The Kidlington Organ

Richard Vendome

This account is based on a Musical Times article of August 1981 (Vol. 122, No. 1662, pp. 555-557), revised by the author to incorporate later changes to the specification.

(photo: E. J Williamson)

The organ of Kidlington Parish Church, some five miles north of Oxford, was constructed by a group of volunteers led by Paul Hale and myself, former organ scholars of New College and the Queen's College, Oxford, respectively, with professional assistance from Grant, Degens & Bradbeer of Northampton. The technical consultant was John Bailey, the engineering adviser was Roger Ainsworth, and the diocesan adviser was Simon Preston. The instrument was dedicated on 4th December 1976 by the Bishop of Dorchester, and the service was followed by an opening recital given by the builders. Benjamin Britten died on this day.

The church, fairly large, dates from 1220, and until the Reformation was served by the Augustinian monks of Osney Abbey. The Early English nave is quite plain, with a solid north wall unbroken except by a small door to the new refectory and a single window towards its east end; the west wall has a central window and door. When a major reordering of the church interior was carried out in 1974-5, with a new stone floor and modern seating, we had a golden opportunity to move the organ into the nave. Tests showed that the north-west corner would be the ideal position for the organ, both acoustically and visually.

The small Willis organ in the remote north transept was opened in July 1888 by Charles Harford Lloyd, organist of Christ Church Cathedral. Prior to 1974 the singing was led by a traditional male choir from stalls in the crossing. But the sound of the organ had to travel through two arches to reach the congregation, and was inadequate for accompanying nave services. A typical village instrument, it had been installed to replace a barrel organ (dating from 1836), before which the singing was led by a 'choir' of instrumentalists. Examination revealed that the manual soundboards and much of the mechanical action were in excellent condition, though the pedal pneumatics were perished, used as nesting material by the church mice. This was a 'budget' instrument, using stock pipework; some ranks had two sets of markings (see table below), indicating that they had been used elsewhere. Tonally the organ was undistinguished.

the author working on the new facade, 1977
(photo: E. J. Williamson)

Clearly a different instrument was required, but the cost of a completely new organ would have been prohibitive. I therefore designed an instrument to make use of the Willis building frame, windchests and some of the mechanical action, but with a new principal chorus by Giesecke of Göttingen, flutes by Grant, Degens & Bradbeer, and reeds by Giesecke and F. J. Rogers.

With the bulky 16ft open wood pipes and windchest of 1908 removed, the depth of the organ was restored to that of the original building frame, 6ft 6in. In September 1974 the frame was moved to its new position on reinforced concrete stilts, raising it 4ft above the ground. The Great soundboard was returned to its old position, and the Swell soundboard raised 4ft 6in to speak as an unenclosed Positive; alterations to the action were thus kept to a minimum. The old reservoir was replaced by Schwimmer regulators, freeing up the base of the instrument to house the new Pedal division, which reuses the Great soundboard from the 1879 Brindley & Foster organ at Worksop Priory. The Pedal pipes speak directly into the church from below the gallery, and can be heard with clarity from the console. The instrument is set at a slight angle to the wall, focussing the sound into the centre of the nave, and visually complementing the offset of the 'leaning chancel'.

The most challenging part of the project was the tonal design: not being limited by the exigencies of a normal 'rebuild', we were able to plan a new instrument, but using some old material in good condition. The restrictions of soundboard size and the need to re-use some of the pipework provided a valuable discipline. Architecturally, the church has changed little since c1440, and it was our intention that the instrument should be at home from the point of view of sound and appearance. This has been realized by mild voicing and the design of the new oak case in pre-Reformation style, an English recreation of that at St Valentin, Kiedrich, in Hesse. Temporary casework was constructed for the opening ceremony, replaced by the present facade in 1977.

After much discussion it was decided that the fresh but warm sound we were aiming at could be obtained only from a carefully scaled new Great chorus, based on that of the St Laurenskerk, Alkmaar (data kindly provided by Dirk Flentrop). Its sound is full but not over-loud, the large Mixture IV-V especially being delicately voiced. The absence of a Principal on the five-stop Positive is not a handicap since the Gemshorn is almost a Spitz Principal. The Cimball III is constructed with two octave ranks and one quint throughout its compass: at tenor C, for example, the ranks are 2/3ft, 1/2ft, 1/4ft, imparting a bell-like brightness to the chorus, while avoiding shrillness.

The higher wind pressure and cut-up of the old principal ranks produced a firm tone well suited to the new Pedal division, with some transposition of pipework. The basic scaling adopted was one note larger than that of the Great, and there were few problems in balancing the two choruses. The manual flutes are contrasted in tone, with the narrower ranks on the Great. Subsequent to the opening of the organ we acquired from the Revd Dudley Roberts a beautiful wooden Stopped Diapason (reputedly from Willis's Great Exhibition organ of 1851), now the Positive Bourdon 8ft, which blends well with the metal Stopped Flute 4ft. The Great Chimney Flute 8ft (formerly the Swell Lieblich Gedact) has been revoiced with great skill by Martin Goetze, its half-length wooden chimneys imparting harmonic richness, and the Nason Flute 4ft is a mild Quintadena. The Sesquialtera is narrow in the bass, increasing in scale throughout the compass, and can be used as a solo colour or to give a mild reediness to the principal chorus.

