



Photo © Malcolm Crowthers

## A NEW ORGAN CASE IN NOTTING HILL

by Simon Ablett & John Norman

Recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in organ case design, following a fallow period in the first half of the twentieth century. Traditional examples include Kenneth Tickell's twin cases in Worcester Cathedral – with cues from G.F. Bodley and A.G. Hill – and the highly-ornamented realisation of a Pugin sketch in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft, Palace of Westminster. Modernist designs have come from David Graebe, Peter Collins and Didier Grassin, amongst others. The modernist organ case in St John's Church, Notting Hill, London, is thus part of a growing trend.

When J.H. Stevens & G. Alexander's new Gothic church was built on the summit of Notting Hill in 1845, money ran short so, unusually for the time, it was furnished with a second-hand organ. Even so it took the parish three years to get around to paying the organbuilder. The organ had been built in 1794 by William & Robert Gray for Holy Trinity Church, Clapham, home of the Clapham Anti-Slavery movement. Liturgical fashions changed rapidly in the 1860s under the influence of the Oxford Movement, so in 1873 the Notting Hill choir moved to a new location in the chancel. The organ followed them, moving to the south east chapel from its original position on the west gallery.

In 1885 the by-then 90-year-old instrument was out of date. Funds were still short so the commission to enlarge it and fit a new action was given to George Hele of Plymouth, who retained much more of the 1794 work than was usual at the time. Few changes were made in the following 125 years and Hele's mechanism was of a rare type, so the instrument now has a grade II\* Historic Organ Certificate.



Boxed away behind stonework on the south side of the chancel and with extra sound absorption in the form of a 1960s carpeted podium under the crossing, the organ had a good reputation for tonal quality when heard at close range but was remarkably ineffective when heard by the congregation in the nave. Initial thoughts of relocation to the original position on the west gallery were revised when it was realised how much light would be lost from the nave, so a compromise was sought by moving the organ to the north transept. >

## PROJECT

???



pipes which did not even cover the upper part of the instrument. The challenge thus was to create a new case that would cover the instrument in its new freestanding position without being overbearing, and would respond both to the bold and unfussy detail of Stevens & Alexander's building and to the general design ethos of the new rooms planned for the west end of the church.

It is usual for a substantial number of the pipes of an organ to be located in a wooden box (usually rectangular) fitted with louvres controlled by the player to vary the volume of sound. The instrument had gained a particularly tall swellbox in 1885, then hidden behind an arch. Since the brief was that, because of its historic II\* status, the organ itself should be restored without alteration, the swellbox presented a design challenge, since a new case tall enough to cover it risked being overbearing and out of scale with its surroundings. The solution was to design a lower case of flush oak panelling with inset walnut and allow the dark-painted box to peep over the bold line of the new front pipes and to provide a visual distractor in the shape of a St John's Eagle. A model was made of the proposed design to help members of the congregation visualise the effect. Initial plans for an alabaster sculpture proved both heavy and expensive but Alison Henham, a member of the organ builder's staff, suggested the use of shiny 80% tin alloy, matching the new bass pipes in the case. Her design was approved by both the parish and by the Diocesan Advisory Committee and the finished eagle has attracted wide praise.

The support of the Heritage Lottery Fund has been an integral part of the project. The Fund realised that the historic status of the instrument presented an educational opportunity. Since the freestanding position of the organ allows people to walk right round it, the lower side panels have been glazed, permitting views of the 125-year-old mechanism. A model illustrates the basic principles underlying the mechanism and small LED lights within the organ allow observation of the movement of the pallet valves that admit air to the pipes.

The organ project is one of several ambitious schemes at the church under the appeal campaign Restoring the Future. These include alterations to the main entrances, the restoration of the original metallic paint finish to the magnificent terracotta reredos, major alterations at the west end and initial ideas for a new decorative and lighting scheme. ■

## PROJECT TEAM

Rector:  
The Revd William  
Taylor

Architect:  
Simon Ablett  
Inspecting Architect

Organ Consultant:  
John Norman

Organbuilder:  
T.W. Fearn & Son

Organ case:  
Penny's Mill Design

Eagle sculpture:  
Alison Henham

With the organ speaking from a 'round the corner' position, removal of the acoustically absorbent carpet was deemed a necessary part of the plan. The new layout has proved a great success, with the organ now audible at a sensible power level and with the wood floor giving a good acoustic for performances by a wide range of music ensembles, including, piano, choir and string orchestra. The availability of a newly-cleared and intimate Lady Chapel is a bonus.

The new transept position for the organ has involved the instrument being made freestanding, just as it had been both at Clapham and when first installed at Notting Hill. The challenge was, however, that the original case had been lost when the organ came from Clapham. Hemmed in by masonry in the former chapel, the 1885 remodelling left the organ with little proper casework facing the chancel, just lower panelling plus bass