

The organs of St. Neots Parish Church



The Church in the early 19th Century

From an engraving of 1820 (by courtesy of the Norris Museum, St. Ives)

The earliest reference to an organ in the history of St. Mary's Church in St. Neots is to be found in a medieval will dated 1531 when a bequest of a grail or gradual and a breviary was made to serve the organist at Matins and Mass. This is just before the reformation and about the time the tower was completed. From recent research done by Dominic Gwynne (an organ builder of repute) and his reconstruction of two instruments of the time from parts found in East Anglia it could be that St. Neots might well have had quite an interesting organ.

However the builder of the first recorded organ of present times was Dr. Justinian Morse, though there is an interesting reference to payment to an organist just a little earlier but so far no further evidence of an instrument has been found. Dr Morse was an apothecary of Chipping Barnet who combined the art of healing disease with that of making organs. Three other organs are said to have been constructed by him, namely those at St. Matthew's, Friday Street; St. James's, Clerkenwell and The Foundling Hospital all in London. Morse's inventive ingenuity is further referred to in an advertisement of which a copy is found in the First Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, this advertisement is summarised as follows: "An advertisement of a new organ by Justinian Morse, of Chipping Barnet, Herts. Any person in one hour though ignorant of music, can play all psalm tunes, voluntaries, &c." Also there is a reference that he worked on a player mechanism but from the wording of the above, it is fairly obvious that the instrument referred to was a barrel organ of some kind, but there seems to be no record of the specification of this or of any of the other organs constructed by the enthusiastic doctor. We also know that on October 20th, 1752, as he was riding in his chair at Barnet, "he was seized with an apoplectic fit near the Windmill, and being carried home expired in a short time to the very great concern of many families in that neighbourhood, with whom he was in much esteem." His tombstone in Hadley churchyard states that he was in his sixty-second year

There are the records of 1749 when the 'Morse' organ was installed and opened including the sermon preached at the opening service. The next reference appears in the churchwarden's accounts in 1758, when "Bainton mended the organ for 2sh." Again in 1761 to "Mr. Robinson for a pair of joynts for ye organ 9d." In 1782, Mr. Argent was paid £10. 10s. for repairs and in 1783/4/6, repairs seem to have been done by Rouse. During this period also the tuning was part of the organists stipend and receipts are still filed in the churchwardens accounts of the time now held in the County Record Office. In 1820, Thos. Davison of Whitefriars, London, printed a book written by George Gorham, M. A., "The History and Antiquities of Eynesbury and St. Neots in Huntingdonshire and St. Neot in the County of Cornwall", and in there is a reference to the Organ in St. Neots Church as follows:

"The Organ, with which the Church is furnished, having been built by a private gentleman, Justinian Morse, M. D. of Barnet (a celebrated mechanical and musical genius), was presented by him to the Church of that place, with the stipulation that it was to be forfeited if the Parish ceased to provide an organist. These conditions not having been complied with, Dr. Morse himself for some time performed. It was finally removed to St. Neots, where it was opened by Dr. Randall of Cambridge in September 1749".

On arrival at St. Neots, this organ was placed on a screen under the tower and from the engraving in Gorham was a very real asset to the church.

In 1847 St. Neots, following in the fore of current opinion, spent much time and energy in refurbishing the church. To understand what was done at this time, one must look to Leeds Parish Church, where an influential priest a Dr Hook was vicar. He rebuilt the parish church in such a way that a pattern of worship evolved which left an enduring mark on the worship of the Anglican Church. A surpliced choir was placed between the Nave and the High Altar. Until this time this form of layout for the worship had been, in the main, restricted to Cathedral and Collegiate Churches. St. Neots was not slow to adapt to this "new fashion" and in this refurbishing, took the "Leeds Movement" into account. The pews, pulpit, choir stalls, all date from this time. The organ was torn down from its loft and placed in the Jesus Chapel at the side of the chancel. The work was executed by a "builder and joiner" of Bedford and this may well account for the fact that within 10 years it needed replacing. The entry in the faculty at this time makes very interesting reading.

"The organ to be fixed in the Jesus Chapel, and such alterations to be made as may be found necessary, and such repairs done as may be required for its use"

In 1855, remembering that the Morse organ was over 100 years old, and had had two moves, it must have been virtually unplayable, for, in August, G. M. Holdich was commissioned to rebuild the instrument - tenders having also been received from W. Hill of London as well for a two manual instrument. The saddest part of the rebuild was that the priceless 18th Century case was sold to him in part payment. This case has had a history in itself and having been in many churches and a school, may now be found in Birmingham Cathedral where it forms the case on the west side of the organ. Though it cannot be proved absolutely, however, the markings on some of the pipes notably the choir Cremona and some of the mixture pipes lead us to believe that a little of the "Morse Organ" found its way into Holdich's organ. The organ as it stands today is a medium sized three manual and pedal instrument of the mid-nineteenth century. It was built by George Holdich in 1855. It is indeed one of the few large instruments he built and is one of a very few left today that is in any way recognisable of his style. This is mainly due to the conservative overhauls that it has had in 1900 and 1972.

