early years of the nineteenth century. Its most characteristic feature was the absence, in all but a handful of cases, of pedals, and the related provision of 'long' compasses, usually commencing at GG, for the Great and Choir (or Chair) Organs. In the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries these tended to have 'short' octaves in the bass. The lowest note of the keyboard sounded GG, and the next, C. There was no C# pipe, but the C# key sounded AA. The next note was D and the compass then continued in regular fashion to c<sup>3</sup> or d<sup>3</sup>. From the mid-eighteenth century it became increasingly common in church organs to make the bottom octave a 'long' octave (omitting only the GG#) and the top of the compass crept up, first, to e<sup>3</sup>, and then, from the mid-1790s, to f<sup>3</sup>.<sup>1</sup> Other modest developments took place. Jordan's 'invention' of the Swell Organ (*c.* 1712) greatly commended itself to the English with their taste for expressive melody, and the old Echo Organs were gradually converted into Swells (though a short-compass Swell, commencing at middle c, or possibly fiddle g, satisfied organists for long enough) (Sumner 1962: 191–3). To John Snetzler, a Swiss organ-builder who settled in England during the early 1740s, is owed the only tonal novelty to be universally adopted into the English organ during the course of the century: the narrow-scaled, cylindrical dulciana, which first appeared in Snetzler's organ for St Margaret's, King's Lynn (1754) (Sumner 1962: 164, 308).

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Snetzler seems occasionally to have introduced another novelty into his organs, namely pedals, but as an innovation they made little headway in England during his lifetime (Pearce 1927: 30–6; Williams 1962: 238, 285). Organists and organ builders remained conservative in outlook, disinclined to make innovations, and already, in the mid-eighteenth century, prone to retrospection – the veneration in which the organs of ‘Father’ Smith were held (‘for the fineness of their tone they have never yet been equalled’, as Sir John Hawkins put it) (1776, iv: 355) was a symptom of this.

In moving forward to the early-nineteenth century the casual observer could be forgiven for concluding that the design of the English organ had altered little in the seventy or eighty years leading up to 1820. Stop lists remained remarkably similar throughout these years. The large organs of George Pike England (Newark Parish Church, 1804, or Lancaster Parish Church, 1811) closely resemble, on paper, those of Richard Bridge or John Byfield from the mid-eighteenth century, with their two mixtures, a tierce and a mounted cornet on the Great, a small mixture to complete the Choir chorus, and semi-imitative reeds in the Choir and Swell Organs. John Avery’s organs for King’s College, Cambridge (1803) and St Margaret’s, Westminster (1804) display a similarly generous provision of mixtures, cornets and reeds in the (apparently) eighteenth-century manner, as do Hugh Russell’s reconstructions of organs by Renatus Harris (St Dunstan, Stepney, 1808) and Richard Bridge (St Anne, Limehouse, 1811). There are some features which distinguish these instruments of the early-nineteenth century from those being built seventy years before. All except the Stepney organ had pedals and some pedal pipes (though there were no pipes at Lancaster), all had ‘long’ octaves and a compass which ran to f<sup>3</sup>; the Swell compass, too, had expanded cautiously downwards: to tenor d at Newark and Lancaster, but more conventionally to e or f in other instances. Although each of these innovations suggested lines of development which the later nineteenth-century organ builders would pursue rigorously (and sometimes fruitlessly) it must be remembered that these were among the most ambitious organs of their day; a study of the smaller instruments of the period would underline yet more strongly the conservative, and minimise the innovative tendencies of the organ-builders. Altogether, it is striking that so little seems to have occurred in English organ design between 1750 and 1820. One is bound to ask, is this a true picture?

In general, the English organ of the first two decades of the nineteenth century earns its characterisation as a highly conservative instrument. There were, though, subtle and significant distinctions to be drawn between the conception and construction of the organ at this time and the practice and taste of the previous century.

