

English Masonic Lodges, Pipe Organs and National Heritage

Andrew Pink

January 2007

The presence of a pipe organ in English masonic lodges still represents to many freemasons a *sine qua non* in terms of lodge furnishings, and the position of lodge organist remains a prized one. However, while the tradition of appointing a lodge organist flourishes, the heyday of the pipe organ in English masonic lodges (c.1850-c.1950) is long gone and pipe organs have been steadily disappearing from lodges, to be replaced by an electronic keyboard, or even just a CD player; *sic transit gloria mundi*. Of course, English masonic lodges are responsible only to themselves for the management of their estate and are free to make their own decisions, but a serious consequence of this shifting musical landscape of disappearing pipe organs is that in many cases the documentary history of an instrument disappears with it. Thus the record of a significant slice of English masonic heritage, and of England's musical history, is steadily being eroded and lost to posterity.

Music has been integral to English freemasonry from its establishment in the early years of the eighteenth century. The inclusion of songs set to music in James Anderson's first edition of *The Constitutions of the Freemasons* (1723) is clear evidence for this. Less well known is that in London during the 1730s and 40s freemasons pioneered the use of marching bands. These were used to accompany each year's newly-elected Grand Master in a spectacular procession of freemasons through the streets of Westminster and the City of London to the annual Grand Feast, held in a City livery hall. At other times the singing of masonic songs, led by celebrated masonic actors, was a well-documented feature of London freemasons' annual night out at the theatre during the same period, no doubt with the theatre orchestra playing its part.

Despite eighteenth-century English freemasonry's exuberant public music-making, musical instruments were unknown in the privacy of the masonic lodge, which by tradition in those days met in the private, upper room of a tavern. Here music-making was restricted to a relatively small repertoire of songs, sung to simple unaccompanied harmonisations, not only during the work of the lodge, but during the shared meal at the mid-point of the meeting, and in the informal time after the lodge closed.¹ From 1772 the influential masonic writer William Preston (1742-1818) advocated an elaborate formal role for orchestral instruments and groups of singers in masonic lodges in his *Illustrations of Masonry* (which ran to many editions in his lifetime), but there is no evidence that Preston's grand design for masonic music-making was ever adopted. The scale of Preston's musical aspirations was unrealistic and impractical for the vast majority of eighteenth-century English lodges.

The pipe organ made its first appearances in English freemasonry with the advent of regional masonic halls in the late eighteenth century, but the impetus for the inclusion of an organ in these halls was commercial rather than masonic. It must be remembered that to pay their way these purpose-built halls occasionally had to double as public spaces available for hire. So for example, in the new Freemasons' Hall, London, an organ was not originally part of the plan for the building, and for the hall's inauguration in 1776 it was a hired organ that accompanied the choir and orchestra in the newly-commissioned celebratory ode that marked the event; the same ode was used two years later for the opening of a new masonic hall in

¹ See Pink, A. (2005) 'When They Sing: the performance of songs in 18th-century English lodges' in: *Transactions of the Fifth International Canonbury Conference: Freemasonry in Music and Literature. The Canonbury Papers* (vol 2) Stewart, T., (ed) Canonbury Masonic Research Centre: London pp. 1-14 <<http://tinyurl.com/y73lum>>, accessed 2 January 2007.

Sunderland in 1778.² It was only in 1784, at the request of the Academy of Ancient Music, then hiring the Freemasons' Hall in London for its regular concert series, that the London hall acquired from the London organ-builder Samuel Green (1740 -96) what was in effect its first permanent organ,³ and it was not until 1812 that the national (though largely symbolic) role of Grand Organist was created for the influential Catholic musician Samuel Wesley (1766-1837). It is worth noting here the significant contribution that masonic halls made to the development of public sociability in late eighteenth-century England. The 'masonic audiences' were well known for their orderly and civilised behaviour,⁴ and people's experience of concerts in masonic halls played an important role in the development of the modern concert audience.

