

The Perils of Preservation

Martin Renshaw

Barber Institute, Birmingham

29th February 2020

Here's a homely picture of the interior of a quiet chapel in rural Holland. And there they all are, sitting to attention in their Sunday best. They love their old organ which is very well preserved because they've done nothing to it for as long as anyone can remember. But suddenly their well-preserved but also well-neglected organ has taken its revenge on their organist!



Preservation without maintenance

'A Capella' (1998) by Marius van Dokkum
© 2020 Marius van Dokkum / artrevisited.com

This rustic scene is called 'A Capella' – a nice title, meaning at the same time 'unaccompanied' (as services here will be for a while) or perhaps something like 'this is the way it's done in chapels'. The artist is Marius van Dokkum, whose wife is an organist.

Twenty-two years ago, when this painting was made, such a disaster would have set off a deep discussion about preserving this organ – would it be restored, conserved or reconstructed? State money, organ experts and local action would have been all geared towards keeping this organ in place and working. But, if this happened now, would this organ be preserved in the same, almost automatic way? There are just as many denominations in Holland as there are in England. And just as in England their chapels and churches are closing down, so any debate over organs even in organ-loving Holland may no longer have an automatic outcome ... Wouldn't the outcome, these days, more likely be that the chapel would be closed for 'health and safety' reasons and then that closure made an excuse for abandoning both the building and the organ in it? In England, that would almost certainly be the case. (See Guyhirn, below.)



Guyhirn, Cambs Bishop c1870

St Lawrence, Evesham, Worcs (CCT)



Abandoned organs

Christ the Consoler, Skelton cum Newby



This lecture has two parts: one is to look at the outcomes of two related projects in northern Yorkshire and then to see how we stand now with the 'preservation' of organs in this country?

**1771 organ
Entrance hall, Newby Hall**

**Christ the Consoler,
Skelton cum Newby**



The two Yorkshire projects were carried out by me in the early 1980s and they came to mind for reasons which you will see later on. Unfortunately David Shuker didn't know (how would he?) that I was the restorer of the organ whose excellent photo by John Sayer he put on the front of the last Journal as an introduction to the valuable article by Peter Burman. NPOR does not know either – it has been a well-preserved 'secret' till now.

I was asked in 1980 to have look at the c1771 organ in Newby Hall and report on its possible resuscitation after a very long period, some 65 years perhaps, of abandonment. Its case by 'Athenian' Stuart and its context in that house designed and furnished by the Adam brothers were well-known. But the maker of the organ had been given as anonymous in all accounts of it, such as in Michael Wilson's book on 'Chamber Organs'. Daily family and servants' prayers in the entrance hall had been sung with it until the outbreak of the first world war, and one might suppose that this had been one of its primary functions ever since it was installed. But the organ had been silent through that first world war and afterwards, while generations of the Compton family had died, in military battles of two world wars and then struggled in administrative battles to preserve their house and estate. Opening the house and park to the public had here, as in many other similar places, allowed the family's finances to be re-balanced and had brought in money for much-needed conservation of the properties.

Entrance hall organ details, Newby Hall



My colleague, Karl Friedrich Wieneke, and I battled a little bit as well, but this time in 1981, and only through road-blocks which had been set up (illegally) by the police on the A1 to filter out cars whose occupants might be going to support the miners, then on strike against a previous mendacious government. But eventually Karl and I were received rather more warmly than expected, on arriving at the front door, tool-boxes in hands. The mother of the house, perceiving that one of us was German, expressed with some heat – and quite reasonably - her low opinion of the country that had twice mown down the flower of her family. Karl replied quietly that his family had also been brutally victimised by the Nazis for their religious (Christian) beliefs. Peace and understanding were assured from then onwards.

Entrance hall organ, Newby Hall, restored pipework



Another personal memory from our time working at Newby Hall was that the boy friend of Susan Shepherd, the secretary in the estate office, was – by complete co-incidence - a certain Michael Renshaw. As a result, letters arriving for or from 'M Renshaw' had to be carefully screened to see who they were actually meant for. And of course it turned out, as it was almost certain to do so, that this Michael was a not-very-distant cousin of mine.

