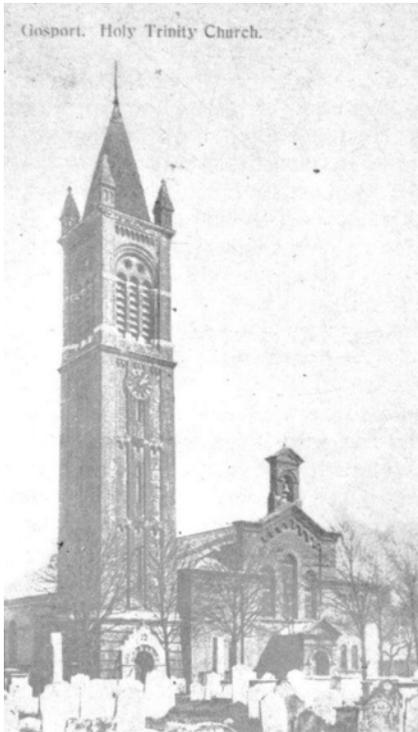


The Handel Organ at Holy Trinity Church

By Reverend John Capper

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The War of the Spanish Succession (1701-1713) ensured the maritime, commercial and financial supremacy of Great Britain in the eighteenth century. Many Gosport merchants benefitted from their profits out of supplying the Royal Navy with provisions. But apart from the great Duke of Marlborough none of Queen Anne's subjects made more money out of the war than James Brydges, created Viscount Wilton and Earl of Carnarvon in 1714



and Duke of Chandos five years later. From 1707 till 1712 he was Paymaster-General of the forces abroad, and was generally suspected of keeping a good deal of the change.

He used his wealth in building a splendid mansion on the Canons estate at Edgware, Middlesex. There was an elaborate private chapel in which a contemporary describes 'a handsome alter piece, and in an alcove above the altar, a neat organ.' A full choir was maintained, which daily entertained over a hundred eminent guests after dinner. For two years from 1718, the Duke's director of music was George Frederick Handel. Here he composed the well known Chandos Anthems, and his oratorios 'Acis and Galatea' and 'Esther'. He was responsible for the specifications for the organ in the chapel, and for playing it during divine service.

Handel was a great organ lover and his nineteen organ concertos are still very popular. He was particularly interested in the mechanics of organ building. He had heard of an interesting invention developed by the family of Jordan at Maidstone. Father and son, both called Abraham, were prosperous distillers but their ingenuity led them to the business of organ making where they succeeded beyond expectation. They enclosed the pipes of the Swell Organ in a wooden box, with a sliding shutter in its front which could be opened and closed by means of a pedal. Thus for the first time the volume of sound produced by part of the

instrument could be controlled. It was the Jordan whom Handel commissioned to build an organ for Canons chapel. They also built the organ for the parish church of S. Thomas a Becket, Portsmouth where the original screen is still to be seen.

The musical glory of Canons did not last long. The Duke of Chandos got into financial difficulties with his speculative investments. Rather acidly, Jonathan Swift wrote in 1734 that 'all he got by fraud is lost by stocks'. The great mansion of Canons was sold by auction for its materials on his death in 1744. The Church of the Holy Trinity, Gosport paid £117 to the auctioneer for the organ as it stood. It cost £16 for dismantling and carriage to London, where a further £105 was spent on repairs, and £30 for a new Swell.

A sum of £5 was incurred in bringing the organ to Gosport, but presumably its erection in the west gallery of the church was mainly done by voluntary local labour, although 16s. was paid on postage for circulating 30 letters for a meeting at the India Arms. Four stones were purchased for 5s. for placing on the bellows to increase the wind pressure and a similar sum was invested on furniture for the organist's pew.

