

Some tips on developing a pipe-organ conservation project

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Applications for a grant towards the restoration of a pipe organ have to demonstrate the heritage value of the instrument. The Heritage Lottery Fund is able to consider conservationist projects that include reversing changes made to an organ subsequent to its original construction, or that maintain the instrument in its current form provided this does not compromise its historical character. Proposals that include alterations to an historic organ removing it further from its original state will not be supported by HLF.

Making an application to HLF to restore a pipe organ means addressing two key matters:

- Responding to the general HLF policy regarding restoration and conservation;
- Establishing an interesting 'narrative' telling the story of the organ, its builder, its tonal design, music-making for which the organ was built – all of which demonstrate the organ's historic credentials and its potential for educational outreach work.

First of all, the project's conservation policy needs to be established. This should be accompanied by an outline 'scope of work' presented to three accredited organ builders in order to establish relative costs and to build a clear and robust budget for restoring the instrument. Developing this policy needs to be in line good conservation practice. To this end the Institute of British Organ Building (IBO: <http://www.ibo.co.uk>) and the Association of Independent Organ Advisers (AIOA: <https://www.aioa.org.uk>) issued guidelines in January 2018 for the development of a scope of work.

Pipe Organ Restoration: Good Conservation Practice

The document is not meant to be prescriptive, but represents a guide to good practice when restoring and conserving pipe organs. Each project invariably throws up unique problems which must be resolved on a case-by-case basis. HLF will normally expect the scope of work undertaken by an organ builder to be strongly orientated around an ethos of conservation and will favour applications in respect of organs of with clear heritage value; many such organs have an Historic Organs Certificate (HOC) issued by the British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS), and a copy should accompany the application (<http://www.bios.org.uk>).

Grants are usually awarded for the conservation of an organ in its present state or for schemes where the proposed works restore a clearly established earlier historic state. Grants will not normally be awarded for schemes introducing changes to the original design of the organ, or works which take an organ further from its original tonal scheme, mechanism or wind system, or which replace earlier parts with non-traditional materials. For example, the replacement of tracker or tubular-pneumatic key or stop actions with an electro-pneumatic action is unlikely to receive grant aid. Pneumatic (and especially electric) actions present specific difficulties which should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis.

Heritage bodies normally encourage applicants to consider engaging an organ builder accredited for historic restoration by the Institute of British Organ Building.

When considering grant aid for historic organs, grant-awarding bodies will normally require that the chosen contractor should adopt historically appropriate methods. For example, contractors are expected to avoid the use of modern synthetic materials and components inappropriate to the organ's original design, to refrain from revoicing, alterations to pitch or replacement of pipework, and to respect historic finishes.

Whilst there are a number of ways in which it is possible to interpret technical evidence found within a pipe organ (or related documentation surviving in the archives), there are some overriding principles of good practice in restoration and conservation work. Assuming that an organ has heritage merit, the technical specification of the work to be undertaken should establish a coherent restoration philosophy, as distinct from a simple 'clean and overhaul' schedule.

It would be usual to find the following elements in a scope of work:

- No alterations, except to reverse changes (the addition in a suitable style of 'prepared for' stops is a possible exception, although grant-awarding bodies would not normally pay for such additions)
- Provision for the assessment, and if necessary, the renewal in the original style, of all internal leatherwork
- Provision for comprehensive investigation of all soundboards and wind chests, with an appropriate level of restoration
- Retention or reinstatement of the original
 - forms of action
 - hand-blowing mechanisms (where applicable)
 - pedal board in the original style and with the original compass
 - swell pedal or lever
 - mixture compositions
 - reed shallots and tongues
 - tuning method
 - bushing (or lack of it)
- No alteration to the pitch or temperament, except to restore the original where this can be established with confidence
- Any replacement of original components or materials should normally be on like-for-like basis
- Provision for the careful storage of any original components or pipework rejected as beyond repair
- The avoidance of slider seals or synthetic sliders
- The removal of incongruous fittings, e.g. light switches, mirrors, modern builders' plates
- The avoidance of inappropriate internal lights
- Cleaning, but not wholesale re-painting of internal surfaces with the exception of metalwork that is badly corroded

- Assessment of mechanical blowing machines for servicing or replacement
- Cleaning and conservation of wooden casework and painted façade pipes, employing a specialist contractor where necessary

Things to avoid:

- over-restoration
- painting internal surfaces or wooden pipes
- internal glossing of swell boxes
- varnishing of action components or wooden pipes
- premature replacement of key coverings which are not yet worn through
- re-engraving stop shields where the lettering is still legible
- washing of pipes with chemical agents

In general, the approach should be one of such minimal intervention as is compatible with the achievement of a further extended period of service. Builders should be strongly discouraged from trying to make the organ appear 'good as new'.

Telling the organ's story

Creating an education programme to run alongside the restoration of a pipe organ can seem a daunting prospect, but the background to a particular instrument, built in a particular place, can usually yield an interesting story about its provenance, its builder, how it works and what it was – and is – used for.

The key to developing such programmes is to allow the organ's own story to be told – a narrative usually comes from the nature of the instrument being restored, rather than generic information about the history of the pipe organ.