A unique masonic hall organ surviving from this period is the substantial instrument built in 1785 by north-east organ builder John Donaldson (d.1807), which is still to be found in its original position on a gallery in the Grade 1 listed masonic hall that opened in Sunderland in 1785, the second hall on this site.⁵ This hall, which is surprisingly small by modern standards, had a public use when not being used for purely masonic purposes, just like other masonic halls of its type. Certainly, from what we know of eighteenth-century English freemasonry the Sunderland organ was not designed for the day-to-day work of the freemasons who met in the hall. While the fine organ case and display pipes remain, it is unclear how much of the instrument inside the case is intact and the organ is currently unplayable. Nonetheless, this is by any standards a valuable, historic English instrument; it is the only surviving work by Donaldson in its original location, and since the Sunderland hall records are intact, this organ's history is available, (though not yet fully researched), thus making accurate restoration possible in the future.⁶

During the nineteenth century, numerous English masonic lodges moved from meeting in taverns into their own local, purpose-built masonic halls where a pipe organ was considered as standard. This was not so much a reflection of the tradition of the organs found in the regional halls that had been established in the eighteenth century, but was rather a reflection of the Victorian vogue for pipe organs which by then were installed across England in every ambitious church, chapel, meeting hall, masonic lodge and stately home. The shift from tavern to purpose-built lodge premises not only reflected the rapid spread of freemasonry among the burgeoning well-to-do urban middle classes who were able to contemplate owning their own lodge premises, but also reflected newly-emerging ideas about male respectability and propriety that excluded the tavern and valued sobriety. These numerous local masonic halls did not normally have a public function, as had been the case with the few regional halls of the eighteenth-century.

The previous century's tradition of lodge music, with its echoes of tavern culture, was ill-suited to the new lodge environment, and so the process of appropriating a new musical repertoire from the unimpeachable sources of church and chapel began. Christian hymns and psalms, and new music inspired by them, expressing sentiments thought to validate freemasonry's fraternal tenets, began to dominate. A profusion of such material appeared in

² Prescott, A (2005) p.219. 'Freemasonry as a Part of National Heritage: The Conservation of Esoteric and Fraternal Heritage in Great Britain' in *Masonic and Esoteric Heritage : New Perspectives for Art and Heritage Policies* Kroon, Andrea (ed) OVN : Den Haag 211-30.

³ See Clements D (2006) p.5. 'Grand Lodge Organs and Organists' in *Library and Museum News for the Friends of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry*, 17 (Winter) 4-8.

⁴ McVeigh, Simon (2000) p.90. 'Freemasonry and Musical Life in London in the Late Eighteenth Century' in *Music in Eighteenth-Century Britain* Wynn Jones, David (ed) : Ashgate : Aldershot 72-100

⁵ For more information about this building see < <http://tinyurl.com/yahq95> >, accessed 2 January 2007.

⁶ I am grateful to officers of the Provincial Grand Lodge of Durham for making the necessary arrangements for me to visit to the Sunderland masonic hall in the summer of 2006.

inexpensive, commercially produced editions of lodge music from the middle of the nineteenth century until the zenith of such publications in the early decades of the twentieth, and the enlightened, convivial and inclusive song culture of eighteenth-century English freemasonry was completely erased. Such a shift was inevitable given that lodge organists were *de facto* already church or chapel organists, and that an invigorated Christianity provided the framework for English notions of social order and respectability. With the nineteenth-century flourishing of masonic activity that expressly drew on Christian traditions it is not hard to see how, in the public imagination, a process began of confusing freemasonry with alternative forms of organised religion.

The pipe organs that were installed in England's new wave of lodge premises were by any standards modest. They were not designed as concert instruments but designed simply to support corporate singing, and to create a suitably solemn atmosphere that was quite distinct from the convivial masonic bonhomie of tavern lodges. The tonal consistency of these modest English instruments, by whichever organ builder, across many decades and in all parts of the country, makes it possible to view these masonic pipe organs of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a distinct type. They not only represent a significant part of English freemasonry's cultural heritage but, arguably, they also make a distinctive contribution to the nation's wider cultural heritage. However, as a consequence of their private location and their modest scale, these instruments have been overlooked by the organ cognoscenti, and are unlikely to compete successfully for public funding towards the cost of their maintenance or restoration. Indeed, it is the costs of maintaining these otherwise modest and unremarkable instruments that has led to many being removed and replaced by electronic alternatives, without any systematic attempt to record what is lost.

It is unlikely that another historic instrument with the significance of the John Donaldson organ at Sunderland waits to be re-discovered in a masonic property, although it does seem remarkable that no-one who has made a study of Donaldson's work has ever commented on its presence. Elsewhere, some valuable domestic chamber organs by a number of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century organ builders can occasionally be found in lodge rooms, donated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by well-to-do lodge members from their own homes. These are exceptions to the typical masonic organ and they deserve preservation. For example, a fine one-manual chamber organ *c.* 1793 in an attractive mahogany case, by Robert & William Gray of London, is currently being carefully restored by Michael Broadway for use in Lodge Room 3, at Freemasons' Hall, London.

