

History of the Organ in Kingston United Reformed (formerly Congregational) Church

An organ was first installed in Kingston Congregational Church in 1871 during the ministry of the Rev. George Blinkhorn. It was built by Bevington and Sons of London and cost £350, very roughly equivalent to £30,000 in today's money. It was located at the back of the gallery (then very much larger than the present gallery). The pipes would have presumably obscured the south windows of the sanctuary. No specification of this organ has survived and we have no images of it, but it is assumed to have comprised two manuals with tracker action. It was pumped by hand. The job of organist was initially shared by a 'Professor Clare' and Miss Alice Harty. The surviving church yearbooks show that in the 1870s the organist was paid approximately £20 per annum, the blower was paid £2 per annum, and tuning/maintenance costs were around £2 per annum.

Deacons' Meeting minutes reveal that Bevingtons maintained the organ, if not regularly: in 1888 they were asked to give a price for cleaning it, and subsequently undertook repairs at a cost of £12. They then agreed to tune it annually for £3 3s. Shortly afterwards an organ festival was arranged, so it must have been in reasonable working order.

By the early 20th century the condition of the organ had deteriorated so much that concern was being expressed, and plans were made to undertake renovations and improvements. However, it must have been in a good enough state to be used for a solo recital in February 1914 and to accompany a performance of Elijah in 1908 and Schubert's Song of Miriam in 1910. In 1915 an 'organ fund' had been set up and an 'Elgar Concert' was given to raise money.

At the end of the First World War, as part of a major renovation of the church interior, significant improvements were made to the organ by the firm of Robert Slater and Son of Forest Gate. The organ was taken down from the gallery and placed in 'a chamber specially built for its reception' in the north east corner of the sanctuary (where it stands today) with the organist facing the organ chamber and viewing the choir and minister through a mirror. The case was designed by a Mr Hardwick. In 1921 an invitation was extended to Walford Davies (later Master of the King's Music) to give the opening recital but he was unable to accept and the recital was performed by Mr W Ratcliffe FRCO of St Alban's Teddington. The Surrey Comet newspaper reported that 'nine new stops had been added, the compass had been extended to 61 notes on the manuals, with three pistons and three composition pedals to each manual, a crescendo pedal, a balanced swell pedal and tubular pneumatic action throughout, with a discus electric blower'. The organ comprised two manuals with no Choir. The Comet said: 'it is practically a new instrument, and it will now rank among the best in quality of tone in a neighbourhood which is exceptionally rich in fine organs. Far more money has been expended on the alterations and improvements than the organ cost originally'. A debt of £1500 was still to be paid at the time of the opening recital. It is not known why Slaters were selected to renovate the organ and we do not know the cost.

In 1928 the organ was once again in a 'serious condition' with 'frequent cyphering' (Church Meeting minutes). An independent report was received from Rest Cartwright & Son who

said that the 'tonal effect was good' but that the type of pneumatic action was the source of the problems. They recommended installation of tubular pneumatic action. Slaters gave an estimate of £210 to put the instrument 'in a proper state of repair' by fitting double acting touch boxes to the Great, Swell and Pedal divisions, with new couplers. The organist, Eddie Thorogood ATCL, made enquiries about possibly adding a five-stop Choir division. Slaters recommended adding this as part of the renovation work, as it would cost much less than adding it later. Slaters happened to have a suitable soundboard taken from a one-manual organ. All these repairs and additions, costing £550 in total (about £27,000 in today's money) were approved following references from other reputable organists, but with much congregational dissent voiced at a special church meeting. A photograph of the renovated organ has survived in the church archives, and the Deacons' Meeting minutes contain a very rough pencil sketch of the interior of the organ chamber, presumably made on the spot by Slaters or one of the consultants.

For the next three decades the three-manual organ was well used, accompanying a regular Sunday choir of around 50 persons, and even a performance of Messiah in 1941.

