

THE STORY OF THE ORGAN AT CHALKWELL PARK METHODIST CHURCH BY JOHN LOW

The organ, built by John Compton & Co., was originally installed in 1930 in what became the Gaumont Theatre, Haymarket, the pipes being placed in two chambers under the stage and the console behind curtains to the right and forward of the stage - so that, to anticipate a question, the console never 'rose up'.

Here at the Church in the late 1950's, concern was being expressed about the inadequacy of the existing organ, the pipes and (integral) console of which were sited in the east transept. This organ had come from a Cinema - the Mascot in London Road, Westcliff. It had been built by August Gern around the beginning of the 20th Century.

In the 1950's, Stanley Davies had moved into the area and transferred his membership to Chalkwell. Though he could not play a note, he had a great interest in organs and he suggested to the leaders and trustees of the church that they might buy a redundant organ from a cinema. He didn't receive much encouragement! Caution was the order of the day; perhaps understandable seeing that the church had only just cleared the debt it had incurred at the time it was built nearly 30 years earlier. But Stan persisted, and wrote to Lord Rank to enquire about buying a cinema organ for the church. Two were notified as being available. He took me along to try both of them. Neither was felt to be suitable for our purpose. In one case the cinema manager pleaded with us not to put in a bid – the one thing that made his job worthwhile was playing for the children's matinee on Saturday mornings!

I still remember the day when I was at work at the NSPCC Headquarters, then in Leicester Square, and Stan came to the office to ask me to go to the Gaumont Theatre in the Haymarket nearby to play the latest one notified as being up for disposal. We both felt this would be excellent for our purpose and, shortly thereafter, the Minister, the Rev. Owen Johnson, was able to try the organ, and he agreed. The reluctance of the trustees was overcome; they gave it their support. So the organ was purchased for £150 in 1959, that sum having first been raised by Stan for this very purpose.

When the purchase was completed, only a month remained for removal before contractors were to begin refurbishment of the cinema. Using a van kindly loaned by Fred Granger, one of our members, Stan would leave for London at evening time, work through the night, labelling and removing all the pipes – well over 500 of them – and the windchests, load up, make the return journey, unload at the church, and then return home for a few hours rest before repeating the same process. Though he had no experience of organ building he completed the work within a fortnight.

The last day of the removal will live on in the memories of those who took part, including the writer. None of us were removal contractors, but we all learned lessons that day under Stan's directions. Moving the weighty console up the aisle of the cinema with barely an inch to spare on either side was very difficult and had to be done with great care.

The task of re-assembling the organ took a number of months, but the work went ahead with Stan taking charge but being greatly helped by Charles Thomas, Len Matthews and Ray Coker. The pipes were placed in the chamber (above the choir vestry and behind the two arches on the opposite side to the pulpit) which had been provided for when the church was built but never used. That does not sound difficult until it is pointed out that in the theatre the pipes were in long, low, rooms under the stage whereas the church's organ chamber is lofty, but with a comparatively small floor area. The chamber had first to be partitioned to provide the two chambers in line with the organ's original design.

When the work was completed, the organ was dedicated on the 25th June 1960 and the service was followed by a recital given by Dr Eric Thiman, organist of the City Temple, Holborn Viaduct.

Initially, the tuning of the instrument was in the hands of Frank Holden. Frank had worked for John Compton at the time the organ was built. Then he went to the BBC where, among others, he was responsible for the maintenance and tuning of the BBC Theatre organ, built by Moller – a Dutch firm. This was sited in what had been “Jubilee” a redundant Methodist Chapel in Hackney of which, coincidentally, Stan had been a member and a trustee in his earlier years. That was where Stan first met up with Frank. The greatly-loved Sunday morning programme “The Chapel in the Valley” was broadcast from there in the post-war years.

The story of the organ, and how it came to this church, cannot be told without constantly referring to the part played by Stan Davies. He was an intensely practical man, and from 1960 to 1990 when he died, he was the curator of the organ, lavishing hours of work on it. In his Will, he bequeathed the residue of his estate to the church, and asked that a part of the bequest should be set aside as an Organ Fund in the names of Mrs Ellen Annie Stoneman, the widow of his former employer (whom he cared for in her last years) and himself. On her death, with no family, she had bequeathed her house to Stan, so that he would have a home. The purpose of the Fund is to secure the future maintenance, upkeep, and tuning of the organ

In 1991 the action of the organ was restored, the cost being met out of Stan’s bequest. . This work was undertaken by Terry Fearn, an organ builder, and a member of Rivercourt Methodist Church, Hammersmith, who had been responsible for the tuning of the instrument since Frank Holden’s death. When Terry Fearn moved to the West Country in 2004, the tuning of the organ was put in the hands of Peter de Vile of Saffron Walden.

In 2008 it was evident that work needed to be done on the instrument – in particular to update the electrical system, which was still in its original state. Two estimates for the work needed were secured, and the one from B C Shepherd & Sons was accepted. This included the installation by Sonic Services of a solid state note switching system and piston capture system, together with the carrying out of action adjustments and speech and regulation of pipework. Shepherds have also agreed to undertake the tuning of the organ.

The organ, typical of the theatre organ of its day, is built on the extension principle, so that each set (rank) of pipes can be played from more than one manual and at different pitches. It is totally enclosed, so that no pipes are visible; they are all behind shutters, which can be opened or closed to vary the volume by the player using one or both swell pedals. Below is listed the sets of pipes in the two chambers with the variant names used at other than 8 ft pitch being given in brackets. The list is given in ascending order of volume.

Right chamber (left swell pedal) *Flute *Strings *Salicional (violin) Mixture *Diapason (octave)
Left chamber (centre swell pedal) Gamba *Clarinet Horn *Tibia (ocarina) *Tuba Trumpet

Those marked with an asterisk were part of the original 9-rank organ. The Horn and the Mixture are replacements for other ranks (Krummet and Vox Humana) which were of less use in the church than in the cinema. The Trumpet and Gamba ranks were added not long after the organ was brought to the church. Stan made these alterations at various times so that the instrument should be as user-friendly as possible in its new home. Space was not available for all the cinema organ effects, and it was a matter of some sadness to him that space could not be found for the Marimba Harp and Xylophone. However, a Set of Chimes and the Vibraphone were retained.

This organ was in the Gaumont for about 29 years until 1959. The removal from the cinema and its installation here took at least a year, so that it has now served the church for much longer than it was in the cinema. Both of this church’s organs came from cinemas – is that a record?

Since the opening recital, the church has been very pleased to welcome some noteworthy figures from the organ world to give recitals on its interesting instrument. These include Sandy Macpherson, George Blackmore, William (Bill) Davies, Simon Gledhill and Nigel Ogden.

Previous printed material about this organ, produced by Stan, made little mention of his part in the whole enterprise. He would have resisted any tribute being made. But it is right that what he did should not be forgotten. He loved this church and its people and the work he undertook in bringing the instrument here was an expression of his faith and his joy in singing the praise of his Lord. For someone who had never undertaken such a task before, this was a labour of love, and the organ at Chalkwell is a testimony to his initiative, patience, persistence and ingenuity.

John Low, October 2009