

**The History of the Organ**  
by  
**Nicholas Thistlethwaite**

The present organ was donated by Horatio Mann, Fellow Commoner, in 1765. The builder was John Snetzler, a Swiss, who settled in England around 1740 and established himself as a maker of church and chamber organs. Born in 1710 in Schaffhausen, and trained in central Europe, he was probably attracted to England by the openings for skilled craftsmen, as was his compatriot Burkat Shudi, the harpsichord-maker. Snetzler's business was founded on the domestic market: he had a steady output of chamber organs, housed in elegant cases fit to grace the music rooms and saloons of the aristocracy and wealthy middle-classes; but he also constructed church organs, including important instruments for St Margaret's, Kings Lynn (1754), Ludlow Parish Church (1764), Halifax Parish Church (1766), Beverley Minster (1769) and Nottingham Parish Church (1777). Many chamber organs survive, though not always without alteration, but few of the church organs are recognisable as Snetzler's instruments, even if some of his pipes and the case survive. The fact that most of the pipework of the Peterhouse organ has survived without significant alteration, as well as the case, makes it important.

Early documentation has proved elusive. The earliest description that has so far come to light is contained in the reminiscences of the Revd W.E. Dickson, who recalled the organ as he knew when a Cambridge undergraduate in the 1840s:

In 1842, it had probably received no alteration whatever since its builder completed it. It had two manuals, GG to e in alt. The Great Organ, with nine stops, was played on the upper manual; the choir, with four, on the lower; but four other stops, enclosed in a swell box with sliding shutter, were also commanded by this lower manual. The wind was conveyed to them, I believe, by tubes from the channel of the choir sound-board, after the manner of a mounted cornet. Snetzler's organ was extremely brilliant and telling; the sesquialtera and cornet wonderfully bright; the reeds (a trumpet and clarion) coarse and unpleasing. The keys were black, with sharps faced with ivory or bone; less handsome than Schmidt's [sic] at [Great] St. Mary's. The drawstops were mixed up together on both sides of the book-board, as in many foreign organs at the present day ... Peterhouse did not then maintain a choral service. The organ was used only to accompany the voices of a few little boys in chanting the psalms and canticles on Sunday evenings ...<sup>1</sup>

To this extended description should be added two slightly earlier pieces of information. First, the accounts of Elliot & Hill, London organ-builders, record a charge in 1830 for tuning the organ and adding a coupler:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> W.E. Dickson, 'Old Times in Cambridge', *Musical Opinion*, 16 (1893), 399.

<sup>2</sup> Birmingham University Library, British Organ Archive: Elliot & Hill, partnership account (1829-31), fol.17.

1830            Mr. Pratt ordered M<sup>f</sup> Hill to let  
October 4      Peacock & Thomas Tune Peterhouse Chapel Organ  
                  with coupler-Stop to draw [?] the Grt Organ to Choir          6 – 0 – 0

Secondly, Smith in his *Cambridge Portfolio* (c.1838) notes that ‘The organ in the Chapel of St. Peter’s College was built by Snetzler, and though small has a very pleasing and pure quality of tone’.<sup>3</sup>

About ten years after the period to which Dickson’s reminiscences refer, John Hanson Sperling included the stop-list of the Peterhouse organ in his large manuscript collection of organ specifications. Sperling was an undergraduate of Trinity, a clergyman (ordained 1849) and an antiquarian; his note-books are a major resource for organ historians. They include drawings of organ cases; they were gummed into the manuscript and may pre-date the compilation of stop-lists, thought to have been made between 1850 and 1855. Sperling had his idiosyncrasies as a reporter, but is usually found to be accurate when his statements can be tested against other sources. He records the Peterhouse organ as follows:

#### S. Peter’s College Chapel

Snetzler 1765, the gift of Horace Mann, a fellow of the College. 2 full rows of keys, GG short 8<sup>ves</sup> to E in alt. Choir and Swell on same keys, dividing on fiddle G. Small unison [8’] Pedal Pipes added by Avory in 1804.

[Great]

Open Diapason  
Stop<sup>d</sup> Diapason  
Principal  
Twelfth  
Fifteenth  
Sex 3 ranks  
Trumpet  
Clarion  
Mounted Cornet to C, 5 ranks

Choir Bass

Open Diapason  
Stop Diapason  
Principal  
Flute

Echo

Open Diapason  
Stop Diapason  
Dulciana  
Hautboy

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<sup>3</sup> J.J. Smith, *Cambridge Portfolio* (Cambridge, c1838), 195.

A remarkably good organ and in excellent preservation. [Added:] 2 octaves of Open Pedal Pipes from CCC 16 feet to tenor D added by Hill 1852.