The original idea was simply to make the organ work again, and this was achieved, using the best-known conservation methods, following which it was possible to make a careful reconstruction of the divided Great four-rank mixture. This will be fully described in a forthcoming edition of the BIOS Journal.

Right now, I'd like to make just two points – the first is that, nearly forty years ago, many of the questions that preserving an old organ raised, both technical and ethical, had at that time scarcely been explored in the UK. There was no forum in which these could be debated until I organised the Branston conferences in the later 1980s. These were followed by a major conservation meeting in Liverpool in the later 1990s, but by then I had left the UK to work in France. Nor was there in 1981 any outside expertise to guide us over the restoration or otherwise of the two reed stops, which were therefore left as they were found ...

The second point is that, having restored the organ, what was its future going to be? I'm afraid that once the first few series of recitals had been played and once the older generations of the Compton family had passed away, any initial enthusiasm went away with them. An organ which had to be pumped by foot by the player or an assistant, did not appeal enough to local organists to keep it alive and sounding publicly except very sporadically. It is however still working perfectly well, nearly 40 years on. It is hardly dusty either, as Vicki and I were able to see for ourselves four years ago. In other words, it is indeed well-preserved, but more like a Stradivarius violin in a glass museum case than a piano in a railway station, available for anyone to play.

Christ the Consoler, Skelton cum Newby, Yorks South view



While working at the Hall, we were asked to have a look at the organ in the nearby church, Christ the Consoler, which stands in the deer-park grounds of the Hall. The church was built with the ransom money which had been collected by Lady Margaret Vyner for the release of her son. He had been kidnapped in Greece, but was murdered before he could be rescued. Its architect was William Burges, the designer also of the equally elaborate church at Studley Royal, built at the same time (from 1871 onwards) a short distance away, near Fountains Abbey. Of all architects of the period, Burges certainly knew about 'setting organs in their context' (the subject of Peter Burman's article), architecturally speaking, if not historically.

Organs in William Burges' Yorkshire churches



St Mary's, Studley Royal



Christ the Consoler, Skelton cum Newby

He was perhaps the best-known of the C19 architects whose clients gave him freedom to play to the utmost with gothic forms, colours and materials. He took advantage of this freedom to an extent that no other was able to do, with the possible exception of his predecessor, AWN Pugin. So the organ in this church is provided with a unique case, which is really more like a huge version of a portable organ of the St Cecilia type than anything else. In addition, the organ is supported on what must be one of the most elaborate jettied stone organ lofts ever made.

Elaborate jettied stone organ loft



Its four courses of carving culminate in a balustrade that incorporates a string-course which is itself a continuation of the capitals of the nave arcade. The organ's siting is impressive; it is also very impractical. The console and main parts of the organ are set under and behind a high arch between the nave and a north tower. The Great soundboard is set outside this arch, placed high up at the same level as the feet of the front pipes.

Great pipework and access



Between the front pipes are two hinged gates, about 25 feet above ground. These open up to give access to the pipework, and there is a small ledge just inside it to stand on. I doubt if anyone would be allowed to work on it these days without substantial scaffolding, but nearly 40 years ago, things were different, and repairing this organ (following water damage) definitely looked to me like an interesting challenge. It was.

Only a few years later, in 1991, the Newby Estate found it could no longer afford to support the church, and it was offered to and taken over by the Redundant Churches Fund. At which point, I was told that my services were no longer required. I don't know who looks after this organ now, but it is very obviously in need of TLC, and perhaps more, nearly thirty years on.

St Mary's Studley Royal, Yorks



The much larger contemporary Lewis 1875 organ at the other Burges church of Studley Royal, was restored by Harrison's in 1980. Inexplicably described as 'a little organ' on NPOR, and with a Grade One HOC, it is arguably a much less successful design visually, though certainly its placing and access are equally as successful in making all efforts to tune and maintain it as difficult as possible. This church is, annoyingly for would-be

visitors, not open all day, and is in fact completely shut during the winter. It is the property of Historic England and managed by the National Trust.

So here are a couple of pretty well-preserved Lewis organs on which a good deal of money and effort have been spent, plus a unique and historically important organ by Thomas Haxby. There they will sit, mostly silent, until someone else comes along and cherishes them. 'Well preserved', indeed.



