

PIPE UP FOR PIPE ORGANS

PIPE ORGANS IN COMMUNITY CENTRES

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Summary

1. This paper summarises Pipe Up's thoughts on the retention of pipe organs in former churches which have become (or are about to become) community centres.
2. Pipe Up believes that existing pipe organs should wherever possible be retained by the community centre. This is because such organs:
 - 2.1 can significantly extend the range of activities that the centre can offer, notably for weddings, concerts, dances, ceremonies and fun events;
 - 2.2 have a significant heritage value in their community, and often have their own story to tell, linked with but independent of the building in which they were installed;
 - 2.3 are usually robustly made and can often be brought back into playable condition and maintained at modest cost; and
 - 2.4 unwanted organs rarely have any monetary value and so are likely to be sent to landfill or scrap if removed. So many such organs are offered by churches being sold for redevelopment that there are reducing opportunities for finding them a new home, at least in the UK.
3. This paper first sets out the background to the current situation, then considers the activities they can support, the practical aspects of owning an organ, the financial aspects and then some case studies. Links to appropriate web sites are also provided.

Background & History

4. Britain became a world centre of organ building in the 19th century, when the proliferation of new churches and chapels led to the creation of dozens of organ building firms, throughout the country. Victorian town halls and other assembly buildings were also equipped with pipe organs to facilitate major musical events, civic ceremonies and the like. British organs achieved a high reputation for build and tonal quality.

5. Technical advances were made throughout the century and thereafter, either to enable larger instruments to be played more easily or to enable organs to be played from consoles detached from the actual pipes themselves.
6. In non-conformist churches, the organ was often given a position of great prominence, integrated with the pulpit at the front of the church and thus with ideal acoustic performance. In Anglican churches, organs were often installed close to the chancel, often at the cost of the sound as heard by the congregation in the nave.
7. Many but not all organs were designed for the exact position in the actual building in which they still stand. Others may have been moved from other places and then adapted in some way.
8. Every organ has its own unique story to tell about how it came to be created, by which organ builder, and what size and mix of organ ranks was chosen (and hence, the mix of musical sounds it could produce).
9. Church communities frequently made changes to their instruments, in accordance with changing musical tastes. These changes help tell the story of the congregation and how its tastes changed.
10. Some of the history of pipe organs can be obtained from the National Pipe Organ Register at www.npor.org.uk Church records and organ builders' archives can supply further details.

About Pipe Organs

11. Pipe organs seem complex, but are in essence a system to deliver air to selected pipes when the keys are pressed by the player.
12. The simplest type of system (or "action") is a mechanical or "tracker" organ, which is operated purely by linkages activated by the player's hands and feet on a system of rods, levers and valves, via an airtight box called a windchest. The air for these instruments was often supplied by a hand-pumped lever operated, usually by a boy, standing next to the instrument, inflating an air reservoir inside the instrument. Now, an electric blower is usual.
13. The more complex actions introduced in late 19th and 20th century instruments included many different varieties of pneumatic and electrical action, which made it easier to play larger instruments and enabled the pipes to be situated remotely from the console. These can be more complex to maintain and repair.
14. Pipe organs contain moving parts made of wood, leather and wire which control the flow of air to the pipes, which are made of lead, lead/tin alloys, zinc or wood. Inevitably, the moving parts deteriorate through wear and tear, while dust and soot and other debris can accumulate in the air passages and pipes.
15. Pipe organs are sensitive to changes in the ambient temperature and humidity, which affects the tuning of the notes played by the pipes, and the overall operation of the moving wooden parts, which can seize up if the humidity becomes too low or too high. Damp is a serious threat.
16. A pipe organ therefore needs regular care visits by an organ tuner, who can often diagnose and fix common faults on the spot. Organs used to need

major attention every 30 years or so, but with air becoming cleaner, this interval is increasing to about 50 years.

Options for an incoming Community Group

17. Many community groups taking over a former church are faced with a decision on what to do with its organ. This can be difficult as it is rare for community group activists to have any experience of managing pipe organs.

Assessing the Condition of the Organ

18. The first step is to assess the condition of the instrument.
19. It is normal, for example, to find that some notes don't play, or the organ makes strange sounds without any key being played (usually caused by unwanted escapes of air through the pipes known as "ciphers") or it just doesn't work at all. This sometimes leads the group to think that it is completely broken or needs unfeasible amounts of money to repair.
20. This is rarely so, however. Many organs develop minor faults, or become apparently unplayable, after a period of disuse. Our experience is that many such faults are minor and can be fixed in a single visit by an organ tuner or builder. For example, uneven keys can be adjusted, ciphers fixed, and tuning corrected. Water ingress can, however, demand more extensive repairs.
21. So the first question is how a community group might assess the condition of the organ. This inevitably involves the need for advice from skilled people who know the instrument or who can assess it after inspection.
22. The most straightforward method is thus to approach the organ builder who last looked after the instrument while it was in use as a church. He or she will often know the condition of instrument better than anyone. An organ builder's visit might cost £200 a day or less, outside London.
23. Organ faults encountered during its church use may have been written in a notebook kept at the console, and if this has survived, it is a valuable source of information.
24. One of the difficulties in making decisions on organs is that different organ builders may come to different views on what needs to be done, and give estimates which include substantial extra sums to cover the risk that they may find more problems than they thought. This can easily "spook" the community's trustees.
25. A different approach is therefore to appoint an independent consultant and ask him or her to write a report on the instrument and specify what work needs to be done. This could then be supplied to organ builders and the resulting quotations are more likely to be comparable. There is an association of organ consultants who can advise in such cases¹.