These may be illustrated by referring to the entry relating to the organ in Rees’s *Cyclopaedia* (1819, xxv: n.p.). It is said to have been written by

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Burney, but whilst the rambling, structureless character of the first part of the article is compatible with an author whose powers were failing (Burney died at the age of eighty-four in 1814) the second, more technical part of the article suggests that another writer took a hand and added to Burney's work before publication. A couple of sentences which echo a passage from Burney's *History of music* (1789) combine reverence for 'Father' Smith with a claim that his successors genuinely improved upon his work in certain respects:

The organs in our churches, that have been well preserved of father Schmidt's make, such as St. Paul's, the Temple, St. Mary's, Oxford, Trinity College, Cambridge, &c. are far superior in tone to any of more modern construction; but the mechanism has been improved during the last century, by Byfield, Snetzler, Green, Gray, &c. The touch is lighter, the compass extended, and the reed-work admirable.

The (other?) writer takes up the point about an improvement in mechanism and mentions the qualities which organists of his generation expected of a good key action:

The touch of the keys should be free and elastic, and exactly the same pressure should be requisite to put down every key throughout the scale. No better proof can be given of a good touch, than that a turned shake can be executed with equal facility in every part of the scale, except perhaps in the lowest octave, where it is not to be expected or desired. If all these things act without noise, the mechanical parts of the organ may be considered good, and in order.

The implied comparison here with old organs is carried further when the writer turns to consider the tonal structure of the organ. He remarks on the indispensability of a good stopped diapason, 'as that stop is the foundation of the organ', and has little to say of the open diapason, except that it should be 'full, smooth, and articulate'. No eighteenth-century organist would have disagreed with him. He goes on, however, to make the point that the 'relative strength' of the various registers 'is of great importance to the goodness of the chorus':

As a single stop should not be loudest at the top, so the chorus stops should not predominate over the diapasons; a fault very general in the old organs, arising from the bad taste of the times in which they were made. The chorus should be rich, brilliant, and articulate; the twelfth and tierce, and their octaves, should not be heard, except when listened for.

Despite the taste for brilliance, this passage exhibits a concern for unison diapason tone which was to prove characteristic of the nineteenth century. The writer's remarks about reeds also suggest a certain distancing from the work of earlier builders. He approves of the trumpet as adding greatly to the 'majesty as to the strength' of the chorus, and the clarion because it increases the brilliancy of the chorus. He continues:

The goodness of these, and all other reed stops, besides the requisites already

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mentioned, depends upon their speaking readily and quickly; and being free from the nasal tone, such as is produced by bad players on the clarionet, or hautboy . . .

and, he might have added, by the reeds of older organs. Again, there are the beginnings of a preoccupation which was to possess builders and players alike during the next hundred years: how to get reeds to speak promptly and cleanly, and with a full, regular tone. This preoccupation eventually led to reeds which were very different from those made by Smith, Harris and their immediate successors.

It is illuminating, finally, to turn to an account of the St Paul's Cathedral organ which was published in the *English Musical Gazette* in 1819, for as well as casting light on the cult of Smith, it helps to sharpen the distinction between the musical taste of the early-nineteenth century and that of the previous century, and at the same time to expose the roots of some later-nineteenth-century fashions in organ use and tonality. The author is discussing Smith's diapasons on the Great Organ:

These have always been esteemed the finest that Schmidt ever made. Those at the Temple are very fine in bass, but fall off exceedingly in the treble; these do not, but are regular and uniform, in the quality of tone throughout. We cannot say whether the richness, smoothness and beauty of the treble is more enchanting, than the fine, full, and sonorous tones of the bass. We are speaking of the three diapasons when used together. The effect of them with pedal basses (the right hand being engaged with the melody in the treble, while the left is accompanying it on the swell) is beautiful, and shows the diapasons off to the utmost advantage possible. The style best calculated for the diapasons is adagio, legati, and cantabile movements, which have the most rich effect that can be imagined. Three or four notes, or a chord, held down in the bass on these diapasons, has all the effect of thunder at a distance; and we must say, when comparing these diapasons with any other that Schmidt ever made, or even Harris, or Schreider, Schmidt's principal man, who built the organ at Westminster Abbey; or even Green, that they fall short in respect of the quality as well as body of tone. (*EMG*, 1 January 1819: 7)