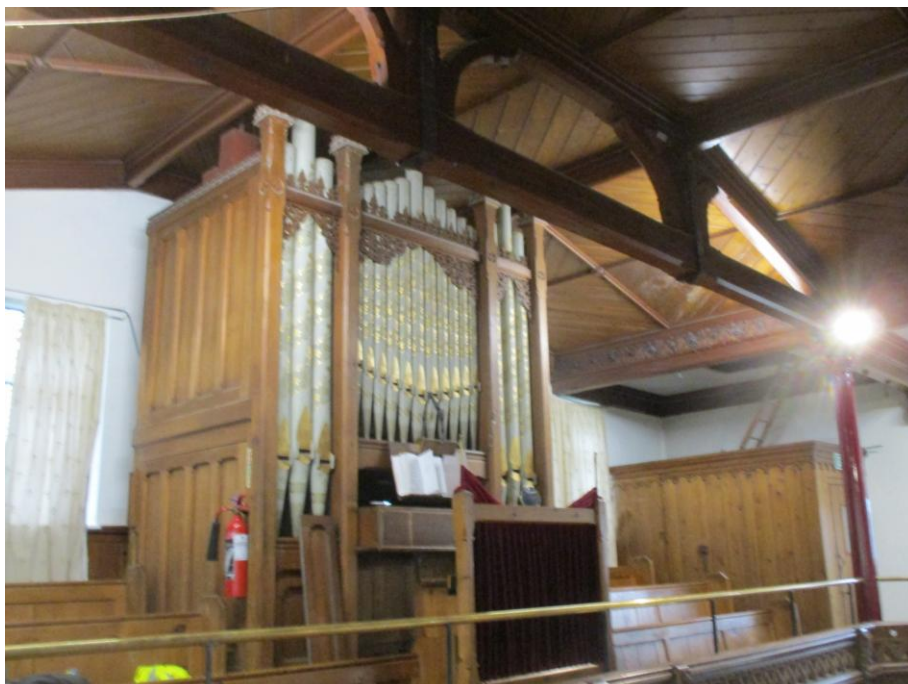
St Andrew, Ombersley, Worcs

John Gray organ, 1829

Many other organs preserved by neglect could be cited, not least the altered-but-totally-restorable John Gray organ almost uniquely still in its original case and still on the gallery of the contemporary church for which it was made. This is in the 1829 church at Ombersley near Worcester, built by Thomas Rickman for the Sandys family. I don't think that this organ is very likely to go anywhere else, or to be thrown out, even though its chief local defender died four years ago. But it might be rash to make any assumptions about this or any of the other organs I have seen and investigated.

Bluntisham Baptist church, Hunts.

Holdich, 1875



Why do I say that? Because an exactly equivalent organ – by another excellent maker, and also still on the contemporary church's gallery for which it was made in 1875 – has (since this lecture was given in early February) been dismantled. This organ is, in addition, completely original and in perfect playing order. But permission for its removal and sale was given last year by the Listed Buildings Advisory Committee of the Baptist Union.

Here is a prime example of a victim of what has wrongly been allowed to become the default solution for an unwanted organ – to try to sell it abroad. And that is how I became involved, because I was asked to go along to have a look at it with a view to relocating it. I'm afraid that my reaction – that they absolutely should keep their own iconic organ – did not go down well and was ignored.



These two organs, at Ombersely and Bluntisham, are the hinges to the second part of what I want to say:

I think we now (and by 'we' I mean BIOS as an organisation) must go beyond arguments over definitions of terms like 'conservation, restoration, or preservation'. Otherwise such debates seems to me to be like holding conferences on the deck of the Titanic, while in large swathes of the country our precious historic culture of organs and church music is lurching towards a gigantic and perfectly visible iceberg. We need to get onto the front foot and challenge the well-known failures of current systems – those failures that were well-exposed in the conference on Unwanted Organs in September 2017. This meeting was under the chairmanship of Peter Burman. It was he who wrote the article in the last Journal that featured the organ at Christ the Consoler on its cover, and inside, and which provoked this talk.

In my own small ways, I am taking some steps. Here's one of them.

By setting up a Trust, I hope to be able to preserve old organs by restoring them if necessary and then placing them where they can be useful: in redundant churches of the CCT, FFC etc., and - why not? – in railway stations, like the pianos you increasingly see and sometimes hear there.

