

The organ at St Mary and St Margaret Church in Castle Bromwich needs a thorough repair so that it will remain central to music making and the understanding of community life in Castle Bromwich and North Solihull both in the past, present and future.



Choir practising with pipes and keyboard console clearly visible

The organ console shows a small plaque naming Peter Conacher of Huddersfield as builder of the organ. The Conacher company was originally set up by Peter Conacher (1823–1894), who, born in Scotland, studied as apprentice organ builder in Leipzig, Germany. After returning to England, he worked for Hill & Sons in Lincolnshire, and then for JW Walker & Sons. Conacher had a good reputation; they built several church organs of high quality throughout the country. The factory later diversified and provided nationwide organs for cinemas and dance halls. Perhaps the most famous of these was provided for the Odeon Theatre in Blackpool. A handful remain in private hands; their sound can be heard caringly restored on “YouTube”. The company remained functional in its own right until quite recently; there is a website with the company name although no longer active.

Looking at the original documentation held by the church it is very clear that the rebuild of the organ in 1927 incorporated part of a much older organ previously installed in the 19th century. The paperwork included a letter from a city organ adviser written a few years earlier suggesting that the organ in use at that time was unfit for purpose and typical of an organ of the 1820s to 1840s. On the Organ Guild’s listing it is suggested that a previous organ builder may well have been Forster and Andrews although it also lists a date of 1815 which was before the time of Forster and Andrews.

Various documents from 1926 show that Conacher & Co had dismantled the pipework from the previous organ prior to their rebuild and recommended that a significant part of it was of a high quality and should be retained and reused in the new organ. This amounted to approximately 65% to 70% of the rebuilt organ and is evidence that the greater part of the instrument as it remains today is considerably older than 1927. We believe it dates back to at least 1820 – 1840 and possibly even earlier.

Church documentation held at Warwick Archives (St Mary and St Margaret church, now in north Solihull, was until quite recently part of Warwickshire) is sparse on written evidence of any activity at the church. Possibly this was because at that time it was not a Parish Church but a chapel built and used by the Bridgeman family resident in the adjacent Castle Bromwich Hall. Two accounts dating back to 1641 make a few references to musical activities and specifically in 1820 of “tuning the

organ". That begs the question whether the organ had already been installed before 1800. There is no written evidence to fix that date as yet.

Peter Conacher installed a pneumatic action organ in 1927 which has proved to have done a sterling job for almost 100 years; there are only 3 remaining Conacher pneumatic organs left untouched in the country. In fact knowing the additional information about the use of previous pipework it is arguable that the instrument in its present state is unique. One of the organ specialists who looked at the instrument was keen to show us that the pipes were indeed refashioned from an older instrument. There are also clear signs on the rear wall behind the present organ to show where the previous organ was positioned. It is very important that the organ which has performed so well for so long should be put back into a condition which will guarantee its use and enjoyment for future generations preserving as much of the old machinery in a way similar to that when it was first fitted.

The refurbished organ will give the church the opportunity to open up the 1730s building to a much wider audience. Several well-known organists who have played the present organ have agreed that a fully functional instrument will indeed attract good musical audiences for concerts as well as providing a fine sound for weddings, funerals and other church and civic services.

The head teacher of the local primary school has shown a real interest in bringing groups of children to find out more about the organ, both after it has been repaired but also during the rebuilding so that they could see the dismantling process and refit. The Head of Performing Arts at one of the local Secondary Schools has similarly shown interest; using the church as a possible venue for recording and for introducing their keyboard players to the differing requirements of a wind-blown pipe organ.

Castle Bromwich Local History Society has shown a lot of interest in the project. They have fitted into their forthcoming programme slots allowing the Organ Committee to explain how we hope to enrich music in the community.. We also hope to be able to offer information about the organ and its history when our Grade 1 listed church is open to visitors on Heritage Open Days and at other designated opening times.

A recent suggestion that the sides of the organ casing should be given a Perspex window allowing people to see inside the mechanism as the organ is in use seems an excellent idea as long as it does not detract from the historical nature of the instrument – we would of course retain the original wood panelling in case it needed to be refitted. Other plans are to erect an information board about the organ and to create freely available videos and recordings made in church as we progress.

Martin Bates – Organist – March 2018