The admiration for smoothness and sonority, the pleasure taken in an effect suggestive of thunder, the taste for gentle melodic movements and legato passages of full harmony place this writer firmly in the nineteenth century. Considered alongside the extracts from Rees, it becomes apparent that the similarity of stop lists over the better part of a century does not tell the full story. To discover what was really happening in English organ-building in the first quarter of the nineteenth century it will be helpful to look in some detail at an extant instrument of the period.

### THE THAXTED ORGAN

Few substantial organs have survived from the years around 1820. It was not, perhaps, a distinguished period in the history of English organ-building.



1 Thaxted Parish Church, H. C. Lincoln, 1821.

One era was drawing to its close, another had yet to begin. A later generation found little of value in the organs built during the 1810s, 1820s and 1830s, and either destroyed them or made drastic modifications. No survivor from this period is more important than the organ built by Henry Cephias Lincoln for St John's Chapel, Bedford Row, London, and now standing in Thaxted Parish Church, Essex (Plate 1). Despite its present state of dereliction (or

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because of it) it survives as the only largely unaltered 3-manual organ to have come down to us from the first four decades of the nineteenth century. It is therefore particularly unfortunate that its history is poorly documented.

There is no maker's plate, but both the Sperling Notebooks (MS 79: 71) and H. C. Lincoln's 1824 circular (MS 78: 322) confirm that Lincoln built an organ for St John's Chapel, Bedford Row.<sup>2</sup> It is known that the Chapel was closed for some months in 1821 whilst the galleries were enlarged to provide additional seating, and it is probable that the organ was installed then (Bateman 1860: 218).

St John's Chapel, Bedford Row, was a proprietary chapel. It became unsafe and was demolished in 1863.<sup>3</sup> The organ had been removed in 1858 to Thaxted, and appears in its present position in the north transept on a plan attached to a faculty application of 1879 (MS 30).<sup>4</sup> The organ was repaired by Alfred Kirkland in 1907 (MS 82). The scope of his work is not known, but it may have included making the present Great roller-board (which is not original), re-leathering the bellows and applying tuning slides to the two open diapasons and the principal on the Great (fortunately, the tops of the pipes were not trimmed). Someone, at some stage, re-made part of the Great stop action, with the result that the stops now have round shanks (the surviving originals are square). An electric blower was installed and some of the rack boards were renewed. The organ has been deteriorating for some years, and the pipes of three registers – the mixture and trumpet (Great), and the bassoon (Choir) – have disappeared since 1913, when a correspondent recorded their existence in a letter to *Musical Opinion* (37, 1913: 33); a few trebles are missing from the surviving mixture.

None of these alterations (with the exception of the incongruous stop shanks) has seriously compromised the character of the organ, and regrettable though the losses of pipework are, they have to be set against the otherwise complete survival of the flue choruses and the three Swell reeds.

The stop list is as follows:

<b>Great Organ</b> (FF, no FF#, to f <sup>3</sup> )		
Open Diapason Front	8	
Open Diapason (C)	8	
Stopped Diapason	8	
Principal	4	
Twelfth	2 2/3	
Fifteenth	2	
Sesquialtra (FF-b)	iv	
Cornet (c <sup>1</sup> -f <sup>3</sup> )	iv-iii	
Mixture	ii	{missing}
Trumpet	8	{missing}
Pedals (FF-c)	8	{unison pedal pipes}



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**Choir Organ** (FF, no FF#, to f<sup>3</sup>)

Dulciana (FF–e grooved)	8	
Stopped Diapason	8	
Principal	4	
Flute	4	
Fifteenth	2	
Bassoon	8	[missing]