One further source should be mentioned, although its status is impossible to corroborate. In 1912, C.W. Pearce published a partial transcription of an early manuscript collection of organ specifications compiled by Henry Leffler between c1800 and 1820. He included a stop-list of the Peterhouse organ. However, consulting the original manuscript (now in the British Organ Archive) reveals no sign of the Peterhouse specification, and it does not appear in other related manuscripts of the same period, of which there are several.<sup>4</sup> Where did Pearce find this specification? Is it a genuine source or did he concoct it from a later source? For the sake a completeness it is reproduced below,<sup>5</sup> but it is impossible to know what weight to attach to it, especially where it differs from Sperling.

[Organ built by Snetzler, 1765]

Two setts of keys: Great and Choir, GG (long octaves) to E  
Echo, Tenor F to E

<u>Great</u> (7 stops)		<u>Echo</u> (3 stops)	
		<i>Played from Ch. Organ keyboard</i>	
Open Diapason	57 pipes	Open Diapason	36 pipes
Stopped Diapason	57 “	Dulciana	36 “
Principal	57 “	Hautboy	36 “
Twelfth	57 “		
Fifteenth	57 “	<u>Choir</u> (3 stops)	
Sesquialtera and		Stopped Diapason	57 pipes
Mixture, III Ranks	171 “	Principal	57 “
Trumpet (treble)	29 “	Flute	57 “

Piecing the evidence together, Snetzler’s organ consisted of a Great Organ of nine stops [or seven, according to Pearce] and a second keyboard controlling a 4-stop Choir Organ and a short-compass Echo Organ, also with four stops [three stops in each case, according to Pearce]. The Great clarion in Sperling was perhaps a bass to a treble trumpet – a device Snetzler used elsewhere, presumably to save on space and cost. Sperling claims that the Great cornet was a treble solo stop, mounted on its own stage above the main soundboard; he may have been correct but it is also possible that it was the treble of a chorus mixture (‘Sesquialtra and Cornet’) drawing in halves – common enough in Georgian organs. Some modifications had taken place since 1765: John Avery (‘Avory’) had added pedals and perhaps one octave of unison (8’) wood pedal pipes in 1804 when he is known to have been in Cambridge, working on other organs (King’s, Great St Mary’s); Elliot & Hill in 1830 had added a coupler to connect the Great keys to the Choir Organ (or the Choir keys to the Great?); someone unknown had converted Snetzler’s Echo Organ into a Swell by placing a sliding panel in the front.

<sup>4</sup> See: Nicholas Thistlethwaite, ‘Source materials from the early nineteenth century’, *BIOS Journal*, 1 (1977), 75-100.

<sup>5</sup> C.W. Pearce, *Notes on English organs* (London, 1912), 79.

Sperling also claims that William Hill added 27 pedal pipes of 16' pitch in 1852, played from a pedal board with a compass of C to d<sup>1</sup>. His statement is substantiated by two consecutive entries in Hill's letter book.<sup>6</sup>

M<sup>r</sup> Amps Peterhouse                    { Estimate New Set 16ft Pipes CCC to D  
Cambridge May 21<sup>st</sup> [1852]    { Complete New Peds Keys & 2 Couplers  
New Bass Tr & revoice the treble Keys to be quieted Pipes to be  
Cleand [sic] & Tuned & regulated £150                    (ordered June 4)

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Peterhouse May 26                    Pedal pipes CCC to D & Pedals £100

The first entry appears to confirm that the work was ordered; the second raises the question of whether it was pared down. Sperling makes no mention of couplers and retains the Great clarion rather than replacing it with a full-length bass to the trumpet, so perhaps economy prevailed.

Hill's pedal pipes would have occupied a significant amount of space in the gallery; they must have been placed either along the west wall, partially obscuring the window, or to either side of it, where they would have been more visible from the chapel. Avery's addition of small pedal pipes in 1804 had begun the enlargement of the organ's foot-print; Hill's work took it a stage further.

Hill & Son returned in 1893-4 to undertake a more far-reaching reconstruction of the organ. The planned 'improvements' are recorded in the firm's shop book.<sup>7</sup>

[Job no:] 2151    March 10. 1893

St Peters College        }        Improvements  
Cambridge                }

- i.     Make compass CC to G  
       Retain and repair old black keys
- ii.    Remodel drawstops on modern plan. Ditto Gt & Ped action
- iii.   Retain present Gt & Ch intact, clean & repair pipes etc. etc.
- iv.    Add new Swell – Op gr. Hohl Fl. Sal gr. Gems. Dul Mix.  
       Ob. Cremona.
- v.     Add soft Bd<sup>n</sup> & Flute to Pedal
- vi.    3 comps to Gt & 2 Sw
- vii.   Sw Gt & Sw-Ped coupler.    £350

This describes a relatively conservative scheme for the time. The key compasses and console were to be modernised, composition pedals and couplers were to be introduced, and a small Swell Organ was to be added. But Snetzler's Great and Choir were to be retained 'intact' and his original (?) 'reversed colour' keyboards were to be kept. Unlike some of his contemporaries (Henry Willis, for example) Thomas Hill had a respect for old work, and this scheme is not untypical of his approach to old organs.

