

Tayside Organists' Society

Showing of the film *Organ Stops: saving the King of Instruments*

Steeple Church, Dundee

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Review by Peter Thornton

The February meeting of the Society took the form of a showing of the documentary film *Organ Stops: saving the King of Instruments*. An appropriate choice: the Society has been anxious for some time about the possible fate of many pipe organs in the area as a result of changing styles of worship, the relative affordability of electronic substitutes and the Church of Scotland's ongoing radical rationalisation of its property estate. Societal, religious and technological changes in the 19th century saw the rapid development of the British organ building industry; those of the 20th and 21st centuries now threaten the existence of much of their legacy.

With a background soundtrack that included organ music by Bach, Buxtehude and others, the film followed the English organ builder Martin Renshaw and his efforts to rescue pipe organs before they are lost forever. Up to the time that filming was completed in 2021 he had been able to re-home some 55 organs, the majority of which have gone to churches in France. We watched the dismantling and removal of a Bevington organ from a Surrey church that had been abandoned in 2004. The instrument would soon be on its way to a new home near Stuttgart in Germany.

In a poignant sequence Martin visited a disused Methodist chapel in Co. Durham and met the incredible 95 year old Blanche Beer who, aged 12, had started as the organist and had served until the chapel closed as a place of worship. With Martin hand-pumping the bellows because the electricity supply had been turned off, Blanche had her last ever play, including full organ (with a cry of "keep goin', son!" to Martin) for the climax of *The Holy City*. Sadly this instrument wasn't going to find a new home. With the deadline for disposal of the building approaching it was broken up for parts as a last resort when it became obvious that there was nowhere for it to go. Our last glimpse of Blanche was of her walking away from the chapel, a tear in her eye and a souvenir organ pipe under her arm. I was pleased to discover later via the internet that Blanche went on to celebrate her 100th birthday last year!

By contrast, there were stories of great success. Another good, solid organ from a former mining village found a new home in Clapton, East London, rebuilt by Martin in a Seventh Day Adventist church where Fiona, the enthusiastic young organist, also runs a music school. The largely Afro-Caribbean congregation is full of excitement about the instrument, which reminds them of the organs that they heard in their homeland, and which they are confident will attract new worshippers to their services.

We also visited the workshop in Sheffield of Goetze & Gwynn, one of the few remaining organ building firms in the UK, and we watched their work to restore the historic organ, dating from 1705, of Trinity College, Dublin. In Islington, London, we found a magnificent Father Willis organ that was rescued when the church building was taken over by a secular charity and converted into a venue for both worship and music concerts. In Greater Manchester we met Marc, who has filled his spare bedroom with a 2-manual and pedal organ made up from pipes that he's sourced on eBay. Fortunately his long-suffering wife is also fond of organ music!

At the end of the film there was a short break for refreshments, followed by a question and answer session over a video link with Martin Renshaw himself, James Dawson, the maker of the documentary, and Alan Buchan, an Organ Adviser of the Scottish Federation of Organists. Despite some technical issues with Zoom, we learned more about the challenges facing those who are keen to rehome redundant instruments. A building's new owner may wish to keep the organ case and façade as a visual feature, it may not be possible to find a suitable building to match an available organ, and instruments designed and built for the UK may not tolerate climates overseas. Nevertheless Martin has arranged successful organ transplants to countries and climes as diverse as Poland, Italy and South Africa.

At the end of the evening Ron Oliver, Society President, thanked all those involved in arranging and participating in our event, particularly those who had joined us remotely. We were privileged to have had their presence and we appreciated the expert knowledge they had shared.

The concern of Tayside Organists' Society for the future of local pipe organs is well justified. Office bearers have made approaches to the local authority in Dundee, encouraging engagement when change of use planning applications are made for church buildings, so that all avenues may be explored to protect the heritage and musical value of the pipe organs therein. It's to be hoped that, with sufficient notice before the skips arrive, we may be able to safeguard many redundant organs and that they may survive to sing again in new homes.