I am not suggesting the wholesale preservation of all the pipe organs in English masonic halls and lodge rooms. Times change, and so do the needs and budgets of masonic lodges. It must be admitted that the vast majority of these instruments are of little musical or monetary value in themselves, and that the singing they were designed to support is no longer a hallmark of English freemasonry. The value of these instruments lies not in their physical preservation *per se*, it lies in the collective preservation of their historic details, that will allow us to gain a better understanding of their place in the wider context of the cultural history of English freemasonry, and in the history of English organ building.

That said, a few examples of these modest instruments do need to be preserved if only to make sense of the documentation they have generated. But if, as I suggest, there is little to choose between them, then how are they to be selected for preservation if not on obviously musical or historical grounds? The important consideration in making such choices must then be the importance of an instrument's location, because it is only by location in notable spaces that the preservation of an otherwise unremarkable instrument might be justified. In some cases such a location will be identified by the UK Government's heritage listing process. This is the case for the organ by Norman and Beard Ltd of London (1912) in the lodge room known as The Greek Temple, at the Great Eastern Hotel at Liverpool Street Station, London. This imposing and highly decorated Edwardian space is Grade 1 listed and so the survival of its otherwise typically modest masonic pipe organ has been guaranteed by its being integral to

the lodge room's original design. Despite the completeness of the furniture and fittings in this lodge room it is no longer used for masonic meetings, but the instrument is intact and playable.⁷ In other situations it may simply have to be that English Freemasonry corporately agrees to create a mechanism of some kind to register its historic buildings and their interiors, providing support where necessary for their maintenance and preservation. By way of example, let us consider the large, panelled lodge room at the masonic hall in Leicester and its modest organ (1949) by Taylor & Sons of that city, all dating from the middle decades of the twentieth century. This currently well-maintained instrument is located on a spacious balustrade gallery above the room's entrance doors, and housed in a handsome neo-classical case, all integral to the impressive effect of the room's design. The coherence of the whole would be lost without the organ.⁸ Fortunately the survival of this room and its organ are not in doubt. Is there a case to be made for such significant masonic locations to re-discover a public amenity value as concert venues?

It is to be hoped that at the very least some enthusiasm can be found by individual lodges to record for posterity the pipe organs they still have, and for others to recover information from their files about those pipe organs that are now lost. The mundane paperwork associated with a pipe organ is as important as the instrument itself: receipts for tuning, details of tonal design and alterations, examples of architects' drawings, notes of correspondence, and programmes of events can all be kept for posterity with a minimum of fuss. Any documentary information about lost instruments that lodges may be willing to relinquish might be of interest to The British Organ Archive, in the Archives Department of the Birmingham Public Libraries.⁹ Of course, the specification of individual pipe organs past and present should always be checked against the data already held by the National Pipe Organ Register (NPOR) at Cambridge University,¹⁰ and updates sent electronically to the editors there.

Not all the material relating to masonic pipe organs is held in the relatively restricted environment of individual lodges' records. Masonic newspapers held in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry at Freemasons' Hall, London contain glowing reports of once newly-built masonic halls and their organs, most now long gone.¹¹ This is publicly accessible data, currently unknown to the NPOR and deserves recording there. Perhaps someone will find the time.

This paper was written at the request of the British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS) and presented during the BIOS Study Day at Freemasons' Hall, London, 25 November 2006. The author, Andrew Pink, is not a freemason. He works as a Research Assistant at UCL, University of London, and is currently completing a PhD thesis, *The Musical Culture of Freemasonry in Early Eighteenth Century London*, in the Music Department at Goldsmiths College, University of London. This doctoral research is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and is supervised by Professor Simon McVeigh.

⁷ I am grateful to the Engineering Manager of the Great Eastern Hotel for making it possible to visit The Greek Temple in the autumn of 2006.

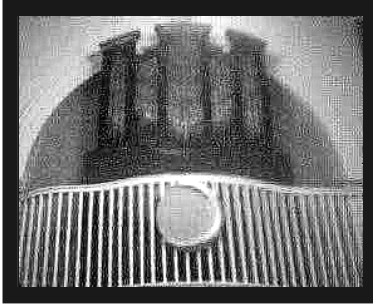
⁸ I am grateful to Professor Aubrey Newman from the University of Leicester for arranging my visit to this hall in the summer of 2006.