By 1960, when Vincent Waterhouse (later Clerk of the Royal College of Organists) was organist, the instrument was again in urgent need of renovation. Several options were put before a special church meeting (attended by no fewer than 250 members!): (1) A new organ costing between £7000 and £10,000. (2) A rebuild of the existing organ incorporating electro-pneumatic action costing £4000, (3) As 2 above, but including re-positioning of the console, (4) An electronic organ costing £1000. The deacons' recommendation was for (3) and this was agreed by the meeting. The firm of Morgan and Smith of Hove won the contract (one of the church members had been an employee of the firm). The eventual cost was around £5000, equivalent to around £80,000 in today's money. The console was moved to a new recessed position in the front row of the congregation, facing the pulpit. A trumpet stop was added to the Great and a mixture to the Swell. Morgan and Smith assured the church that the rebuilt organ would last 70 years. The minister said 'we now have an instrument which we shall be able to pass on without shame to those who will come after us'. The opening recital was given by Dr Eric Thiman, then organist of the City Temple.

In 1975-77 the church sanctuary was gutted and completely renovated: the raked floor, pews and soft furnishings were removed, which transformed the acoustics of the building from dull to very resonant, making the organ sound bigger and brighter. Morgan and Smith moved the console back to the north east corner of the sanctuary, facing across the church and giving a good view of the congregation and minister. In consultation with the then organist Tony Wenman they also divided the organ to create better access for servicing: the Swell, Great and Pedal divisions were redistributed within the main case on the east side, while the Choir division and Lieblich Bourdon pedal stop were moved to the west side. The unenclosed Choir organ with the addition of a Larigot (donated by Muriel Barber, the choir librarian) produced greater brightness.

Apart from regular tuning and maintenance, no improvements or additions have been made to the organ during the last 40 years and it has continued to perform satisfactorily. But it is now beginning to show its age and reveal hidden weaknesses, namely deterioration of the

leather parts used throughout the pneumatic action, occasionally unreliable electrical contact coupling systems, splits in the leather jointing of the bellows and cracks in the woodwork. The swell pedal no longer operates and the tuning is sharp (447Hz when it should be 440Hz), due partly to excessive wind pressure.

Recent reports have pointed out the importance of the organ: a survey made by the URC's Musicians Guild in 2002/5 suggested 'listing' the organ in category II* which indicates that it is of '**considerable historic and musical interest.**' An advisory inspection made by A J Beeson (URC Organ Advisor) in March 2017 noted that the organ 'is a joy to hear and play' and a 'fine instrument' with a 'generally impressively even and responsive action ... It would be a crying shame and a betrayal of stewardship to lose the organ here.' He goes on to say that 'the organ does need to have some money spent on it, over and above routine maintenance'.

The organ is played regularly on Sundays, occasional recitals have been given (eg by Andrew Daldorph, formerly Organ Scholar at Guildford Cathedral) and it is used for organ lessons. Since 2005 maintenance has been undertaken by F H Browne of Canterbury.

Additional notes:

A description, brief history and full specification of the present organ can be found in the National Pipe Organ Register (N13783) but this contains inaccuracies. All references to north should read west, and references to south should read east. References to 1950 should read 1960. Kingsgate Davidson were not involved in any rebuilding work in 1899 or indeed at any time, as far as can be ascertained from the church archives. The NPOR will be updated.

In short, Bevingtons were the original builders. Slaters rebuilt the Bevington organ in 1920 and 1929. Morgan and Smith made further substantial alterations in 1960 and 1977.

The word BATES is embossed on the wind-chest in the main organ case: Bates was the name of a firm of organ builders in Ludgate Hill during the 19th century.

The church archives contain a recording of the organ being played at a service in 1956 (ie prior to the 1960 renovation) and at a service in 1966. The archives also contain photographs of the organ as rebuilt in 1929 and 1960.

The II* listing of the organ given in the URC Musicians Guild Report 2002/5 (referred to above) needs to be put into context. Of the 76 pipe organs in the Southern Synod of the URC, 2 are listed as grade 1*, signifying that they have been awarded the British Institute of Organ Studies Historic Organ Certificate. 9 are listed as grade I, signifying an organ of 'outstanding historic and musical interest'. 27 are in grade II* signifying an organ of 'considerable historic and musical interest' and 15 are grade II indicating an organ of 'special historic and musical interest'. The remaining 23 pipe organs are ungraded, and there are 60 electronic/digital organs.

The NPOR (N13783) notes that 'further information' about the organ can be found in the journal 'Musical Opinion', January 1962. A copy of this article has yet to be located.