

A History of the Organ

The church records of St. Michael, Highgate, tell us that the first organ was built in 1842, when Thomas Gardner was appointed Organist. Fourteen organists and five rebuilds later, some of the original pipework is still retained in the present instrument, although it is perhaps doubtful whether the congregation of 1842 would recognise the fact.

1842 & 1873

The organ of 1842 was built by Messrs. Gray & Davidson in the west end gallery, at a cost of £700 – which was mostly defrayed by a double pew rent for one year. It was a three manual and pedal instrument of 19 stops, although the Swell, Choir and Pedal were short compass and there were no manual to pedal couplers. In 1859 it was cleaned and lowered to a new position, possibly to overcome the distance between congregation and organ accompaniment. Certainly for this reason, a harmonium was purchased in 1869 and placed at the upper end of the centre aisle for weekday services.

By 1873 the instrument was in need of further cleaning and modernising, with a view to the ‘improvement of singing’, and this work was undertaken by the original builders at a cost of £61. Being one of the few remaining organs still tuned to the old system, it was returned to equal temperament, so that music could be played in every key. The reeds were improved and the Cornopean rank – which had been prepared for in the original instrument – was now added. Further work included a new set of pedals from CC – E, extending the compass by nine notes and adding nine new Open Diapason pipes; the provision of Great-Pedal and Choir-Pedal couplers and the attainment of a steadier wind supply from the bellows. This was a comprehensive instrument for the time.

The 1873 Organ

Great Organ
(CC – G)

Double Open Diapason
Open Diapason
Stopped Diapason
Principal
Twelfth
Fifteenth
Mixture

Swell Organ
(Tenor C)

Bourdon
Open Diapason
Stopped Diapason
Principal
Cornopean
Oboe

Choir Organ
(Tenor C)

Open Diapason
Dulciana
Stopped Diapason
Clarabella
Principal
Flute
Clarinet

Pedal Organ
(CC – E)

Open Diapason

Great-Pedal
Choir-Pedal
Swell-Great

1885

The dramatic introduction of an east end surpliced choir in 1881 with 18 boys in addition to the men, accentuated the distance between organ, choir and congregation. This resulted in the June report of 1883, circulated to all parishioners, recommending a new, or almost new organ in the east end, to cost £650. It took twelve months and much persuasion for the project to catch the imagination and resources of the parish. Once £643 had been promised, Messrs. Hill & Son were employed to build an organ comprising 26 stops at the east end and work began in September 1884.

This was a substantial rebuild with entirely new tracker action, new keys, pedals and bellows. The old Great soundboard was adapted to the Choir Organ and some pipework retained, but new soundboards were built for Great, Swell and Pedal and several new stops added. The short compass Choir and Swell were now extended with new basses and in some cases the trebles of the old pipework were transposed to increase scale. Moving the organ to the east end required a new case which was designed by Messrs. Hill & Son, built in oak to match the choirstalls and given by Mrs Lovell as a memorial to her husband. The upper part of this case still stands today. The organ was dedicated on January 25th 1885, which was observed as the anniversary of the consecration of the Church.

The 1885 Organ

Great Organ (CC – G)

Double Open Diapason
Open Diapason *
Open Diapason
Stopped Diapason
Principal
Wald Flute *
Twelfth
Fifteenth
Mixture III
Trumpet *

Choir Organ (CC – G)

Open Diapason
Dulciana
Stopped Diapason
Clarabella
Principal
Flute
Flautina *
Cremona

Swell Organ (CC – G)

Bourdon
Open Diapason
Stopped Diapason
Salicional (grooved) *
Vox Angelica T.C. *
Principal
Fifteenth *
Mixture *
Cornopean
Oboe
Clarion *

Pedal Organ (CCC – F)

Open Diapason
Bourdon *
Violoncello *

Great – Pedal
Swell – Pedal
Choir – Pedal
Swell – Great
Swell – Choir
Swell – Great octave

6 composition pedals

1911

Following the complete breakdown of the organ on several occasions in 1910, Messrs. Brindley & Foster were contracted to rebuild and further enlarge the instrument, replacing the worn-out tracker action with tubular-pneumatic. Their additions consisted of the Pedal Violone, Sub Bass and seven of the eight enclosed Choir stops, the old Cremona being revoiced as a Clarinet. These additions were placed in the farthest eastern bay of the Church, requiring a new case which was dedicated to the memory of Mr Smithett, a late churchwarden. Part of this case forms the eastern side of the present organ. The new console was detached and stood on the north side of the altar, with the player facing south. This four department and pedal instrument, playable from three manuals, now included some of the most delicate stops available at the time, which also meant a certain amount of inter-departmental duplication. A full appraisal of the instrument, 30 years later, appeared in the July 1943 edition of *The Organ* magazine by J. Stewart Archer. The cost of the rebuild was £900.

The 1911 Organ

Great Organ

Double Open Diapason
Open Diapason I
Open Diapason II
Stopped Diapason
Principal
Wald Flute
Twelfth
Fifteenth
Mixture III
Trumpet

Choir & Solo Organ (unenclosed)

Open Diapason
Clarabella
Dulciana
Principal
Flute
Flautina

(enclosed)

Hohl Flute *
Dolce *
Celeste *
Viol *
Harmonic Flute *
Orchestral Oboe *
Clarinet
Vox Humana *

Tremulant

Swell Organ

Bourdon
Open Diapason
Stopped Diapason
Salicional
Celeste
Principal
Fifteenth
Mixture II
Cornopean
Oboe
Clarion

Pedal Organ

Sub Bass *
Open Diapason
Bourdon
Violone *
Violoncello

Great – Pedal
Swell – Pedal
Choir – Pedal
Swell – Great
Swell – Choir
Swell – Great octave