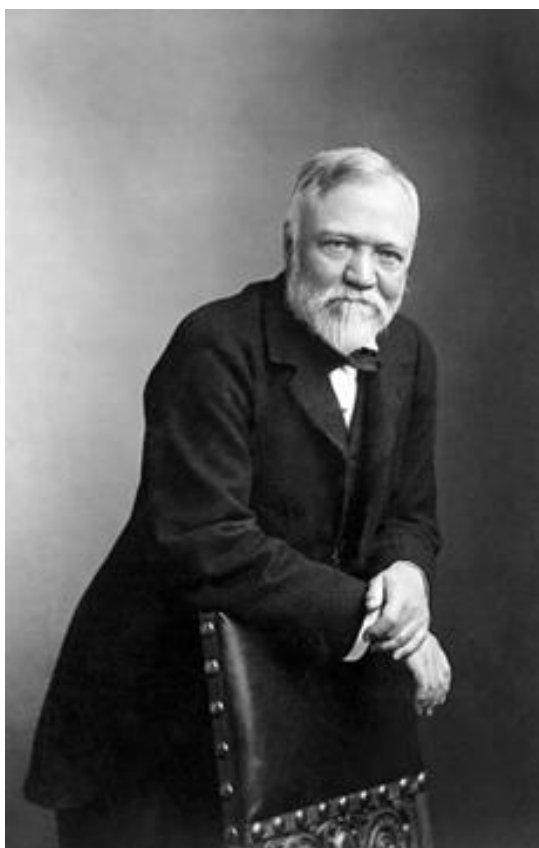
Aims of the Trust

To acquire Historic Pipe Organs to loan them to suitable places, on the condition that the recipients

- take reasonable care of the instruments
- insure them
- regularly maintain them by employing reputable organ builders, and
- have regular concerts to raise funds to pass to the Trust in acknowledgement of the loans.

The latest news (summer 2020) is that the Trust's articles are pretty well agreed among the trustees, but that there might be a delay of some months while the Charity Commissioners get round to reviewing them. There will be at least seven organs 'vested' in the Trust to start with, three dating from the C18, two from the 1820s and two Bevington organs, one each from the 1850s and 1860s. Three of them already are installed in suitable places. In addition, the loan of the Nelson organ now being lent as the choir organ in Christ Church cathedral, Oxford, for five years (originally it was to be for six months) has been partly financed by the same source. The financial resources of this TC Trust are useful but by no means huge, but with willing helpers and community input, it can spend seed-corn money to ease organs into places which might not otherwise have been able to think of benefitting from them, as we will discuss in a moment. So if any readers of this have ideas about places which might accept Trust organs, please let me know.

The TC Trust's available funds pale into tiny insignificance compared with the equivalent of many millions of pounds made available by an almost-forgotten patron of organs just over 100 years ago.



Andrew Carnegie in his own words

'Believing from my own experience that it is salutary for the congregation to hear sacred music at intervals in the service and then slowly to disperse to the strains of the reverence-compelling organ after such sermons as often show us little of a Heavenly Father, I feel the money is well spent.'

Andrew Carnegie positively wanted churches to buy organs, and to achieve this he set up a secretariat. This assessed requests for help and paid out up to half the cost of an organ. I think it would be a good way of remembering Andrew Carnegie's extraordinary generosity by also setting up a secretariat, specifically designed to protect organs pro-actively. It would do this by challenging faculty and other applications for their unnecessary removal, and by continually pushing ecclesiastical and planning bureaucracies into considering organs at the level they deserve, instead of putting obstacles in the way of saving them. Even once you have got an organ out of a church, sometimes at very short notice – as I have had to do twice recently from closed Methodist churches - it can then be an tiring uphill task to get these organs into another church.



Let me show you an example of this. [A 4-minute film clip was shown.] This community church and music school, in the back streets of Homerton are, as you have seen, not only keen to have an organ but also willing to do something about it. They drove up to near Durham, they loaded pipes and parts, drove back again and unloaded them - and then they cleaned them. They have helped when they could to put the organ together as well – along with other wonderful volunteers, one of whom is here in this lecture room. Three organ-playing employees of Harrison's also helped with dismantling the organ. One of them, with his dad, hired a large van and drove it all the way to London, to bring the largest 16' Pedal open wood pipes, and an extra reservoir and a blower - and then refused to accept any payment at all for doing this.