**Swell Organ** (e to f<sup>3</sup>)

Open Diapason	8	
Stopped Diapason	8	
Principal	4	
Cremona	8	
Hautboy	8	
Trumpet	8	
Coupler Swell		[Swell to Great]
Pedals Great		[Great to Pedal]
Pedals Choir		[Choir to Pedal]

Swell lever

Pedal board: FF to c (FF# coupled to F#)

The Thaxted organ provides a useful starting point for a consideration of the construction and design of the English organ in 1820. Care must be exercised in treating it as a typical product of the English organ-builder's workshop at that time. It would have been satisfactory to have been able to discuss Lincoln's organ alongside similarly intact survivals from the workshops of, say, William Gray and Hugh Russell, each of whom was regarded as being among the leading builders of the day, but – sadly – no substantial instrument by either builder has survived in a state of completeness comparable to Thaxted. We are in a stronger position in regard to another leading metropolitan builder of the 1810s and 1820s. Thomas Elliot's work (and especially that of his partner and successor, William Hill) is central to the present study, and enough of it survives for us to form a reliable impression of his instruments. Particular reference will be made in what follows to three of these: Scone Palace (1813), Ashridge (1818) and the organ for the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace (1819), which, since 1841, has stood in St Margaret's, Crick. The Scone organ is intact – a remarkable survival, still standing in its handsome Gothic case at one end of the Long Gallery, and so little used over the years that its moving parts have suffered a minimum of wear and tear. Various features distinguish it from Elliot's later instruments, and it may be that it has at least as much in common with organ-building of the late-eighteenth century as it has with that of the 1820s and 1830s; for this reason, a detailed consideration would be out of place in the present study.

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Table 1 *Thaxted Parish Church, 1821: scales*

<i>(1) Diapason choruses</i>					
Great Organ	C	c	c <sup>1</sup>	c <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>3</sup>
Front Open Diapason			49.5	30.5	16.5
Open Diapason	152*	89.25	49	30	16.5
Principal		49	30	17	10
Twelfth	51	32	19.75	12.75	8.25
Fifteenth	49	29.25	17	10	7
Sesquialtra I	42	25.5	26.5	16.5	10.75
II	37	22	19.5	12.5	8.25
III	32	20.25	16	10.75	8.25
IV	25.5	16.5	14	9	
<i>Composition:</i>	FF	17.19.22			
	C	15.17.19.22			
	c <sup>1</sup>	8.12.15.17			
	f <sup>2</sup>	8.12.15			
Choir Organ	C	c	c <sup>1</sup>	c <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>3</sup>
Dulciana		59.75	35.75	21	12.5
Principal	79	44.5	24.75	16	10.75
Fifteenth	42	24.75	16	11.5	7
Swell Organ	C	c	c <sup>1</sup>	c <sup>2</sup>	c <sup>3</sup>
Open Diapason			38	24.75	15.25
Principal			25.5	16.5	10
<i>(2) Flutes</i>					
		(a)	(b)		
Gt Stopped Diapason	c	63.5 × 54	8		
	c <sup>1</sup>	48.25	152 × 12.5		
	c <sup>2</sup>	31.25	82.5 × 8.5		
	c <sup>3</sup>	21	47.5 × 5.75		
Ch Stopped Diapason	C	127.5 × 101.5	12.5		
	c	66.5 × 57	9.5		
	c <sup>1</sup>	45.5	149 × 12.5		
	c <sup>2</sup>	30.5	76 × 8.5		
	c <sup>3</sup>	21	38 × 6.5		
Ch Flute	C	65.5 × 57	9.5		
	c	48.25	136.5 × 12.5		
	c <sup>1</sup>	31.25	76 × 9		
	c <sup>2</sup>	21	38 × 6.5		
	c <sup>3</sup>	14.5	22 × 4.5		

(a) Internal dimensions (wooden pipes) or diameters (metal pipes).

(b) Thickness of sides (wooden pipes) or length and diameter of chimney (metal pipes).