6 composition pedals

1958

This rebuild was undertaken at a cost of £4,000 by the firm Rest Cartwright, to which the Organist of the time, Ivor Davies belonged. Once more the action was changed, this time from tubular-pneumatic to electro-pneumatic with a new detached console in dark oak on the north side of the altar, the player facing west. The four departments were reduced to three with a new Choir chest using Roosevelt action, together with a Dulciana extension rank on a separate chest. The remaining unenclosed Choir stops were discarded together with the Vox Humana. Whilst the keyboards extended from CC-C only the Choir had pipes beyond G. A Tromba-Trombone rank was added to Great and Pedal respectively and the pedal further increased by a second Bourdon and its 8ft and 4ft extensions. The Basset Horn replaced the Swell Bourdon and additional couplers and tremulant were now available. A Trompette was added to the Choir in memory of G.T. Pinches, a previous Organist of the Church and teacher of Ivor Davies.

1985 The rebuild by Nicholson of Malvern

By 1977 the organ was a sad and dim reflection of its former character. After four rebuilds, much of its personality had been lost and the musical and mechanical short-comings were all too evident – constant wind leaks and ciphers, a very weak treble to most ranks and a completely unusable Choir department. The physical layout of the instrument and console also required redesigning for the organ was spread poorly over two bays of the church with a hidden console of no musical merit. The general effect of the organ was well suited to the building and style of worship at St Michael's and the instrument contained some good quality pipework which had survived each rebuild.

The decision was made to establish the musical integrity of the organ whilst respecting the liturgical requirements of the parish. This resulted in a relatively unfashionable approach; a comprehensive rebuild incorporating the best of the old pipework into a substantial 3-manual instrument with electro-pneumatic action and traditional 'Parish Church' specification, including a new enclosed Choir division. The PCC placed a contract with Nicholson of Malvern, and the Organist was appointed Consultant, to draw up the specification and liaise with the builder throughout the project.

The role of the organ in public worship is one of glory to God. In this respect liturgical needs have been met first, in the provision of a firm and comfortable Great chorus for hymn accompaniment, a tonally and dynamically wide-ranging 'English' Swell and an independent and supportive Pedal department. The Choir division placed immediately above the north-side choirstalls, is not designed as a small Great, but provides new colour and choir support in appropriate parts of the liturgy such as chanting and anthems.

The addition of upperwork in the two new mixtures and Great Fifteenth is sufficient in this acoustically sympathetic building and the Swell octave couplers are provided only for special effects, being redundant in the 'full swell' combination. The reeds have been given thorough attention and recomposition, now providing a chorus Trumpet, a bold and rich Cornopean and a thrilling solo Tuba, able to hold its own in single notes against Full Organ. Whilst on paper the flutes may appear to duplicate, the aural reality is of a subtle but distinct voice-character to each rank, giving great flexibility and choice. The new flutes are wide-scaled and the revoiced Great flute now has clarity and real personality. The Viola is in effect a delightful small diapason making a very useful swell-great link in dynamic growth.

By careful design Nicholsons have been able to contain the organ in one bay of the church whilst ensuring proper egress of sound from each department – Swell and Choir speaking into the Chancel, Great and Pedal into the Nave. The instrument has been raised as high as physically possible, giving greater aural space beneath. The fully refurbished console, whilst not ideally placed for organ, choir and congregational ensemble, merits its position by being in touch with the chancel but not a distraction from the Nave.

Nicholsons have achieved a resourceful instrument which is an exciting example of modern tonal design. On such an instrument music of any period can be made to sound artistically convincing.

Alan K. Gray

The 1985 Organ

Great

Double Open Diapason	16
Open Diapason	8
Viola	8
Stopped Flute	8
Octave	4
Wald Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Fourniture	III/IV
Trumpet	8

Choir to Great
Swell to Great

Pedal

Sub Bass	32
Open Wood	16
Violone	16
Bourdon	16
Principal	8
Bass Flute	8
Fifteenth	4
Octave Flute	4
Fagotto	16
Ophicleide	16
Posaune	8

Choir to Pedal
Great to Pedal
Swell to Pedal
Swell Octave to Pedal

Combination Couplers

Pedal pistons to Great pistons
Great pistons to Pedal pistons
Generals on Swell Toe Pistons

Sequencer (added 2011)

96 levels of generals
12 levels of divisionals
'+' and '-' thumb and toe pistons

Choir (enclosed)

Gedeckt	8
Dulciana	8
Principal	4
Open Flute	4
Nazard	2 2/3
Gemshorn	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Flageolet	1
Clarinet	8

Tremulant

Tuba (unenclosed)	8
Tuba (unenclosed)	4

Swell to Choir

Swell (enclosed)

Open Diapason	8
Lieblich Gedeckt	8
Salicional	8
Voix Celeste (T.C)	8
Principal	4
Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Plein Jeu	IV/V
Contra Fagotto	16
Oboe	8
Cornoepen	8
Clarion	4

Tremulant
Octave
Sub-Octave
Unison Off

The Organists of St. Michael's Church, Highgate

1842 – 1873	Thomas Gardner
1873 – 1884	Henry J. Lawner
1884 – 1893	Charles E. Metcalfe
1893 – 1895	H. A. Weeldon
1895 – 1909	George T. Fleming
1909 – 1936	George T. Pinches
1936 – 1937	Ernest F. Mather
1937 – 1939	J. W. Horton
1940 – 1947	G. N. Cove
1947 – 1971	Ivor R. Davies
1971 – 1974	Peter M. Wright
1974 – 1976	Stephen O. Barber
1977 – 2009	Alan K. Gray
2009 –	Paul A. Dean