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<sup>6</sup> Birmingham University Library, British Organ Archive: Hill & Son, Letter Book (1838-61), 290.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., Shop Book, 4 (1891-1901), Job no. 2151.

In the event, further changes were made before the work was complete. The new specification was recorded in 1897, as follows.<sup>8</sup>

Great Organ

Open Diapason in front\*  
Open Diapason, large  
Claribella  
Principal\*  
Twelfth\*  
Fifteenth\*  
Trumpet\*

Choir Organ

Echo Diapason\*  
Echo Dulciana\*  
Stopped Diapason\*  
Flute\*

Swell Organ

Double Stopt Diapason  
Open Diapason  
Stopped Diapason  
Principal\*  
Flautina  
Oboe

Pedal Organ

Open Diapason 16  
Bourdon

Couplers

Swell to Choir  
Swell to Great  
Swell to Pedal  
Great to Pedal  
Choir to Pedal

3 composition pedals to Great and Pedal; 3 to Swell; reversible pedal for Great to Pedal

\* Snetzler pipes

The most notable change from the shop book proposal is the loss of Snetzler's Great mixture, displaced to make way for a 'large' open diapason. The Swell stop-list differs, too, with the addition of a double diapason 16' (space- and wind-consuming) a major change. Alongside these alterations, Snetzler's soundboards were discarded, together with the wind system, actions and console; it seems unlikely that the proposal to retain the 'reversed colour' keys was pursued: none of the early-twentieth century accounts of the organ mention them.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Lethe', *Musical Opinion*, 21 (1897), 95.

The 1893-4 work must have included a physical enlargement of the instrument. The case may have been extended to make it deeper; it may also have been moved slightly forward (the original position of the case front cannot be established, but it is questionable whether Snetzler would have felt a need to bring it as far forward as it is at present).

No further records of any work on the organ before the 1960s have been found, although toe pistons and a balanced swell pedal had been installed by 1949, when the Revd B.B. Edmonds noted the specification.<sup>9</sup>

In 1963, Noel Mander completed a comprehensive reconstruction of the organ. As in 1893-4, the objectives were a mix of modernisation and conservation. The surviving Snetzler pipework was carefully preserved with minimal alteration to the voicing; the Great regained a mixture (though not modelled on Snetzler's); and mechanical action was retained to the manual soundboards. The case and front pipes were restored. On the other hand, unit chests with electric action were used to enlarge the Choir and Pedal Organs, the stop actions were electrified, and the new console was provided with a range of modern playing aids.

The present specification follows with tentative attributions of the registers. (Some of the Mander pipework may have been second-hand.)

GREAT		
Open Diapason	8	Snetzler
Stopt Diapason	8	Mander?
Principal	4	Snetzler
Nason Flute	4	Mander?
Twelfth	2 2/3	Snetzler
Fifteenth	2	Snetzler
Mixture	II	Mander
A Trumpet	8	Hill?
CHOIR		
Echo Dulciana	8	Snetzler, ex-Echo
Stopt Diapason	8	Snetzler, ex-Choir
Flute	4	Snetzler, ex-Choir
Principal	4	Snetzler, ex-Echo Open Diapason
B Gemshorn	4	Mander
C Nazard	2 2/3	Mander
B Gemshorn	2	Mander
Tierce	1 3/5	Mander
C Larigot	1 1/3	Mander
A Trumpet	8	Hill? (from Great)
SWELL		
Salicional	8	Mander
Stopt Diapason	8	Snetzler, ex-Great Stopped Diapason
Principal	4	Snetzler, ex-Choir Principal
Fifteenth	2	Mander?
Mixture	III	Mander
Oboe	8	Hill

<sup>9</sup> Birmingham University Library, British Organ Archive: B.B. Edmonds, manuscript note-books of organ specifications.

#### PEDAL

D	Open Diapason	16	Mander (zinc) + Hill Great Op. Diap.
E	Bourdon	16	Hill + Mander
D	Octave	8	Hill Great Op. Diap.
E	Flute	8	Hill + Mander
D	Fifteenth	4	Hill Great Op. Diap.
E	Flute	4	Hill + Mander
A	Trombone	16	Mander + Hill Great Trumpet
A	Trumpet	8	Hill Great Trumpet
A	Clarion	4	Hill Great Trumpet

#### COUPLERS

Swell to Great

Swell to Choir

Swell to Pedal

Great to Pedal

Choir to Pedal

#### ACCESSORIES

5 thumb pistons to each manual

5 toe pistons each to Pedal and Swell

3 reversible thumb pistons: Great to Pedal;

Swell to Great; Choir to Pedal

3 toe pistons, duplicating reversible thumb pistons

#### COMPASSES

manuals C-g<sup>3</sup>

pedal C-f<sup>1</sup>

*[End*