The horizontal Trumpet 8ft of copper was designed and made for us by Giesecke; it is of narrow scale with beaked shallots, intended both for solo use and to add excitement to the plenum. The other reed stops are by F. J. Rogers; the Dulcian 8ft has French shallots and is full-bodied, effective both as a solo voice and in chorus. On account of limited headroom, the Bombard has half-length resonators, but produces a solid tone with its large Schnitger-type shallots.

More controversial is the Septima 4 4/7ft, a neutral flute stop which occupies a minimum of soundboard space and combines with the Bombard to give the impression of a soft 32ft reed, or in Louis Vierne's words 'the richness of a muster of double basses', being the seventh harmonic of the 32ft series. I was inspired to experiment with resultant tones by my experience of the Pedal Fagot 16ft on the Frobenius at the Queen's College, Oxford, which has half-length resonators in the bottom octave and projects a haunting 11th harmonic (sounding a sharp 25th).

With the exception of the reeds, the new pipework was voiced entirely in the church by John Bailey, Martin Goetze, Edward Bennett and Kenneth Tickell of Grant, Degens & Bradbeer; voicing in situ is slower and therefore more expensive than factory voicing, but has the advantage of allowing plenty of scope for experiment, which in our case was very useful.

The mechanical key and stop action is a mixture of old and new; sections of the old manual action have been replaced by lighter trackers of American whitewood. The touch is firm but not heavy. The pedal key action is of aluminium and was designed and constructed by Paul Hale. A traditional trundle stop action was made for the Positive by Jim Williamson. Only the pedal stop action is electric.

More than 50 people assisted the project in various capacities over a period of two years or so; the total cost was around £6000. At times we were inclined to treat the venture as an extended academic exercise, an attitude quickly corrected by John Bailey, who guided us with infinite patience to achieve a fine balance between matters technical, musical, historical and financial, and to whom we are greatly indebted.

The organ has been used in recitals by players including David Briggs, James Dalton, Paul Hale, Lady Susi Jeans, Alena Veselá and Peter Ward Jones, and recorded by Colin Andrews and Richard Vendome.

Various stop combinations are demonstrated by the author on CD (Gift of Music CDG1220) and on YouTube ('Kidlington organ').

1888				**1976**				
Great	mechanical			*Great*	mechanical		∅	
1	Open Diapason	8	*a*	1	Principal	8	145	*d* (bass *e)*
2	Claribel Flute	8	*a*	2	Chimney Flute	8	95x75	(9)
3	Dulciana TC	8	*b*	3	Octave	4	77	*d*
4	Principal	4	*b*	4	Nason Flute	4	62	*f*
5	Harmonic Flute	4	*a*	5	Fifteenth	2	45	*d*
6	Fifteenth	2	*b*	6	Sesquialtera II	2 2/3, 1 3/5	38	*f*
7	Clarionet TC	8	*a*	7	Mixture IV-V	1 1/3	29	*d*
				8	Trumpet	8	66	*d*
				9	Tremulant	(to both manuals)		
Swell	mechanical			*Positive*	mechanical			
8	Horn Diapason TC	8	*a*	10	Bourdon	8	100x80	*g* (bass 2)
9	Lieblich Gedact	8	*a*	11	Stopped Flute	4	60	*f*
10	Gemshorn	4	*b*	12	Gemshorn	2	40/32	*h* (bass 10)
11	Cornopean	8	*a*	13	Cimbell III	1/2	13	*d*
12	Tremulant			14	Dulzian	8	40	*i*
Pedal	pneumatic			*Pedal*	mechanical	(electric stop action)		
13	Open Diapason	16	*c*	15	Sub Bass	16	204x166	(14)
14	Bourdon	16	*a*	16	Principal	8	155	(1, 4)
				17	Octave	4	80	(10)
				18	Twelfth	2 2/3	55	(3)
				19	Mixture III	2	44	(4, 8, 6)
				20	Septima	4 4/7	56x46	(5, bass *j*)
				21	Bombard	16	100	*i*
couplers				*couplers*				
15	Great-Pedal			22	Great-Pedal			
16	Swell-Pedal			23	Positive-Pedal			
17	Swell-Great			24	Positive-Great			
	wind pressure: 75 mm				wind pressure: manual 63 mm, pedal 75 mm			

∅ internal diameter of lowest note in mm. (or depth x width of wooden pipes)

a Willis (1888)
b Willis, with two or more markings (1888)
c Willis (1908)
d Giesecke of Göttingen (1975)
e Brindley & Foster (1879)
f Grant, Degens & Bradbeer (1975)
g (Willis, 1851?)
h Fratelli Denti of Crema (1982)
i F. J. Rogers of Leeds (1975)
j (Holdich, c1850)

numbers in brackets refer to reused stops from 1888 organ