Deciding on Retention or Disposal

26. Even once the condition of the organ is known, the question arises whether it should be retained or removed. Pipe Up believes that organs should be

¹ The Association of Independent Organ Advisers is at www.aioa.org.uk

retained in situ wherever possible, even if funds are not immediately available for any repairs required.

27. We believe community groups should consider the following factors:

Factor	Pipe Up Comment
<p>An organ provides greatly improved opportunities for a wide range of activities, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • musical events, notably community choral events, instrumental concerts and organ recitals; • weddings and other ceremonies which benefit from organ music; • enabling the teaching of children and adults to play organs; • enabling local organists and others to play the instrument individually, possibly in return for an hourly fee; • “fun” events such as dinner dances, discos and karaoke which could use the organ, often with a band; • showing silent movies (eg “Nosferatu”) with a live organ accompaniment • “cinema” style organ music concerts 	<p>Organs have recently broken out of the confines of their original roles in churches and now perform key roles in many arts venues.</p> <p>No sound system can replicate the authentic sound of a pipe organ.</p> <p>Events such as weddings gain greatly from them.</p> <p>See how a functioning church in Camberwell, London, has created a new form of entertainment with its pipe organ: www.organoke.com</p>
<p>The organ can help tell the history of the building including the locality and of its faith communities. .</p>	<p>Pipe Up feels it is important to stress the elements of continuity between the former church use and community use and encourage former churchgoers to feel at home in the re-purposed building.</p> <p>Some organs have plaques recording the dedicated service of their organists, whose story is often interesting.</p>
<p>It is usually possible to get the instrument partially playable at limited expense.</p>	<p>Hearing it playing, even partially, can inspire the community to raise the funds needed to complete the work, maybe phased over time.</p>

Factor	Pipe Up Comment
Some grants are available for organ repairs.	These tend to be for major restorations rather than minor repair but local trusts may support this. We advise against applying to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, whose grants for organ repair have fallen recently.
It is possible to “mothball” an organ so as to prevent any further deterioration while decisions are made or funds are raised.	Most organs can survive long periods of disuse as long as they are protected from avoidable causes of deterioration, notably water ingress, building dust, vandalism/ physical damage or humidity fluctuations. It is important however to press the keys and move the stops regularly to prevent them seizing up.
The effects of heating and humidity on the tuning and operation need to be understood by those responsible for managing the building	long periods of low humidity can damage organs. Temperature variations affect the tuning of an organ through thermal expansion and contraction
Maintenance and tuning: organs should ideally be visited by an organ tuner at least twice a year.	This will cost in the region of £500 a year outside London.
Cost of removal: scrapping an organ and sending it to landfill may well cost over £1,000 in labour and waste disposal charges	Scrapping an average organ will generate 1 tonne of waste.

Examples of community centres and other venues with organs

28. Pipe Up is aware of a growing number of community centres (and other places) which have pipe organs and use them to enhance their activities. Here are details of a few.

Headcorn, Kent

29. A community group called “Heart of Headcorn” fought a dogged campaign to buy the former Methodist Church in the village, with the help of Pipe Up activists. Before it succeeded, the Church sold its organ to a nearby Anglican church.
30. Undeterred, Heart of Headcorn has installed a re-homed organ, which is now nearing completion. It has already started to use the instrument to accompany a wide range of local musical activities, including three choirs.

Union Chapel, Islington, London

31. This Victorian 1,600-seat Congregational church still functions as a church, but is also used as a venue for rock concerts, comedy shows and a wide range of other activities.
32. Performers are strongly encouraged to use its 1877 3-manual Willis organ, and many do so. It also hosts organ recitals, choral music events and a periodic festival of new organ music called “Organ Reframed.”
33. Further details are at: www.unionchapel.org.uk

Organoke

34. St Giles Church, Camberwell, London, has a large 1844 Bishop organ requiring major repair costing £500,000. It set about raising some of this money by inventing a new form of entertainment: “Organoke.”
35. Hundreds of fans enjoy dancing, singing and performing karaoke to the music of the Bishop organ, working with a five-piece band fronted by an MC drag artist.
36. Further details are at www.organoke.com

Ashburton Arts Centre, Devon

37. This arts centre in a former Methodist Church has retained its 1907 organ built by Cornish organ builder Hele, and uses it in its music offerings, which include jazz sessions.
38. Further details are at: <http://ashburtonarts.org.uk/>

London Bridge Station & the Whitgift Shopping Centre, Croydon

39. In 2022, Pipe Up activists installed two one-manual 1880s organs for unrestricted public use, one on the concourse of a major London station, and the other in a shopping mall in south London. Both are well used, and the organ at London Bridge is played by about 5 people an hour. It is also used for carol concerts and other musical events. The diversity and range of abilities of players has astonished us.

