

PAUL R HALE

MA(Oxon) FRCO ARCM FRSCM FGCM FRSA
Accredited Member of the Association of Independent Organ Advisers
Emeritus Cathedral Organist, Southwell
Archbishop of Canterbury's Lambeth "Thomas Cranmer Award" 2017
President, The Organ Club

Organ Consultant

www.PaulHale.org
PaulHale@diaphone.clara.net
01949 836170 / 07974 931057

3 TREFOIL CLOSE
BINGHAM
NOTTINGHAMSHIRE NG13 8TX

Parish Church of St John the Baptist, Chipping Barnet

THE ORGAN

The proposals by Henry Groves & Son

Henry Groves & Son made proposals for the rebuilding of the fine organ in St John's in February 2023. In order to make these proposals, Jonathan Wallace (principal of the firm) made a survey of the organ and studied the detailed Report & Recommendations I had prepared at the church's invitation some weeks beforehand. This was followed by a site meeting at which Jonathan Wallace, the Diocesan Organ Adviser (Andrew Lucas) and I looked in great detail at all that had been proposed, refining some details and arriving at complete agreement about the scheme.

Mr Lucas and I were impressed with the grasp Mr Wallace had of the organ's needs (and the church's), and of the imaginative, practical and sensible manner in which he proposed to address them. He came up with space and cost-saving ideas for the layout and a new, modern wind system, with extremely thorough replacement of all electrical and pneumatic elements, with a convincing console layout of stops and pistons, and with a method of allowing access to the inside of the Swell box, for the proper tuning of the pipes, which has been impossible for decades.

His idea of moving the Choir Organ will prevent the pipes from being damaged by a tuner struggling to get between the Swell and the Choir, and his idea to move the Great Mixture to the other side of the soundboard so it can be tuned from the passageboard is exactly what we had hoped for. An inspired idea was that of lying down some of the large Pedal pipes (currently in the SW corner of the organ) in an area under the Swell box currently occupied by an unnecessary number of bellows. This will create room for tonal egress, for tuning access and for a new chest for the Great Trumpet, which will also be made to draw on the Choir Organ – very useful.

Because there will be a new Choir soundboard with electro-magnetic mechanism, two stops can be used at two pitches each – most useful – and, cleverly, the five ranks making up the ‘Cornet séparée’ can be made to draw as one stop – a 5-rank Cornet – on the Great Organ. In addition, the Choir gains a longed-for Clarinet.

The console will be refitted and refinished in Bideford by Renatus, the UK’s leading independent console maker, so that will be done to the highest standard.

All tendering firms showed competence in their proposals, but in my view, and that of the Diocesan Organ Adviser, the Henry Groves proposals are far and away the most appropriate and imaginative, and also offer much the best value for money.

An example of a recent 3-manual 49-stop organ by Groves not far from Barnet is to be found in St Mary the Virgin, Potters’ Bar, where in 2019 the company restored, reconfigured and installed a three-manual Walker organ from a church in Derby. I supervised the work and Renatus restored the console, so a visit there to inspect the organ, its quality and finish, would be a worthwhile idea.

Paul Hale
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8th February 2024