

Thorney Abbey Organ

On 16th August 1858, the Cambridge Chronicle carried a brief announcement buried under a report concerning the intemperate behaviour of a curate at Thorney Abbey, "The Organ. - The re-opening of the organ at Thorney Abbey takes place on Thursday next, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon. We understand this is now one of the finest organs in the neighbourhood, the swell organ more especially. A treat may be anticipated".

As it turned out, whoever wrote it was well-advised since the organ is one of the outstanding instruments in the Fen country.

The Abbey Church of St Mary and St Botolph, Thorney is all that remains of an ecclesiastical establishment dating from 662 which was refounded in 972 following destruction by the Danes. The Abbey church was reconstructed in 1090 and over the next 500 years, further additions to the monastic buildings took place with a Lady Chapel in the 13th century and, between 1305 and 1322, the Great Gate, Chapter House, Abbot's Hall and a new Dormitory.

The monastery, led under the rule of St Benedict, survived until its dissolution in December 1539. Following this at around 1550, a period of demolition occurred, partly to provide stone for Trinity College and the new chapel of Corpus Christi College in Cambridge. At this time the Abbey was granted by the Crown to John, Earl of Bedford.

The subsequent fortunes of the Abbey are bound up with the drainage of the Fens by Cornelius Vermuyden. Numbers of Walloons were brought in to settle on the land and, needing a place of worship, an agreement was drawn up on 17th March 1639 between the fourth Earl of Bedford and the Bishop of Ely to enable them to use the building once it had been repaired. In 1839 further work was begun under the direction of Edmund Blore, which included a new sanctuary and transepts, which was paid for by the Duke of Bedford.

To date however, it has not been possible to find any record of an organ beyond notes made by Sperling and another unknown source. Neither does there appear to be any mention of an organ in the correspondence between Thorney Abbey Estate and the architect Blore, which is odd given the magnitude of the buildings reconstruction. There is the following (unattributed): "The tenantry, to mark their sense of gratitude for an act of such considerate munificence, purchased by subscription a fine organ, of the value of £320, built by Robson & Son".

Kelly's Directory of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk 1904, notes that "The organ cost £320 and was enlarged in 1858. . ."

Sperling's record of the organ tells that it was built by Joseph Robson ca. 1840. Many of the bellows weights carry the initials 'J R & Son' which would seem to bear this out.

The specification given by Sperling is as follows:

GREAT G G - F

Open Diapason
Stopt Diapason
Dulciana to Tenor C
Principal
Flute
Twelfth
Fifteenth
Sesquialtera II ranks

SWELL Fiddle G T0 F

Open Diapason
Stopt Diapason
Principal
Trumpet 'very good'
German Pedals 1½ octaves

The present organ contains work dating from at least that period and perhaps before. There is some suggestion that an earlier instrument may have been built by Benjamin Flight. Flight's "Practical Tuner for the Organ or Pianoforte" published in 1830 lists Thorney Abbey, Northampton as one of the organs built by him. However, there is no other corroborating reference.

Thorney Abbey must have had a flourishing musical tradition since there are two letters written in February 1846 by Tycho Wing, the Duke's estate manager at Thorney, to an unknown person. They refer to the organist at Thorney expressing an interest in a post at Tavistock and it is obvious they would much rather he did not go, "Our man here has talent and skill no doubt but I advise him that it is scarcely to be expected that the preference will be given to him over all the local candidates". Apparently, the candidate was required to be "well versed in Cathedral and Choral music".

In 1858, the organ was enlarged by Bryceson & Son at a cost of £195 paid for by the 7th Duke of Bedford. At the same time, it was divided in two parts on a gallery either side of the west window with the Swell in the north case, and the Great and presumably the Pedal, in the south. The cases and swell box were to be made at Thorney by the Estate carpenters. Bryceson also incorporated the four stops from Robson's Swell organ and the old CC Great soundboard and pipework with a few minor tonal changes.

It was this organ which eventually Hill & Son reconstructed in 1888 when it was moved to the south transept. Their brief was to "Remove organ from western gallery, now divided into 2 parts N&S, and re-erect in new gallery of S Transept. Reconstruct action and rearrange soundboards so as to make again in one, with keys at end on W. side. Oak case. New front."

There were a few tonal changes. Based on documentation, Hills reduced the Swell mixture from four to two ranks, substituted a Voix Celeste for the Swell Harmonic Flute and appears to have substituted another Stopped Diapason on the Great for the original since the present stop has none of the traditional English quality.

New Swell sub and octave couplers were to play through and six combination levers were added, three to each manual. Hills' original intention to have the player facing east was reversed and the player now faces west with the rather odd situation that the Swell organ faces into the east wall of the transept rather muting its effect. The total cost was £240. There is a rather interesting document certifying their entitlement to receive payment signed by T Micklethwaite, the church architect on 21st December 1888.

Some of the metal basses of the Great Open Diapason were clearly part of Bryceson's case fronts and were lavishly decorated. They survive tucked away at the back of the organ and give some idea of the effect of the instrument at the time. The stoplist as left by Hill & Son is now:

GREAT

Open Diapason 8
Stopped Diapason 8
Keraulophon 8
Principal 4
Wald Flute 4
Fifteenth 2
Sesquialtra
Cremona 8 from ten.g

SWELL

Bourdon Bass 16

Bourdon Treble 16

Open Diapason 8

Violin Diapason 8

Voix Celeste 8 from ten c

Principal 4

Mixture

Cornopean (old Trumpet?)

Oboe 8 from ten.c

Clarion

PEDAL

Open Diapason 16

COUPLERS

Swell to Great

Swell to Pedal

Great to Pedal

Acknowledgements:

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Bedford County Record Office.

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