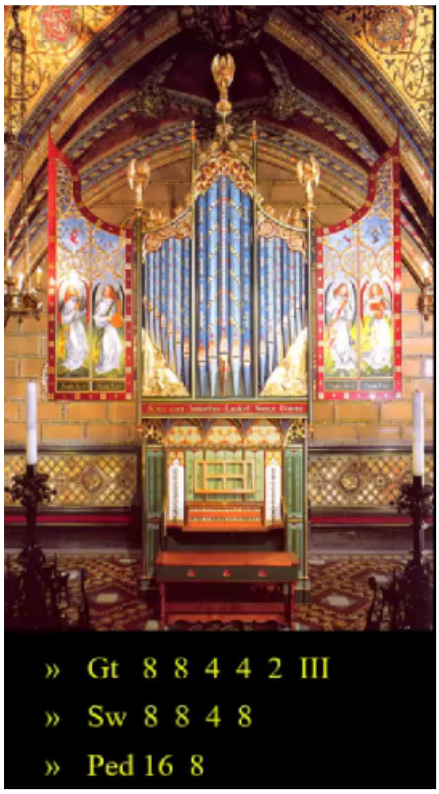
Past Events

* * *

Online Talk by John Norman
on his recent book 'Organ Works'
March 25th 2021 at 8pm

On March 25th EDOA members, and some members of SSLSO who joined us, were privileged to hear a talk by Organ Consultant John Norman about his experiences in organbuilding and his latest book 'Organ Works' published in December 2020. John Norman is descended from William Norman (1830–1877), who founded the pipe organ manufacturing company Norman & Beard, and during the talk he referred to the work of his father and grandfather in the business.



The Drake organ in the Palace of Westminster

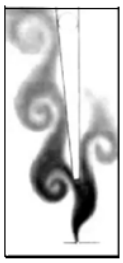
John spoke first about his career in organ building. His account was full of interesting anecdotes and amusing asides. He joined Hill, Norman & Beard as a trainee and learnt voicing with Robert Lamb and finishing with Mark Fairhead, and while he was there he patented the 'mini relay'. At Brisbane Cathedral, where the organ had been built by his grandfather in 1909, John negotiated an upgrade to the organ to make it suitable for the larger building; he had 24 hours in which to persuade them of the merits of the choir division, the positiv division and a horizontal trumpet. HN&B installed over 30 new organs during his time with them and he was involved in the design of many of them. He spoke of the RCO organ where HN&B were able

to make changes at the last minute to accommodate Peter Hurford's wishes. John designed the organ case Carrs Lane Church in Birmingham, in the Scandinavian style to match the building. St Mark's Portsmouth and Hambledon Church both have organs where, to save space, one stop borrowed the lower notes from another stop. Henry Willis IV described the Hambledon organ as 'one of John Norman's bassless organs'.

John then joined IBM for a time and became a member of the Cathedrals Fabric Commission and the London Diocesan Advisory Committee, and he was Chairman of BIOS from 2006 until 2011. As an organ consultant he was involved with sixteen new organs. He described the Drake organ in the Palace of Westminster and the Tickell organs in St Mary-le-Bow and Worcester Cathedral. Most interesting was the inside information such as that Rushworth & Dreaper, when they installed the earlier organ in St Mary-le-Bow, worked to the nearest inch whereas Kenneth Tickell worked to the nearest millimetre; or that the Dean & Chapter of Worcester had intended to run a competition for the design of the organ case, but when they saw Kenneth Tickell's design they were so taken with it that they abandoned the idea of a competition.

John mentioned his previous books before going on to explain the contents of 'Organ Works' which using modern technology can be full of colour pictures. The main sections are : What is an organ, the History of the Organ, Matching the Organ to the Building, Tonal Structure and Organ Pipes. The organ has the widest range of pitch of any instrument, and having separate pipes allows each to have ideal proportions. Its ability to sustain a continuous sound makes it ideal for choral accompaniment. These are facts we know but may not have articulated. The history of the organ goes back to about 250 BC and the book covers the Battle of the Organ (Smith v Harris), the introduction of the German compass by Mendelssohn, the neo-Baroque movement and much else besides.

The section on tuning and temperament is particularly interesting, containing such nuggets as: most orchestras nowadays tune to a pitch sharper than A=440; tuners prefer to tune cathedral organs to equal temperament and organs in smaller buildings to one of the unequal temperaments; the important thing in a tempered scale is that the major third is one seventh of a semitone sharp. This book really contains everything you ever wanted to know about the organ and probably many things you didn't know you didn't know.

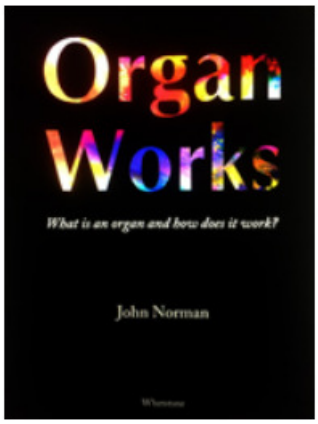


The wind hitting the top lip of a pipe.

The vibration is governed by

the resonance of the pipe.

The book can be ordered online from bios.org.uk/publications/index3.php, price in the UK £49.50 incl. p&p.



We thank John Norman warmly for presenting this talk, and we also thank Martin Penny for being the technical host of the Zoom session.

Rosemary Knight

* * * * * * *