

Martin's introductory remarks, 19 September 2017

**Good morning and thank you all very much for taking the trouble to come here.**

**Today we need to discuss what are difficult and sometimes very complex matters. I hope we can do this positively and seriously, but I definitely hope not always too solemnly.**

**In essence, this conference is all about 'sustainability'. This word has hopped into public and political discourse, because it is becoming more apparent every day that the long-term sustainability of churches is by no means certain. But the word covers a wide range of problems which also affect organs in various ways. One task we have today is to unpick these problems and look at them closely, to see what we can do – and perhaps cannot do - to protect organs.**

**You might think that Hampstead, once London's 'village of culture', home at various times to Sigmund Freud, Nikolaus Pevsner, DH Lawrence and George Orwell, would be very busy protecting and cherishing its heritage. It is, in fact, at least as far the built and natural environment go. But the varied problems that affect organs can be found here too :**

- A convent was sold and ruthlessly demolished, no-one knowing if there was an organ in it or not. This was only one hundred yards away from where we are now, just across the green space to the south of this building.**
- There are organs in two Church of England churches in the civil parish of Hampstead that are not being maintained by their church leaders and are being left to degrade.**
- Here are two examples of the low priority organs have had up to now with amenity and heritage organisations. A very large Willis organ was allowed to be removed by English Heritage, as it then was called, from Air Studios, the large former Congregational church just across the road from here. An organ in the care of Historic England, in the music room at Kenwood, dating from the 1790s is hardly ever used.**
- Finally, this church, St Stephen's, was abandoned by the diocese of London forty years ago. It was vandalised for twenty years before a**

home in Sweden was finally found for its large Willis organ, the one you heard when you came in this morning. This building was saved by the efforts of Peter and others, fighting the Church Commissioners who wanted to sell the site. It was brought back to life by Michael Taylor and his wife Andrea who runs the school that supports this building on a daily basis, so that it can be used for community purposes and conferences like ours, and let for weddings and other public or private events.

So this church is iconic : it was left to die and then resurrected. Is this going to be pattern for all of Britain's unsustainable churches, of whatever date ? If so, the future is going to be a very rough ride.

But, as one of SAVE Britain's Heritage reports said in 1975 :  
 'Conservation ... is not a fetter or a curse : it is a necessity, which should also be seen as a stimulating challenge'.

The rising crisis of sustainability led the Department of Culture, Media and Sports to set up an English Churches and Cathedrals Sustainability Review towards the end of last year. [I think that adding cathedrals was a big mistake, as we will no doubt see.] Its declared aim was 'to consider the challenges faced by our ecclesiastical heritage buildings and their long term sustainability'. The chair of the reviewing 'task force', Bernard Taylor, hoped that the public consultation that closed at the end of January this year would (I quote), 'find innovative ways ... to ensure that these beautiful buildings achieve levels of sustainability that will enable them to remain at the heart of their communities for generations to come'.

Setting aside the point that buildings themselves are unlikely to find such solutions, and the assumption that these churches are actually at present really any longer at the heart of 'their communities', the thrust is obvious : the pact between government and chiefly the Church of England, forged 40 years ago in the wake of Peter's excellent 'Change and Decay' exhibition at the V & A, has run its course. Signs of this are already apparent : the scheme for Heritage Lottery Funding of repairs to church buildings has been altered so that from 2020 they will have to compete with other applicants, and the stipulation that only experienced architects and craftsmen should be

involved has been watered down. These are worrying signs of both lack of commitment and lack of money.

But even those churches that are sustainable are in this position because of they operate in a way which is also unfavourable to organs. Therefore the instruments we like and want to protect are coming under serious attack in a pincer movement. I don't think we need to look at why this has happened historically ; what we need to do is look at these problems in the face this morning and try to understand them. Then this afternoon we must try hard to see what we might do about the situation organs find themselves in.

We've come here to discuss what I think is a deepening crisis – not only for organs in particular but really also for church music in general. On the one hand we have the financial crisis that has precipitated the Sustainability Review. On the other we have the growth in cities and university towns of evangelical, neo-Calvinist churches that do not see the need for music of any high quality ; as a result many of them do not want or use organs that are, they say, too 'expensive to maintain'.

They are a group of churches, mostly within the Church of England, that have been allowed to become almost independent of it. This is presumably because they are maintaining buildings, though at the expense of making typical changes to them. Their attendance numbers are keeping up, often because they are run in conjunction with church schools whose prospective parents have to attend their services.

These urban churches are therefore in a sense still sustained, for at least as long as the present fashion lasts, or until a successful preacher-entrepreneur moves on. They also have their equivalents in country parishes, but there the turn-over of entrepreneurs is more rapid, though organs often quickly become victims when such people take over even rural churches. As a rule of thumb, you can be sure that if the pews go out, the organ will be next on the list ...

Organs in these rural churches are also threatened by another development. The idea of 'Festival Churches' started in Lincoln diocese, which with Durham diocese has the lowest numbers of worshippers in rural areas. Such 'festival' churches are to be opened only for services only at major

church festivals (Christmas, Easter and Whitsun, presumably, and perhaps Harvest Festivals). The clue is in the name – though they may be opened too for the ever-decreasing numbers of marriages and funerals performed in churches these days.

If this ‘festival’ route is recommended by the Task Force appointed under the Sustainability Review, there is cause for real concern. How these country churches are to be maintained, insured and protected is not clear. Organs in them are likely to be left for months without use, heating or maintenance. Unless the local community takes a real interest in their organs as well as their church fabrics, here is a real threat to our organ heritage. Where do those of us who are concerned decide to stand? Do we try to protect the good organs, whatever that means, and let the rest go?

But having said that begs the question: where are the good ones? Not every organ is on NPOR and anyway the Register does not tell us if an organ is in good order or if it is played regularly. Or if it is in a church already unable or unwilling to pay its diocesan share.

Perhaps being able to decide rapidly which organs are really worth defending might rally people to save the good ones. It might even persuade some major Foundation to come up with the money to keep them going, even if the churches themselves are rarely used. Might it be possible to put a scheme in place in which local people (organists and others) are shown how to do essential maintenance work on the organ, as happens in two areas in France already?

Can we expect church organ advisers to help? We heard at the fortieth anniversary conference of the British Institute of Organ Studies at Cambridge last September that the Church of England has shamefully failed to put in place any realistic, practical and mandatory training for its own advisers. We all know that the expertise of advisers varies from the well-informed to the opinionated, and there’s no doubt that there is need to pull their levels of professionalism up towards those of other advisers to churches.

SAVE Britain’s Heritage campaign noisily for threatened country houses, churches and other monuments. The Landmark Trust, the Spitalfields Trust

and many others work proactively to save our built heritage. But who does the same for organs ? What strategies can we think up that will save all those good unwanted organs in the not at all distant future ?

First, though, as I said : we need to know how things stand at present, and this morning is going to be devoted to trying to understand the problems we face. Armed with this knowledge, this afternoon we can discuss what we might do about them.

So I am now handing back to Peter to give the first of this morning's presentations ...