

A Short History of the Organs in High Street Methodist Church, Harpenden

The Compton Organ

High Street Methodist Church, or the Wesleyan Methodist Church as it was in those days, was opened in September 1930. The design of the church provided space for an organ behind the choir on the south side of the chancel but a lack of funds meant that for two years worship was led from a grand piano situated in the vacant organ chamber. During those two years, many local fund raising concerts were held. At the same time, enquiries were made and estimates received from various organ builders.

One of the first estimates received in November 1930 from Hill, Norman and Beard was to provide a two manual organ with 29 stops at a cost of £1,980. A number of revised specifications were drawn up in the intervening period but in 1932 the Organ Committee of the day was recommended to visit the Aolian Hall in Bond Street, London to hear the Compton organ that had been installed there. The Committee members were impressed and decided to place an order for a two manual organ with 34 stops and a detached console at a cost of £1,365. There were just seven ranks of pipes, as the typical Compton design relied heavily on extension and borrowing. The organ was installed with all the pipes enclosed in a box with swell shutters and situated behind the right hand side of the choir stalls. None of the pipework was visible in the church. On 5 October 1932, a Service of Dedication was held and Alex James ARCO, who was organist of the Church from 1932 to 1942, played music by Rheinberger, Corelli, Jarnefelt, J S Bach, Dvorak, Nesbitt, Whitlock and Karg-Elert.

In 1937 two more stops were added and in 1938 a 32 feet pedal stop was installed in the organ chamber with its outlet through a grill into the south transept. When construction work on the new organ case started in March 1998 it was discovered that this stop was not speaking properly and probably had not been for some years.

As long ago as 1962, it was realised that the organ was not powerful enough for the size of the church and congregation. There was a proposal to open up the wall of the organ chamber to release more sound into the south transept, but this was not pursued.

From 1985 Saxon Aldred (an organ builder from Redbourn) took over responsibility for tuning and maintaining the organ. In that year, the organ was rewired and the electrics were converted to solid state. However, despite his efforts, it became increasingly obvious in the early 1990s that it would be necessary to refurbish the organ. The congregations were increasing in numbers quite significantly; a "full" church was a frequent occurrence and the effect on the acoustic of the building was marked as the organ was almost inaudible at the back of the church. During this period the Rev. John Walker, a keen organist, was appointed Minister of the Church, and under his leadership an Organ Committee was set up to consider ways in which the organ could be improved to enhance the worship. The Committee sought advice from various sources, looked at redundant organs in various parts of the country, and explored the wide range of pipeless organs that were available. One well known pipeless organ

company was persuaded to install one of their top organs in the Church for a weekend. A concert was held on the Saturday evening using both the pipeless organ and the Compton. During the services on the following day the organs were used in turn, even accompanying alternate verses in some of the hymns. At the end of the weekend the congregation, having responded to a detailed questionnaire, did not favour the pipeless organ, and the Committee was left to consider other ways of replacing or updating the Compton organ.

The Binns Organ

While these discussions were taking place, the Trustees of the Williams School of Church Music approached the Church with the offer of the organ from The Bourne, Salisbury Avenue, the former home of George Williams, who was a member of the Church. The Trustees no longer required the organ and the Organ Committee was unanimous in its view that, subject to a suitable scheme being drawn up to incorporate the organ in the church, the offer should be accepted. Such a scheme was devised and put out to tender with the contract eventually being awarded to T W Fearn of London.

The organ that had been donated by the Williams School of Church Music had been built originally by J J Binns. It transpired that the instrument had a long history, much of which came to light by chance. Mr Rodney Pearson BA FTCL FLCM, the organist and choirmaster of Christ Church, Linthwaite, Huddersfield, wrote in the "Organists Review" asking if anyone with knowledge of any Binns organ would contact him as he was writing a thesis on Binns organs for his doctorate. After an initial trawl through the original ledgers of J J Binns, Mr Pearson felt reasonably confident that the organ acquired by the Church had been built by Binns in 1893 for the Victoria Park Wesleyan Methodist Church, Bonner Road, London, the church of the National Children's Home. However, there remained some doubt in his mind, as there was a suggestion that the organ in that church had been built originally by Foster and Andrews in 1879. Had this organ been refurbished by Binns or was the organ entirely newly built? Although Mr Pearson had access to documents from the Rev Thomas Bowman Stephenson, the minister of Victoria Park Church and the founder of the National Children's Home, which suggested that the Binns organ had replaced the original organ of Foster and Andrews, the issue was only put beyond doubt when Terry Fearn identified the critical Opus No. 141 on some of the organ pipes and one of the wind chests.

The organ, when installed in Victoria Park Church, was situated at the end of the gallery. The detached console was located immediately behind the minister's chair and was connected to the organ above by pneumatic tubing which was 80 feet in length! Among the records of the firm of J J Binns, Organ Builders, there appears the following:

*"From Rev. T B Stephenson, DD, LID,
The Church of the Children's Home, London*

I have much pleasure in testifying to the excellence of the organ built for the Church of the Children's Home by Mr James J Binns.

I had some anxiety because of the peculiarity of the position, but the difficulty has been admirably overcome. The repetition is prompt enough for the playing of the more rapid accompaniments. The tone is a rich, round Church tone. The

compass, exceeding the old fashion, has an additional advantage for Organ recitals.