This organ's move could only have been done as a community effort, and that is the second thing I and the TC Trust would like to foster: to get communities involved in working on what will be 'their' organs. It is a model that has worked in France and it is beginning to work here too, as the experience at Homerton shows. In fact, having heard about Homerton, there are now two other London churches now considering going down the same route - and this will be good news for two more unwanted organs.

Here at Homerton is a community with fourteen (yes, 14!) young organists, eager to learn to play the organ, thanks to the enthusiasm of Fiona who runs the school on Sundays and Mondays. But at one stage their excitement was nearly crushed by Historic England. They told the church committee that installing the organ in the chancel of this 1890s former C of E church was not permitted because it would obscure the view of some murals in the former sanctuary. These murals had already been partly whitewashed over by previous users of the church, and those that remained were so faded as to be illegible. I pointed out that the organ was to be sited well clear of them and would not obstruct anyone wanting to see them. This made no impression at all on HE, so I wrote a very stropy letter to the senior conservation officer at Hackney Council. I explained that organs were not protected from being removed from churches, so why should they be refused entry into churches that wanted them? Especially in this case where the church once had an organ (by Lewis) that Historic England had actually allowed to be removed! The officer's reply included the following:

Letter from senior Conservation Officer

.... it appears that (probably wrongly in my view) organs are not normally regarded as "part of the building" for Listed Building Consent purposes and Listed Building Consent is not normally required for their removal. It would therefore be somewhat perverse for it to be required for their installation or re-location. I note that this is a good pipe organ and the intention is for it to be used to train young organists and these are all benefits which the Council would tend to support.

These works do not therefore need Listed Building Consent and the church is free to locate the organ where it wishes. I am happy for the [church] committee to be advised on this basis.

I hope that this judgement might now be useful to others facing the same obstacles.

We all know too that it is common for organs in closed churches to hang around in them for very many years.

Guyhirn, Cambs: the preserve of pigeons



Eventually these organs are vandalised or perish from neglect, in this case (in Ely diocese) because for about fifteen years the diocese and local authority have never got their act together to save a good oak-cased Bishop chancel organ.

And this is not a new phenomenon: exactly the same was happening fifty years ago, even before BIOS was founded. The truth is that processes for the sensitive and orderly disposal of the assets of closed churches have not improved at all during all that time. BIOS has done excellent work in establishing the NPOR, the HOCS scheme and an At-Risk Register, but these advances have been made against a continually deteriorating background, as far as the security of organs in churches is concerned.

So I suggest that members of BIOS might look with interest at the Andrew Carnegie model. They might think collectively of setting up an active secretariat to campaign along with other amenity societies such as SPAB or SAVE to look after the interests of organs everywhere – all organs, everywhere. It's even possible that the present-day Carnegie Trust might help set up and finance such an enterprise, especially if it could be shown to be protecting and saving, among others, those same organs that had been funded by the great man himself.

Has the membership of BIOS ever been asked if they would like BIOS to become a pro-active organisation or not? No, we haven't, but it's really time we were asked. I know that there are several people in this room who would like to be asked. I can't see any reason why BIOS shouldn't make such a move, even if it means tweaking statutes and Aims. Who would back me in putting the idea on the agenda for the forthcoming AGM?

It seems to me that we must go beyond talking about preserving organs only in the historical-restoration sense. Now we need to concentrate on preserving our entire organ culture! And not incidentally, at this time of climate emergency (or catastrophe), it is time to think hard about the carbon impact of organs, especially when building new organs or rebuilding old ones using plastics and non-renewable and non-restorable materials.

**To work for the preservation
and, where necessary,
the faithful restoration of
historic organs in Britain.**



A Capella (1998) by Marius van Dokkum
© 2020 Marius van Dokkum / artrevisited.com

The future, the preservation, of organs can't any longer be left to chance and individual action. It now needs to become the job of the whole organ community – that's me, that's us - and that's BIOS as well.

Thank you, Vicki, for your wonderful work on the power point images, and to you all for listening.