Holdich was a builder of many fine small organs of the time, and worked from 1830 to 1894. He built in the Classical English style using lightly winded pipework and did not follow the trend of the time for higher pressure sounds. The organ at St Neots is of Holdich's early period, and could be said to be an example of his best work.

George Holdich was a remarkable man and his work was that of a master in his trade. He trained many apprentices some of whom became well known organ builders in their own right. The prospect pipes at St. Neots are the work of Alfred Hunter, a pipemaker of the time, and are autographed as his. Most of Holdich's larger instruments have now been heavily rebuilt or destroyed, but here in St. Neots we have one which is still recognisable as his work.

The original specification gives interesting reading and shows that it was a fine instrument well above the average organ of its day. A copy of the opening brochure is available for inspection at the County Library. (Appendix 2)

The opening of this organ was a great occasion for St. Neots. The Revd. Frederick Ouseley both played and preached. The anthems for the day were Green's "God is our hope and strength" and the evening service was sung to Ouseley's own setting in E flat with Croft's "God is gone up with a merry noise" as the anthem. Later in this year, a concert was arranged at which young Arthur Sullivan was the soloist. Judging from the choir books of the time, which are still in the church, the choir must have been a very competent body of singers.

The organ was well used and in 1873, Holdich renewed the Great Trumpet Stop for £12. It had been damaged by coke fumes. Five years later, he was paid £26 13. 6d. for repairs and improvements (was this a clean?). Holdich retired at well over 80 in 1894 and in 1895 Bishop & Sons took over the maintenance and £12 0s. 6d. was spent on "adjustments". The choir was still a very efficient body and in 1900, £350 was raised to clean and improve the organ. Some of the improvements are to us today of a very doubtful nature, but we are indeed grateful that the organ was in the main still a recognisable Holdich masterpiece, foremost of the improvements were the provision of string toned stops for performance of Romantic Organ Music of the 19th Century. The organ was hand-blown until 1948 when electricity replaced the gas lighting; Bishop's fitted an electrically-driven blower. In 1952, Mr. Norman Hall, of Cambridge, took over the maintenance of the organ and for nearly 20 years kept it playable until a clean was possible. In 1969, the pitch was lowered to concert pitch (C 522). In 1972 the organ was becoming unreliable and after due consideration Bishop's were asked to clean and reset the speech of many pipes that had deteriorated over the years an this gave and opportunity to gently modernise the instrument especially the pedal department. At last it was possible to restore some of the grandeur of the instrument. This work enabled the organ to function for another 30 years when after over 150 years the

soundboards began to show signs of distress and the action was becoming extremely heavy as well as many pipes be nearly impossible to tune.

During 2006 & 2007 the instrument underwent a total restoration with all leather work replaced; a lighter and redesigned action designed by Mr. John Bailey replaced the well worn 1855 design whilst keeping the integrity of a mechanical touch. A new B.O.B. blower was fitted and the pedal organ changed to solid state switching. The organ is now voiced to 75 mm WG pressure. Also the opportunity was taken to put back the Violin Diapason on the Swell (having been replaced with a Larigot in 1972). The pedal reeds were completely revoiced and a new Quint 10 2/3 with a 4 foot Flute stop on the pedal, trumpet pipes on the great were replaced having been made by Booths of Leeds for the restoration. The swell Cornopean and Clarion were totally revoiced and finally an extra rank of pipes added to the great mixture from Tenor C. This restoration has been carried out again by the Ipswich branch of Bishop & Son. A new blower has been provided by B.O.B. of Derby

The 'Holdich' Organ 2006

PEDAL ORGAN

Open Wood	16
Bourdon	16
Quint	10 2/3
Bass Flute	8
Twelfth	5 1/3
Fifteenth	4
Octave Flute	4
Trombone	16
Trumpet	8
Clarion	4

GREAT ORGAN

Open Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Open Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Mixture	2/3 rks.
Trumpet	8 (new)
Sw. to Great	
Tracker	

Electro - Pneumatic Action
Solid state switching

Sw. to Ped. Gt. to Ped. Ch. to Ped.
All Tracker

CHOIR ORGAN

Clarabella	8
Gemshorn	4
Flute	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Block Flute	2
Cremona	8
Sw. to Choir	
Tracker	

SWELL ORGAN

Violin Diapason	8
Gedackt	8
Vox Celestes (TC)	8
Principal	4
Flautina	2
Mixture	3 rks.
Contra Oboe	16
Cornopean	8*
Clarion	4*
Tremulant	
Tracker	* revoiced with new tongues
3 composition pedals to Great and Swell	
The swell act on the Pedal stops	

The organ is voiced on 75mm WG throughout. A new BOB blower has been provided

The 'Henthorne Organ' 2003

Pedal		Great		Positive	
1 Bourdon	16	5 Open Diapason	8	10 Gedackt	8
2 Principal	8	6 Flute	8	11 Salicional	8
3 Flute	4	7 Principal	4	12 Nason	4
4 Great to Pedal		8 Sext (12,17)	2 rks	13 Piccolo	2
Great to Positive		9 Fifteenth	2	14 Siffloite	1

Electric Action with Solid State Switching. The organ is voiced in the classical English style on a low wind pressure of 70mm. The instrument stands to the west of the Lady Chapel.

