

# The Susi Jeans organ moves...again!

Tom Bell & Richard Nicholson

The story of this important and interesting organ begins with Lady Susi Jeans (1911–93), the influential organist, harpsichordist, clavichordist, musicologist and teacher. Born in Vienna in the dying years of the Habsburg Empire, Jeans studied in that city as well as in Leipzig. In the early 1930s she had both a life-changing encounter with historical tracker action organs by Silbermann, which set an artistic course to which she would hold for the rest of her life, and a meeting with Charles-Marie Widor who thought her legato playing in need of improvement! A champion of forgotten early repertoire, and an informed executant of the music of Bach amongst others, Lady Jeans embodied the changing artistic taste and priorities of the mid-twentieth century.

On her first trip to play in the UK Jeans met the physicist Sir James Jeans, marrying him the following year, 1935. As wedding presents Sir James gave his new wife two musical instruments: a two manual and pedal harpsichord, both of which subsequently became famous through Susi Jean's broadcast performances. Throughout her career she welcomed students to her Surrey home, many of whom today have fond recollections both of Jeans' teaching and of the instrument itself.

As a neo-classical, mechanical action organ, the organ was thoroughly ahead of the game in Britain. Artistic ideas which had gained first expression at the Freiburg Conference in 1926, and which signalled a break with the



perceived excesses of the high-romantic school of organ building, had yet to have any significant impact north of the English Channel.

Serious exploration of neo-classical ideals in organ building in Britain had to wait until the mid-1950's. Today most of us think of the Royal Festival Hall as definitively representing a - turning point, and so it does! Yet Susi Jeans' organ appeared on the scene almost two decades earlier, at a time when Arthur Harrison was still alive. Viewed in this context the Jeans organ seems an outlier, or perhaps a bellwether, virtually alone in the UK for nearly twenty years as an example of modern European organ building. It is a remarkable and surprising instrument, and even after mechanical, neo-classical organs became commonplace it retained (retains!) its capacity to bamboozle ill-prepared students.

All mechanical and structural components of the organ were built by Hill, Norman & Beard, the pipes being

supplied by the German organ builder Hermann Eule. Construction of mechanical action organs was relatively unusual in the UK by 1936, though not unknown. HN&B had made a mechanical organ for Singapore a decade earlier, and exported a further tracker instrument in the late 1940s, before resuming regular construction of mechanical organs around ten years after that.<sup>1</sup> The action was designed by Frank Eglen, described by John Norman as 'reckoned to be the expert on tracker action' at Hill, Norman &

Beard. Indeed, Eglen taught Herbert Norman who was later to be in charge of HN&B. Susi Jeans' obituary in The Independent credits the composer Johann Nepomuk David (1895–1977) with the (tonal?) design of the organ, and Eule's director Fritz Abend voiced the pipework. John Norman reports that Susi Jeans 'would have nothing electric', which probably accounts for the presence of the tubular pneumatic stop action, constructed at a time when the standard HN&B approach would have been to provide an electro-pneumatic stop (and key) action. The pneumatic pistons are settable although they do not act on the Hauptwerk Krumhorn!

The Hauptwerk (HW) is located at impost level, with the Oberwerk (OW) – more of a Hinterwerk, really – situated behind at the same level. The Pedal pipework is at the back of the organ, at the same level as the console.

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the marvellous John Norman for much of the following.