I can with all confidence recommend Mr Binns' organs, with their tubular pneumatic system, for all purposes in which the peculiarity of position requires a special arrangement."

That the Binns organ of 1893 found its way from the Bonner Road church to Harpenden and, eventually, to High Street Methodist Church, is due very largely to one man, George Williams. He and his wife Muriel were members of the church in Bonner Road prior to moving to Harpenden in 1934 when they became members of High Street Methodist Church. Sadly, the church in Bonner Road was severely damaged during the Second World War and was pulled down in 1941. Inevitably, the organ also suffered. In a report dated 14 September 1941, a Mr Carter of Messrs Hill, Norman and Beard, Organ Builders, described in detail the damage to the organ. The console and much of the casework had been destroyed and some of the Pipework had been damaged too. Nevertheless, George Williams purchased the organ, or at least all that was salvageable, and it was put in store at Gaddesden Place, near Hemel Hempstead.

The Daniel Organ

When they moved to Harpenden in 1934, George, Muriel and their family moved into The Bourne, a large and impressive house that once stood on the corner of Salisbury Avenue and Townsend Lane. In the course of time George extended the house, building a double storey music room with a small gallery at first floor level. In 1959, he invited Percy Daniel and Co, Organ Builders, from Clevedon in Somerset, to rebuild, enlarge and install the Binns organ in the new music room. A third choir/solo division was added together with a new detached console, to provide a fine organ. It is this console which has now been refurbished and installed in High Street Methodist Church.

The inaugural recital on Percy Daniel's rebuilt organ in The Bourne was given by Dr Harold Darke on 24 September 1960. Harold Darke was for many years the organist of St Michael's Church, Cornhill in the City of London, but he is perhaps more widely known for his lovely setting of the Christmas carol "In the bleak midwinter". Following that opening recital many concerts took place at The Bourne and many people well known in the world of music performed there.

George Williams, whose arthritic hands latterly made it impossible for him to play the organ (which, incidentally, he played from tonic sol-fa editions), was always very keen that the organ at The Bourne should be played. Following his death, the Williams School of Church Music was established in accordance with his will, and the Rev Dr Francis Westbrook was appointed Principal of the School. The opening of the School was marked with a Service of Dedication on 22 May 1971 when several members of the Choir from High Street Methodist Church took part. The service was conducted by Rev A Kingsley Turner MA and Dr William Lloyd Webber (father of Julian, the cellist, and Andrew, the composer) played the organ.

Throughout the following fifteen years the Williams School of Church Music thrived, with regular lectures, classes in musical appreciation and concerts with the organ very

much in use. In 1987 Harpenden Musicale, a local music school, acquired a lease on The Bourne. Harpenden Musicale had been flourishing for some years at that time using premises at High Street Methodist Church for rehearsals for their many orchestras and instrumental groups. Although organ lessons were part of the curriculum offered by Harpenden Musicale, the organ at The Bourne was used less and less. This led to the Directors of Harpenden Musicale and the Trustees of the Williams School of Church Music agreeing that a new home should be sought for the organ.

The Fearn Organ

Whilst the Organ Committee was considering ways of improving the Compton organ, the Trustees of the Williams School of Church Music approached the Church with the offer of the Binns organ from The Bourne. The Committee was unanimous in its view that, subject to a suitable scheme being drawn up to incorporate the Binns organ with the Compton organ, the offer should be accepted. Such a scheme was devised, in consultation with David Noble, the Church Organist, Eric Pask, Diocesan Organ Advisor, and Peter Hurford OBE, and put out to tender. The contract was eventually awarded to Terry Fearn, of T W Fearn, London.

Once the Binns organ was removed from The Bourne the complicated task of amalgamating the two organs began. The new three manual Fearn organ retains all the original Compton pipework which, together with some additions from the Binns organ, now provides the enclosed Swell and Choir divisions, and the enclosed part of the Pedal division. The new unenclosed Great division and the unenclosed part of the Pedal division are mounted in a fine new case which was designed and constructed by Terry Fearn on the east wall of the south transept. These divisions are formed from the Pipework and restored action from the Binns organ. There are nine straight ranks in the new case and two new ranks have been added to the enclosed section.

The Fearn organ has 69 stops and contains 1,632 pipes, a number of which were revoiced. The detached Daniel console, which is moveable and can be brought forward to the foot of the chancel steps for recitals, has been refurbished and fitted with new drawstop jambs and an electronic capture and sequencer system.

It is perhaps fitting that the Binns organ should now find its home at High Street Methodist Church which for many years had close connections with the National Children's Home when it was located in Harpenden at Highfield Oval in Ambrose Lane. It is equally fitting that the modifications and amalgamation with the Compton organ were carried out by Terry Fearn and his son Andrew, both of whom were, at that time, active members of the Rivercourt Methodist Church in Shepherd's Bush, London.

The Fearn organ was dedicated on the occasion of the Church Anniversary on 20 September 1998. The service was conducted by the Rev Philip Barker and the sermon was preached by the Rev John Walker; the organ was played by David Noble. The hymns and organ music during the service included a number which had been sung and played at the dedication of the Compton organ in 1932 and at the inaugural service of the Williams School of Church Music in 1971.