A small organ was built in 2003 for use in the church during the restoration of the Holdich organ.

Built by Roger Henthorne & The Casework which was designed to match the Lady Chapel screen was made by Reg. Flower

Appendix 1



The two organs as they are now.

Appendix 2

THE 'MORSE' ORGAN

From a manuscript in the Royal College of Organists, a specification Morse Organ has been found and is as follows:-

Three Manuals

GREAT - GG-D	55 notes
Open Diapason metal	8
Open Diapason wood	8
Stopt. Diapason	8
Principal	4
Twelfth (divided)	3
Fifteenth (divided)	2
Tierce	1 $\frac{3}{4}$
Sesquialtra Bass	IV ranks
Cornet Treble	IV ranks
Trumpet (divided)	8
Clarion Treble	4

PEDAL (Added 1820-1847)
(18 notes)
11/2 Octaves Pedal Pipes
Great to Pedal coupled

SWELL - Fiddle G	to D 32 notes
Open Diapason	8
Stopt. Diapason	8
Principal	4
Fifteenth	2
Cornet	V ranks
Trumpet	8

CHOIR - GG-D 55 notes

Open Diapason	8
Stopt. Diapason	8
Principal (divided)	4
Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Vox Humane	8
Cremona (Fiddle G)	8

THE HOLDICH ORGAN 1855
(Quoted from Opening Brochure)

"This Organ consists of three rows of keys, namely a Great Organ. Choir Organ, and Swelling Organ; also an independent range of Pedal Pipes of large -scale, on a separate wind. The compass of the Manuals are of the German scale, namely from CC to F in alt. "

THE GREAT ORGAN CONTAINS THE FOLLOWING STOPS:

- 8 feet large Open Diapason
- 8 feet small Open Diapason
- 16 feet Double Diapason
- 8 feet Stop'd Diapason and Clarabella
- 4 feet Principal
- 3 feet Twelfth
- 2 feet Fifteenth
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet Tierce
- 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ feet Sesquialtera
- 8 feet Trumpet

THE CHOIR ORGAN CONTAINS;

- 16 feet Bourdon
- 8 feet Dulciana Bass
- 8 feet Dulciana Treble
- 8 feet Stop'd Diapason Bass
- 8 feet Clarabella
- 4 feet Flute Bass
- 4 feet Flute Treble
- 4 feet Principal
- 2 feet Fifteenth
- 8 feet Cremona

The Swelling Organ extends to tenor C, the keys going all through, connected with the Choir Organ.

THE SWELLING ORGAN CONTAINS:

- 16 feet Double Diapason
- 8 feet Open Diapason
- 8 feet Stop'd Diapason
- 4 feet Principal
- 2 feet Fifteenth
- 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ feet Sesquialtera
- 8 feet Cornopean
- 8 feet Hautboy

THE PEDAL ORGAN extends two Octaves and a third, from CCC, 16 feet to E.
16 feet. Grand Double Diapason

THE COUPLING STOPS ARE AS FOLLOWS:

- Great Organ to Swell
- Great Organ to Choir
- Pedals to Great
- Pedals to Choir
- Octave Coupler Pedals

There are four Composition Pedals with double actions, acting upon the Great Organ Stops.

Two Octaves and a third of German Pedals.

The Case is of Gothic design, having a large range of Metal Pipes in front."

THE 1900 RESTORATION

Bishop & Son London & Ipswich

PEDAL ORGAN

Open Wood	16
Octave	8 (extension of No. 1)
Bourdon	16
Bass Flute	8 (extension of 3)
Tubular Pneumatic Action	
Sw. to Ped.	Gt. to Ped. Ch. to Ped.

GREAT ORGAN

Double Diapason	16
Open Diapason 1	8
Open Diapason 2	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Harmonic Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture	3 rks.
Trumpet	8

Sw. to Great.

Tracker Action

3 composition pedals to Swell & Great

The organ was hand blown until 1948

The pitch was lowered to concert pitch in 1969

CHOIR ORGAN

Stopped Diapason	8
Viol da Gamba	8
Dulciana	8
Flute	4
Harmonic Piccolo	2
Clarinet	8

Sw. to Choir

SWELL ORGAN

Double Diapason	16
Open Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Vox Angelica	8
Vox Celestes (TC)	8
Principal	4
Fifteenth	2
Mixture	3 rks.
Cornocean	8
Oboe	8

(New sound board)