⁹ The British Organ Archive < <http://tinyurl.com/somdt> >, accessed 2 January 2007

¹⁰ The National Pipe Organ Register < <http://tinyurl.com/tdzj5> >, accessed 2 January 2007

¹¹ See, for example, Prescott, A (2005) 'An Old Masonic Hall in Sheffield' in *Tales from Great Queen Street* The Centre for Research into Freemasonry, University of Sheffield : Sheffield < <http://tinyurl.com/y78tv8> >, accessed 2 January 2007.

Slides used in association with this paper.

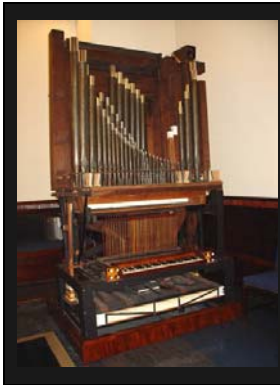


Left: Organ by John Donaldson (1785) in the Freemasons' Hall, Queen Street, Sunderland.

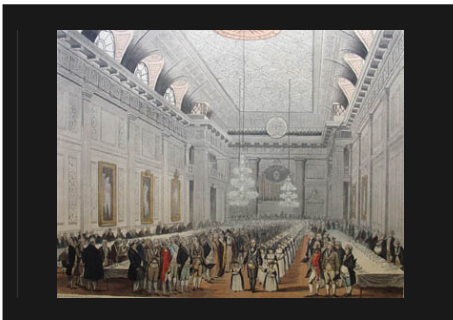
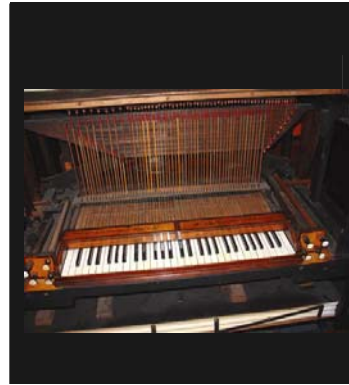
Photograph by Andrew Pink©2006



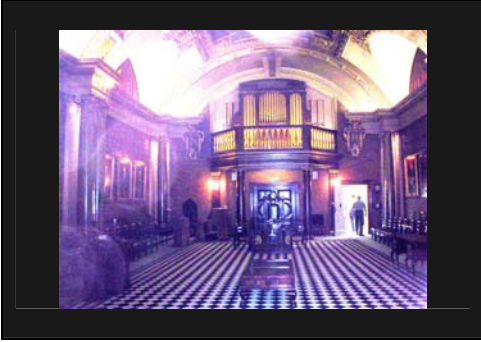
Left: Organ by Norman and Beard Ltd (1912) in The Greek Temple, Great Eastern Hotel, London, EC2. Right: console
Photographs by Andrew Pink©2006



Left: Organ (c.1793) by Robert & William Gray in Lodge-room 3, Freemasons' Hall, Great Queen Street, London WC2, (2006) shown with case removed during restoration by Michael Broadway. Right: Detail showing keyboard and stop jambs. Photographs © 2006 The Library and Museum of Freemasonry. Reproduced with permission.



Left: The organ by Samuel Green (1786), here shown at the far end of Freemasons Hall c.1802), which was installed at the request of The Academy of Ancient Music. Right: Detail of the organ. Source: *The Freemasons' Charity Children Being Presented To The Trustees And Governors On Their Anniversary At Freemasons' Hall*. Original painting by Thomas Stothard (1755-1834), engraved by Francesco Bartolozzi (1727-1815) for William Jeffrys London, 1802. A hand coloured print in the collection of the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, London. Reproduced with permission.



The organ by Taylor and Sons of Leicester (1949), in the Masonic Hall in Leicester. Left: Organ and gallery. Right: console, located in the gallery. Photographs © 2006, Alec Bak. Reproduced with permission.

This paper appears, without images, in BIOS Reporter: the Journal of the British Institute of Organ Studies. Vol XXXI, No, 2, April (2007). ISSN 03098052 pp. 14-21.

This paper appears, with images, in The Organ Club Journal Vol 2007 No 3 ISSN 03060357