The rebuilt organ at
The Parish Church of St Mary Magdalene,
Windmill Hill, Enfield

The history: What happened

The organ was originally a Forster and Andrews organ and second hand when purchased. We are not sure whether or not it was installed by the dedication date of the church (1883) or in 1892, as that date is mentioned and soon after it was being serviced by Bishop and Sons. It could not have been in a brilliant state of repair at that time as in 1915 there was concern about the state of the organ, yet it seems nothing was done until 1920; then in 1921 money was being raised to pay the organ builder the final sum owed. The following extracts from the Parish Magazine in 1920 put it all into perspective:

"We have the specification (from Messrs. Bishop & Son for the reconstruction of the organ) and it was our intention to reproduce it in this number of the Parish Magazine, but it is of such a technical character that we fear very few of the parishioners would be any the wiser ...We will therefore content ourselves with saying that the present organ, when brought to S. Mary's over 37 years ago, was a second-hand, patched-up instrument; a great deal of money has been spent on it from time to time to keep it in going order, but most of the internal arrangements are now entirely worn out, and either a complete renovation or an entirely new instrument has become an absolute necessity. The cost of a new instrument is now prohibitive, so the specification provides for a complete renovation of the present instrument, and the bringing of it up to date in every feature. The cost of this, if put in hand without delay, will be £890. But if we delay the cost will probably be advanced."

There had been much fundraising by the choir and other members of the congregation and in 1922 the final payment was made to Bishop and Sons.

"A cheque for £840 has been sent to Bishop & Sons on account, £50 being retained in order that the new action may be tested by use, and against the probability that some adjustments may be found necessary."

(With thanks to Joy Heywood for her recent researches in past Parish Magazines)

The next half century

It seems that from the beginning of the 1920s onwards the organ worked well with its 3 manuals, 30 pedals and 29 speaking stops, plus a swell tremulant. In the early 1970s there must have been trouble afoot and by 1976 it was becoming urgent. At that time there clearly were some particular funding problems as when work was carried out on the organ it seems it was damage limitation. The choir organ was disconnected but left in situ, the choir manual was removed and the tremulant was removed from the swell organ. While necessary work was certainly carried out on the leatherwork in the instrument and some other repairs and electrical works were undertaken, it is possible the weaknesses in the reed pipes were overlooked, so that while repairs were made to make the organ work efficiently again, deterioration was not stopped in pipework and other parts of the organ. So 1977 saw the organ reduced to 2 manuals, 30 pedals, one swell pedal (there had been a second for the choir organ), no tremulant and 21 speaking stops. It might have happened in 1977, but at some point the console of the organ was raised and the organist has for some years been raised around a foot off the floor with the organ stool unable to be moved back enough for

some organists for fear of toppling off the plinth. For some there were also difficulties in climbing on the organ stool. The safety aspect of this change could not have been considered, but this may have been done so that the organist had a better view of the choir through the mirror and some of the choir could then see the organist directing from the console.

The 21st century

From the early years of this century it was becoming obvious that the instrument was beginning to fail as tuning was impossible on certain ranks of pipes, several of the reed pipes were collapsing, some completely folded in half, and it was a wonder that most of the great trumpet still worked. Several other pipes were not speaking properly and while B C Shepherd and Sons have skilfully kept it going with holding repairs and tuning, the organists have coped with the problems and many of those listening have not noticed any difference, yet it was slowly grinding to a point where it would not be usable. In 2015 the Vicar, The Reverend Dr Gordon Giles, grasped the nettle and began the long process of consultations and looking at what organ builders could offer us. With much help from my colleague of the time, Keith Beniston, as well as consultations with Dr Alan Thurlow and Paul Hale, by 2017 there were various plans for extending the organ or restoring it to the original design.

The restoration

After much thought and many discussions the PCC went with the plan that would restore the organ to a 3 manual and pedals instrument with a few small additions that would make it more flexible, especially for accompanying larger choral works and for being used in general recitals and concerts. Specific things that have been added are: a Trombone on the pedal — this has been accomplished by adding a chromatic octave to the bottom of the restored Great Trumpet; the Trumpet is also playable from the Choir organ and the pedals; the Choir organ had a gap for another set of pipes, into which has been placed a Larigot rank; a Tremulant has been restored to the Swell organ and added to the Choir organ.

Some extra stops only need an electronic connection to make them work on a different manual or on the pedals; thus the pedal organ now has 6 instead of 3 speaking stops. The only pipes added are those at the bottom of the Trumpet for the Trombone; the other stops for the pedals are “borrowed” from other ranks of pipes.

One important step has been to lower the console back to floor level so that the organists have a choice of sitting positions and there is no longer the danger of falling off the plinth. Now that we have a video screen and can see the choir without a problem, it is also still possible for some of the choir to see a waving arm when some direction is needed.

Overall there are lots of new electronics inside the organ and this gives the organist plenty of electronic memory, so that when — in order to change stops — a small piston under the keyboard is pressed with a preset selection of stops, the change in sound is immediate. Each manual has six of these pistons as well as some for short cuts, such as adding the Swell stops to the Great manual or pedals. There are also eight “General” pistons that change the stops on any of the manuals and 16 foot pistons above the pedals. We can also use a “Stepper” piston. This means we can press this piston and not worry about other pistons as it can have 100 or more changes of stops in its memory; we just have to keep pressing it — of course one has to make sure one does not press it twice by mistake as a loud registration might be intended, and the one after it might be very quiet, or vice versa!

The inside of the organ is now fuller than it used to be, partly because of the trombone pipes but largely due to the electronic equipment that has been installed. No longer can old keyboards,

flower arranging stands and other paraphernalia be stored inside the organ as if it were a store cupboard!

The new trombone

The result of all this work is that we now have 3 manuals, 30 pedals and 32 speaking stops. This should make our organ into a flexible instrument suitable for any sort of accompaniment work and equally useful as a solo instrument. We thank David Stalley, and his team from The Village Workshop (Organ Builders), for all the care and attention they have given to the restoration of our instrument. The high level of workmanship they have put into this should guarantee that apart from any unforeseen small thing that might occur, such as an infestation of mice or a power outage/surge, the organ should be good for the next 50 years, at which time it is always recommended a pipe organ should be cleaned and inspected for wear and tear.

Jonathan Marten (June 2019)