## Puzzling pipes

The organ has been subject to various repairs over the years, including tonal alterations whilst it was in the possession of Lady Jeans. A glance at its history, as recorded in the National Pipe Organ Register, reveals the appearance and disappearance of various stops, notably on the Hauptwerk which (if NPOR records are accurate) had nine stops in 1950. It had seven in 1936, as it does at present. The Krumhorn sits on a clamp (an extension to the HW soundboard), and since the stop action to this rank is a later addition the pistons do not act on it. In fact, the Krumhorn appeared in the original specification so its position on a clamp would seem to be a legacy of the various to-ings and fro-ings in this department. The NPOR has the Krumhorn in the original specification, whilst simultaneously claiming it was added in 1950, and again in 1963! The OW Tertian II was installed in 1950, replacing a Quint 143 using new pipework supplied by Harrison & Harrison, according to Ralph Downes in chapter six of his book *Baroque Tricks*, but again voiced by Fritz Abend. Both ranks of the Tertian certainly appear to be English, to judge from the pipe markings. The pipes of the HW Oktave 2', which are German, are in fact marked 'Q 22/3' and even sit on a slide marked 'Quinte' whereas the pipes of the HW Quinte 24", also German, are marked simply 'Q' and sit on a slide marked 'Oktave'. Whatever the history, the Oktave is surprisingly flutey. Some of the holes in the rackboard for the present HW Quinte pipes are padded with felt, because they used to hold wider pipes (i.e., presumably those now employed as the Oktave?) There is also evidence of cutting and moving of pipes at the top of the Quinte. Lastly, there are a couple of pipes in this stop mysteriously marked 'T'. These pipes have the same markings as the other German pipes and thus presumably did not originate in the (Harrison-supplied) Tertian. So, when the Tertian

was installed, was the old OW Quinte reused an octave lower on the HW, and the HW Quinte pipes redeployed as a 'new' Oktave? At this time or later was there an attempt at rescaling the HW upperwork to alter the tone of the instrument? Your intrepid correspondent spent a happy hour or more trying to work all this out. He knows he should get a life, but it would be so interesting to have an answer!

## On the move

Lady Jeans' former home, at Cleveland Lodge in Surrey, became the headquarters of the Royal School of Church Music in 1996. The organ remained in situ, and received some repairs to pipework and re-leathering

of pneumatic components by Harrison & Harrison in 1999. The RSCM moved out of Cleveland Lodge in 2006, at which point the organ was sold to Birmingham Conservatoire. The organ was moved to Birmingham by Nicholson & Co. in 2007, the same firm performing some further repair work and maintaining the organ until moving it again, to the new Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (RBC) building in 2017. Now supplanted by a new Flentrop at the Conservatoire, in 2020, and despite any number of unforeseen complications arising from the pandemic the heroic Richard Young and his team at R & S Young organ builders extracted the organ from RBC, gave it an overhaul, and installed it in the stunning new





music facility at King’s High School for Girls, in Warwick. Being a neo-classical organ, it is brilliantly voiced, something all-too apparent in the bright acoustics of the RBC Organ Studio. It certainly sparked! In its new home the organ looks and feels just right, and although its acoustical setting is still very sympathetic it now sounds a little more mellow. More like a house organ indeed, which is what it is. The Susi Jeans organ is a delight; may it go on to inspire many more generations of organists!

Tom Bell, December 2020

This article tells the story of the latest chapter in the life of the Lady Susi Jeans organ: its move from the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire to King’s High School in Warwick.

I first came across the Susi Jeans organ on a visit to Cleveland Lodge at the time of the Royal Schools of Church Music’s move to Salisbury. Fast forward to 2017 and a tour of the new Royal Birmingham Conservatoire of Music included a visit to the Organ Room, housing the instrument. There followed a happy few minutes playing and exploring it. I enjoyed it immensely; it is hard not to be charmed by this most beguiling of instruments. Now, the organ resides at King’s High School for Girls in Warwick. This is the story of

that journey.

In 2019, the school moved from its home of 140 years in the town centre of Warwick to new state-of-the-art, purpose-built accommodation, still in Warwick, but around a third of a mile away, past Warwick Castle and over the River Avon.

King’s High is part of the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation, one of the largest educational charities in the UK, educating some 2,500 pupils, from 3 to 18. King’s educates girls from 11-18; Warwick Preparatory School is co-educational from 3-7, and single-sex girls 7-11; at 7, the boys progress to Warwick Junior School and then to Warwick School to at 11. The move means that the King’s High and Warwick School family of schools is together on the same campus for the first time in our history, with all the benefits that that brings.