Conclusions

40. Pipe organs are a precious musical resource for any community lucky enough to have one. They are a gateway to a wide variety of valuable community activities and a major asset in attracting bookings for weddings.
41. Pipe Up estimates that four pipe organs a week are being scrapped and sent to landfill, leaving whole communities without the means to hear their unique and powerful music. This is a tragedy for the whole community.
42. We therefore urge all community groups acquiring an organ in a former church to retain it and resist pressures to remove it, taking the time, and investing the modest amounts needed, to assess its condition and make decisions about its future.
43. Pipe Up itself is happy to provide help and guidance along this path: our contact details are below.

Pipe Up Contact Details

Web site: www.pipe-up.org.uk

Email: chair@pipe-up.org.uk

Postal address: 66 Prebend St, London N1 8PS

Charity registered in England & Wales, no. 1199597

Useful Links and Further Information

The Royal College of Organists

www.rco.org.uk

The RCO is the professional organisation for organists in the UK, setting standards and organising examinations and certificates.

It also offers a wide range of courses, workshops, study days and classes and an accredited teacher scheme.

Membership is open to all.

The Incorporated Association of Organists

www.iao.org.uk

The IAO is a registered charity that provides information, support, education, and training for organists, choir trainers and organ enthusiasts and has 4 500 members worldwide and nearly 80 affiliated associations.

It publishes the Organists' Review, a high-quality quarterly magazine with an enviable reputation for both its content and presentation. It is a full colour publication with stunning pictures. News of affiliated association activities are also incorporated into the magazine, providing local up-to-date events and information.

Membership is automatic for members of affiliated local organ clubs, for which it is the umbrella body.

The Institute of British Organ Building

www.ibo.co.uk

The IBO is the professional organisation of the pipe organ building industry in Britain. It also operates a database of organs available for disposal, under the tab "resources/ redundant organs"

The British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS)

www.bios.org.uk

BIOS is a charity which encourages and promotes the study of the pipe organ, including the history and design of the instrument and its music. It owns the National Pipe Organ Register and operates a system for identifying historic organs.

It publishes a quarterly newsletter, the BIOS Reporter, and an annual Review with scholarly articles on organs and organ music.

Membership is open to all.

The National Pipe Organ Register

www.npor.org.uk

NPOR is the national database of pipe organs and is operated by BIOS.

The register is the prime online source of information on Britain's pipe organs, and is the result of many decades of painstaking research and visits by contributors.

It can be searched in a number of ways, eg by address or location. Many entries also contain photographs. Users should be aware that some of the data can be out of date.

The Cinema Organ Society

www.cinema-organs.org.uk/

The Cinema Organ Society was formed in 1953 to further the appreciation of cinema or “theatre” organs.

It owns three instruments and organises live music events featuring world class artists playing a range of music. It publishes four publications a year on all aspects of cinema organs.

It has an extensive archive of photos, audio and documents which has been amassed over many years and is accessible to members to look at in person and online.

It organises workshops and tuition on the playing and maintenance of the instruments, provided by a number of experts both formally and informally.

Alongside its own instruments, members of the Society have helped to save, restore and install other instruments up and down the country.

The Society of Women Organists

www.societyofwomenorganists.co.uk

SWO is a large and growing community of people dedicated to achieving an equal gender balance in the organ world. It is dedicated to celebrating women organists in all areas of music-making.

Among its campaigns is one for adjustable organ benches.

Membership is open to all who support its aims.

The Scottish Federation of Organists

www.scotsorgan.org.uk

This is a federation of Scottish societies of organists. Membership of any of the local societies is open to anyone with an interest in the organ. Its local societies throughout Scotland organise regular programmes of social events and it assists members professionally through the work of several groups and organisations.

Organoke

www.organoke.com

ORGANOKE is a unique entertainment event blending pipe organ and popular dance and karaoke music, in aid of the repair of the Bishop organ at St. Giles' Church, Camberwell, London.

In 2016, whilst discussing ways to raise awareness and cash for the restoration of its 1844 Bishop organ, its organisers thought it would be fun to organise an evening of karaoke with the mighty organ. They added a 5 piece band, a screen and an MC (Ida Barr), and thus gave birth to ORGANOKE.

Almost impossible to describe, its organisers describe it as *“a bit like the end of a wedding reception with the boring bits taken out “and is an absolutely, euphorically joyful experience.”*

Profits raised from the event go towards raising the £500,000 needed.