Rather than try to create interest in the organ from scratch (as it were), it is usually possible to harness existing community groups, organisations and schools to whom the story can be told, thereby developing new audiences and encouraging sustainability of the project.

In developing a narrative which tells the organ's story it is important to be able to demonstrate how an instrument works at a wide range of educational levels. An outreach programme can include technical elements which can be explained at the different Key Stages to schools, as well as to the public. There are a number of professional advisers and amateurs who can assist in the development and delivery of such educational programmes.

It is also important to have a clear understanding of the organ's history, not only from a technical point of view, but also its social roots and impact. Some themes which can be explored are given below; any suggestions given here are not meant to be prescriptive, but represent areas for research and development which have proved useful in other projects.

General background information about a pipe organ

- How does an organ work?

- How do organ pipes speak?
- Does the organ have any technical innovations which need explanation?
- What materials is the organ made from?
- What tooling does an organ builder use?
- Can schools or groups visit the organ during restoration work?
- What skills does an organ builder need?
- How is the organ to be restored/
- What issues does the restorer face?

The organ itself

- What were the circumstances which required the installation of an organ?
- Which companies were invited to tender?
- Who was chosen to build the organ?
- What is the organ-building firm's history?
- Who paid for the organ?
- When was the organ installed?

Its location

- Was an architect involved in planning the organ's location?
- Why was it positioned where it was?
- Is the organ case a memorial? To whom?

Characters associated with the instrument

- Who was the first organist?
- Were any of the organists famous musicians?
- What is known about their life and achievements?

Exhibiting artifacts associated with the organ

- Is there interesting documentation, such as the original contract, correspondence with a donor, architect, organ builder
- Was the organ used for recordings? By whom and when? Do any survive?
- Is the organ featured in any technical literature?
- Who gave the first concert on the organ?
- What was performed?
- Was there a history of concerts once the organ was opened?
- Did any celebrities perform on the organ? What did they play?

History and the organ

- The organ as a musical instrument charts English social and political history e.g.,
- Reformation
- Civil War
- Restoration of the Monarchy
- Organ building after the Great Fire of London
- The organ's changing position in churches and concert halls in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries
- The organ's role in the rise of non-conformism

- The industrial revolution, the Great Exhibition of 1851 and their effect on organ manufacture
- The effect of the Great War on organ building
- The Organ Revival after the Second World War

Memories

- Collect memories of events, incidents and activities connected with the organ and performances on it
- Tours and guides can be offered using trained volunteers to tell the story to visitors

Composing for organ

- Has any music been specially written for the instrument?
- Can it be performed again as part of the organ's rededication?
- Explore how organ music is written
- Can the organ be combined with other instruments, including contemporary electronic technology?
- Can new music be commissioned for the instrument?

Exploring the arts in your community

Often there are other groups in the community who would be interested in the pipe organ from a number of perspectives; liaison with such groups can be a fruitful way in which to explore collaborative arts ventures:

- Creative painting using organ's sound or its visual character as a stimulus
- Exploring the writing of poetry, drama or literature which is associated with the organ or which can be developed, written or commissioned during its restoration
- Making a film which involves the organ

Science and the organ

Community groups interested in technology, or (for example) the nineteenth-century industrialisation of organ building, can explore a deeper understanding of how the technology has been developed. An organ builder or an adviser can usually give an interesting presentation on technical, musical or social aspects of a particular instrument. Some areas for exploration include:

- How does the shape of a pipe affect its tone?
- How do materials affect the sound made from pipes?
- Acoustics and the production of sound from organ pipes
- Manufacturing processes
- Materiality of the instrument

Recitals, concerts and documentation

A series of organ concerts can feature a wide range of activities, including

- A dedication recital to open the instrument
- The organ accompanying silent movies
- The organ combined with other instruments and choirs
- Presentation of schools' project work

- A composition competition for schools and community groups
- An exhibition of activities associated with the project
- Publication of a monograph documenting the organ's history and its restoration
- Recordings of the organ
- Development of a comprehensive website which documents the project

Examples of organ restoration programmes

Colchester Moot Hall Organ Restoration

<http://moothallorgan.co.uk>

St John's Hyde Park, London

<https://savebetty.wordpress.com/about/>

St Mary the Virgin, Tottenham, London

www.smarystottenham.org/history.html

Royal Festival Hall, London

<https://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/blog/restoration-royal-festival-hall-organ-part-2>

St Mary the Virgin Titchmarsh, Northamptonshire

<http://titchmarshorgan.org.uk>

St John's Notting Hill, London

<http://www.stjohnsnottinghill.com/the-organ/>

Union Chapel, London

<https://www.unionchapel.org.uk/about-us/organ-reframed/the-organ-project-2012-15/>

Further reading

Guidance for Church Projects (September 1995)

Historic Organ Conservation

A Practical Introduction to Processes and Planning Dominic Gwynn, Council for the Care of Churches (Church House Publishing, 2001)

Towards the Conservation and Restoration of Historic Organs

A Record of the 1999 Liverpool Conference Jim Berrow (Church House Publishing, 2001)

Links

Association of Independent Organ Advisers

<https://www.aioa.org.uk>

Church Buildings Council (CBC)

<http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/funding-and-grants/our-grants/organs>

Institute of British Organ Building (IBO)

<http://www.ibo.co.uk>