The organ of St Peter de Beauvoir *Notes by Brian Gill*

*Lord Gill is a keen organist who has just retired as Chairman*

*of the Council of the Royal School of Church Music.*



**The history of the organ**

The church of St Peter de Beauvoir was built in 1841. In 1884 when it was extended at the east end by the construction of the raised chancel, the present organ was installed in a chamber on the south side. The organ is a two-manual and pedal pipe organ built by the famous firm of JW Walker of London. In 1974 the organ was extended by the addition of certain stops, space for which had been prepared for in the original Walker design. This work was done in memory of Ethel Uncle who was organist of St Peter’s from 1961 to 1974. There is no record of the builder who carried out this work; but it is apparent that although that work was not of the highest quality, it left most of Walkers’ tonal scheme intact.

In 2007 the congregation instructed organ builders to carry out a programme of restoration of the organ, but in the event for reasons of cost that project was not carried through.

In 2009 the importance of the instrument was recognised by the award by the British Institute of Organ Studies of a Historic Organ Certificate, Grade II.

By 2015 it was apparent that the instrument had deteriorated and could no longer be relied on to support the music of the church. In 2016 the parish considered a number of options for the future of the instrument and took expert advice. It engaged Organ Design Limited of Liss, Hants, to carry out a programme of conservation that recognised the importance of this historic instrument. The brief was to overhaul the mechanical action of the instrument and restore the manuals and pedals while retaining the original Walker pipework and voicing and as much as possible of the original mechanical action; and to refurbish the extension work that was carried out in 1974.

**The firm of JW Walker**

The firm was founded in London in 1828 by Joseph William Walker, who was then only 26 years old. After his death in 1870 the business was continued by his youngest son John James Walker. The firm remained in the hands of the Walker family until the death of Reginald Walker MBE, the grandson of its founder. By then Walkers, like many other English builders, were competing in a declining market for pipe organs and facing new sources of competition from the numerous Continental builders who were being commissioned to build organs in England in the fashionable classical style.

In 1975 the firm was re-formed under the management of a former employee, Robert Pennells, and his son Andrew. This marked a fundamental change in Walkers’ policy from the production of organs in the English romantic style with which it was associated to the production of mechanical action organs in the classical style in keeping with the modern trend. Walkers carried this out with considerable technical innovations of their own. Since 2005 the company has been led by Sebastian Meakin, who has continued the work of the Pennells.

Among Walkers’ best work from this period of its history are the organ of Lancing College Chapel built in 1987 and the organs of Exeter College, Oxford and St Martin in the Fields, London, both built in 1995. In this new style of organ design the Walker company continues to enrich the tradition of English organ building in the 21st century.

**The restoration work carried out by Organ Design Ltd**

Organ Design and Construction Ltd was founded by Matthew Copley, formerly Head Voicer of the Willis Company. Matthew Copley designed and built several major instruments, notably the organs in St Mary Magdalen, Oxford, the Oxford Oratory and St Mary’s Metropolitan Cathedral, Edinburgh. The successor company is owned by Edward Dove, who was a student of Matthew Copley when he taught organ design at Merton Technical College. Organ Design are experienced in the conservation of historic instruments. Among their recent work is the restoration of the Snetzler organ in the Unitarian Church, Hastings.

**The St Peter’s organ**

For the last 60 years or so, organ design in this country has been preoccupied with the classical style that returns us to the sound world of the organs of the north of continental Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. The St Peter’s instrument takes us back to a different era in organ design. It was built in the heyday of church building at a time when Walkers were among the leaders in the organ market. It was similar in many respects to the surviving Walker organs in St Peter with All Saints, Chertsey (1880) and St James the Great, Stretham (1886); but both of these instruments have been greatly altered and enlarged by other builders. It is the integrity of this instrument that makes it special. Although it was built in 1884, the St Peter’s organ represents a lovely example of the mid-Victorian church organ designed at a time when Walkers had not yet adapted to the emerging technical innovations or to the new organ sounds that characterised the late Victorian years. The building of this two-manual organ with a 16ft Open Diapason as the only pedal stop and with a preponderance of 8ft stops on the manuals is typical of that approach. The craftsmanship of the mechanical action, the quality of the oak woodwork and the quality of the pipework sufficiently justify its status as a historic organ.

Although Walkers were building many similar organs at the time, we can be sure that the scaling and the voicing of the pipes were specific to the size and the acoustics of the building. The National Pipe Organ Register shows that the instrument has a Salicional and an Oboe in the Swell division. These must have been in the original specification.

An examination of the organ suggests that in the 1974 alterations the Oboe was removed and the Salicional was replaced by the present Swell Diapason 8ft. Despite these changes, the original Walker sound is still the predominant characteristic of this organ. What we hear is a beautifully voiced, warm-toned romantic organ that despite its modest stop list is capable of playing most of the organ repertoire and is excellent in accompanying both the choir and the congregation.

**The Specification of the organ**

The action

Mechanical throughout

The key compass

Manuals – from C to g3 (56 keys)

Pedals – from C to f1 (30 keys)

The stop list

Swell (enclosed)

Double Diapason 16 ft tone

Diapason 8 ft

Echo Gamba 8 ft

Celeste 8 ft (from tenor C. 1974, added to spare slide)

Stopped Diapason 8 ft tone

Principal 4 ft

Mixture 2 ranks (12.15)

Horn 8 ft (1974, added to spare slide)

Great

Open Diapason 8 ft

Dulciana 8 ft

Stopped Bass: Wald Flute Treble 8 ft tone

Principal 4 ft

Flute 4 ft tone

Fifteenth 2 ft

Mixture 3 ranks (15.19.22. 1974, added to spare slide)

Trumpet 8 ft (1974, added to spare slide)

Pedals

Open Diapason 16 ft

A Pedal Bourdon 16ft was prepared for in the original layout but has never been installed.

Couplers

Great to Pedal

Swell to Pedal

Swell to Great

Wind

Electric discus blower

The original hand-blowing mechanism has been retained

Accessories

Catch-trigger swell pedal

Three foot-operated combination levers *May 2018*