There is evidence of a growing interest in music during the fifty years after the consecration of Holy Trinity Church in 1696. A sum of £7.5s. was paid for 20 ells of Holland linen for the making of new surplices for the choir, and a further 4s. for mending old surplices. A further £4 was contributed by parishioners for the erection of a special Singing Pew for the choir in the west gallery. But hardly had the choir settled down there than it was ousted from its proud position by the new organ. Indeed the instrument took up ten feet in breadth and thirteen feet in depth of the west gallery, and not only the Singing Pew had to be removed but also the two pews below it. The owners of these pews - John Williams and Thomas Nicol were found alternative accommodation, doubtless assuaged by the promise that the organ would assist in 'the more solemn performance of Divine Service'.

The Vestry Book reveals that about 100 people subscribed to the organ appeal, giving sums ranging from £20 to 2s.6d. The Majority were local people, but merchants from London, Coventry and Swanwick were included, indicating the trading connections of Gosport at this time. The organ was opened on 8th May 1748. It was then decided that if any dispute should arise about appointing an organist (or doing any other thing relating to the organ) that every person who subscribed one guinea to the appeal should have a single vote, and every person subscribing more should have as many votes as he subscribed in guineas.

So the voters duly met in church to decide upon their first organist. There were two candidates: Mr. James Peaceable of Southampton, and Mr. Moses Hawker of Portsmouth. The former received 141 votes, and the latter on 28. So Mr. Peaceable became Gosport's first organist, and Mr. Hawker had to be content with his existing inferior post - at St.

Thomas a Becket, Portsmouth, where he remained until 1797.



The organist's salary was often subject to dispute. The church accounts for 1749 indicate that he only received £1.11s.7½d. A Vestry Meeting of 1755 resolved that an annual sum of £75 be paid to the curate, and £25 to the organist. But the chapel wardens were often very late in paying these sums. To help remedy this, a rate of 3d. in the pound for pew owners was proposed in 1769. Three years later another meeting of the vestry decided that 'wholly over and above such subscriptions as the organist obtain for himself' the chapel wardens should pay over to the organist the rents of 'one pew against the south door, and four other large pews in a straight line northward.' The Act to Provide for the Perpetual Maintenance and Support of the Chapel of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in the Town of Gosport, which received the royal assent on 20th May 1825, enacted that the appointment of the organist should be from year to year, to be appointed by the proprietors of the Pews who should also fix his annual salary.

An organ the size and importance of this instrument demands constant care and attention. In 1761 about 90 parishioners subscribed just over £20 for repairs to the organ which were carried out by John Pether. Eleven years later the organ blower is recorded as being paid 6d. a week for his services and 5s. was invested in a new leather for the bellows. A few years later ten guineas was paid to John

Pether and Henry Rawlins for cleaning, repairing and tuning the organ, and a further 9s. to Mr. Mullins for painting and varnishing the instrument.

In 1802 it was resolved that the organ be tuned and such repairs done as are necessary to the boards, bellows and keys, and provided the chapel wardens shall find that a shilling rate will enable them to improve the organ by adding keys making an alteration to the swell to render it complete in the modern state. Mr. Benjamin West, the organist also agreed to solicit private subscriptions for this. Organ repairs were again needed in 1817 and £25 accordingly paid to a Mr. Jacobs which included £6 for brass rods required. In 1823 Mr. West was appointed a member of a committee to ascertain at what expense the organ could be put into complete repair. It was agreed that a James Butler of London, organ builder, be employed to do the same provided the expense did not exceed 30 guineas.

Two hundred and fifty years after Handel sat at the console, this organ is now being completely restored and renovated by the famous organ builders Hill, Norman and Beard at a cost of over £3,000. The original case work remains, facing the nave. (The organ was removed from the west gallery in 1867). It is still surmounted by the coat of arms of the Duke of Chandos. The soundboard of the choir organ is probably the original soundboard since its pallets have subsequently been changed to suit under-action.

Handel's original specification has been lost irretrievably, and in the 19th century the organ was much enlarged by William Hill. However, certain factors indicate original Jordan pipes: very rough soldering; heavier and thicker metal pipes; an inverted curve in the shape of the top lip of the pipes; evidence of pipes being hand made, beater out on mandrel; solid oak wooden pipes with stoppers to the pipe feet being hand made and not turned on a lathe.