One of the new buildings is a Music School for Warwick Prep and King’s High; a shared space enabling pupils from nursery upwards to benefit from specialist teaching in specialist facilities. This building opened in September 2020, but sadly, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant that the opportunities it brings for the Foundation and the wider area have yet to be fully realised; its time will come.

As a Head, my guiding principle has been to open pupils’ eyes to as many new and different opportunities and experiences as possible; showing what can be accomplished is surely the way to inspire the next generation, and for them to go on to make a transformational contribution to the society in which they live and work. Cultural literacy is a key part of this mission.

I have always championed young people’s access to and experience of the organ. As the Director of Music at St Catherine’s School, Bramley, it was a great privilege to work with the late Jennifer Bate on the creation of that innovative residential organ course for girls, and to see it flourish over many years.

There is sterling work being done by local IAO associations and the RCO in bringing the organ to greater prominence to school children. With the promise of our new Music School, playing our part in this endeavour was high on my agenda – but pipe organs are costly, and the expense simply could not be justified at the planning stages of the building.

A series of happy events unfolded over the summer and autumn of 2019 which ultimately saw the Susi Jeans organ installed in the new Music School’s Recital Room.

First was a chance visit to the redundant organs list on the IBO website, and then a quick follow up on a redundant organ Facebook page. It was true – the Susi Jeans Organ was for sale. An email to Dan Moul, Head of Organ at the Conservatoire, quickly followed. Yes, it was still available; yes, the ‘peppercorn’ price really was peppercorn.

I wasn’t quite sure where the instrument would go, or quite how much it would cost to restore or install, but I like a challenge and am a great believer in finding ways to make things work. So the next task was to secure professional help.

This was the second happy event, as,



at Dan’s suggestion, Tom Bell agreed to be our advisor and has been superb from start to finish. Quite simply, this project would not have happened without him. An inspection of the instrument followed, as did quotes from organ builders.

Raising the funds to pay for all this was still an issue, which leads to the third piece of good fortune, in the form of a potential benefactor. After a visit to the organ and a mini-recital by Dan, they agreed to fund not only the entirety of the project but also give money for a sixth form organ scholarship, the Westgate Organ Scholarship. The benefactors have asked to remain anonymous but their commitment to this project, and the interest they have taken in it, has been tremendous; their gift has left a legacy for generations to come.

Their exceptionally generous gift led to our fourth happy event, the appointment of Richard Young as the restorer and installer. Based in Rugby, just up the road from Warwick, we were

delighted to be able to support such a superb local business.

As with so many aspects of life, the COVID-19 pandemic caused unavoidable holdups and delays. Patience and pragmatism won the day, with the organ finally being installed in November 2020.

Throughout this project, there has been a shared passion between consultant, donors, and organ builder. It feels entirely right that as an organ built for a great female organist and teacher, Lady Jeans’ organ should now reside in a school for girls, and play an important part in their musical journeys.

The arrival of the organ is a starting point for us, rather than an end in itself. We already have pupil organists in the school, and strong links to St Mary’s Church, Warwick. Oliver Hancock, the charismatic Director of Music there, is a member of staff at King’s High too, and there is a shared full-time appointment in the form of a post-graduate Organ Scholar. Having two excellent organists inspire pupils, combined with such a

beautiful instrument, provides excellent foundations on which to build. We want this important instrument to enhance music-making for all, across our Foundation, and the wider community, near and far. We look forward to forging new relationships and marking the organ’s arrival in suitable style, just as soon as the COVID-19 restrictions allow.

Richard Nicholson is Principal of the Warwick Independent Schools Foundation, having been Head of King’s High from 2015-2020. A musician by training, Richard was a chorister at Southwell Minster, Organ Scholar at Lichfield Cathedral and at Pembroke College, Oxford, where he read music. Having taught music and been a Director of Music at two schools, he moved into school leadership at The Lady Eleanor Holles School in London before relocating to Warwick.

