

from

Buckingham

to

Worthing

by E. C. Buckland

On Sunday, May 24, 1981, four years of effort by the Sussex Theatre Organ Trust were rewarded at the Gala Opening Concert of our fully restored 3/10 Wurlitzer organ in the Assembly Hall, Stoke Abbott Road, Worthing. Some 18,000 man-hours and £11,000 in materials and equipment had gone into the re-installation project when the capacity audience heard Bobby Pagan, George Blackmore and Ernest Broadbent perform — though patrons at a dance the previous evening were given a surprise preview when Ernest took over from the band for a “Blackpool-style” session.

A history of the organ is worthy of mention, as it is a saga of some significance. The chests, pipework and regulators of the organ were originally installed in the Fulton, later Lorain, Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio, as part of Opus 2013, a Style 205 Special shipped on December 29, 1928. The organ was later repossessed by the Wurlitzer Company and rebuilt for installation in the Metropole Cinema, Victoria, London, in April, 1935. The console for that organ had been reconditioned from the first Tower Ballroom, Blackpool, console, removed the year before.

Removal of the Metropole organ took place in 1961, by an organization founded by Ralph Bartlett and known as the Theatre Organ Preser-

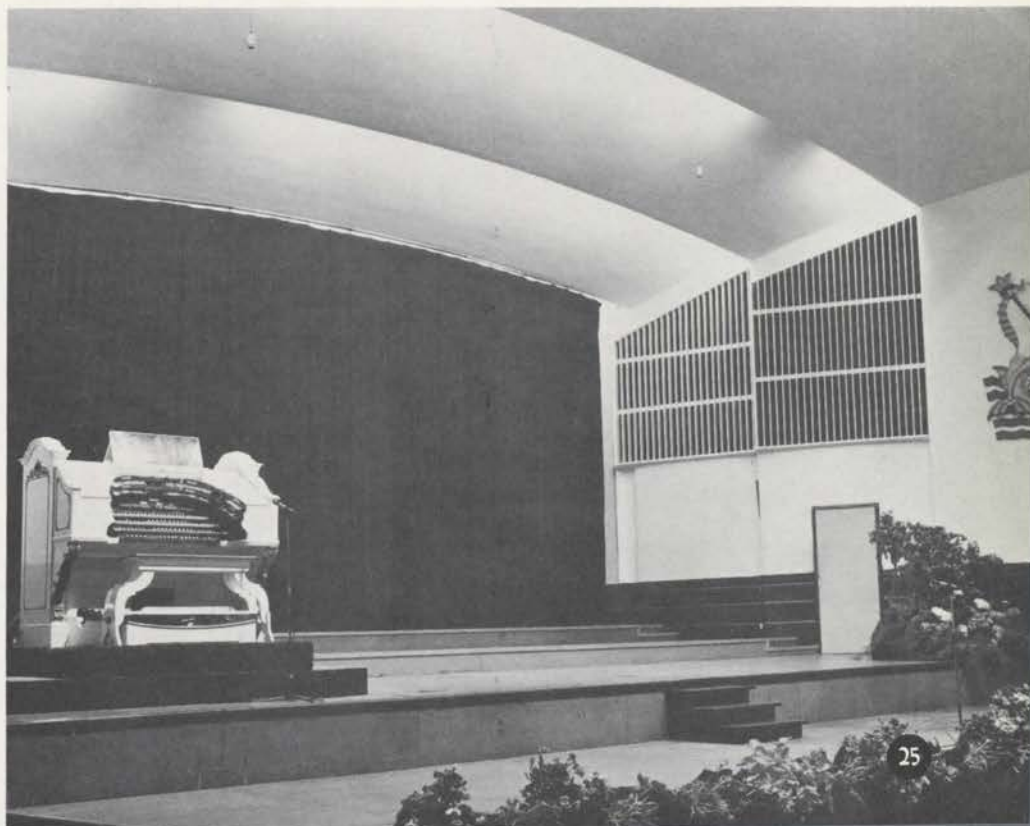
vation Society (TOPS). Damaged parts of the organ were replaced by pipework from the Regent, Stamford Hill, organ and two alternative ranks came from the Gaumont, Watford, Wurlitzer. As the third manual of the Metropole console was a coupler only, the console from the Troxy, Stepney, (Style 220 Special, Opus 2184) was obtained along with relays from the Gaumont, Holloway. The

ten-rank organ was installed in the Town Hall, Buckingham, in what proved to be the first occasion in England that the re-installation of a theatre organ in another home other than a theatre was attempted, although by this time many such undertakings had been accomplished successfully in the USA.

It was completed by TOPS and opened on May 19, 1963, with a con-

Stage of the Assembly Hall, Worthing, with console on its lift. Both chambers are located on the right side.

(John Sharp Photo)







Ernest Broadbent, Bobby Pagan and George Blackmore played the inaugural concert at Worthing, May 24, 1981.



Jackie Brown, Robinson Cleaver and William Davies played the opening concert at Buckingham in May 1963. (John Sharp Photo)

cert by William Davies, Robinson Cleaver and the late Jackie Brown. At Buckingham the organ was tremendously popular, becoming well known through public concerts and dances, broadcasts and recordings, but over the years it suffered from considerable neglect. Finally, with the closing of the building in October, 1974, because of concern about its structural safety, the wisest thing seemed to be to make the organ available for installation elsewhere.

It was acquired by the Sussex Theatre Organ Trust through the goodwill of Ralph Bartlett, General Secretary of the Theatre Organ Club, and an agreement for its installation in Worthing was entered into with the Borough Council in October, 1978.

During the four years that we have been restoring and installing the organ we have continuously referred to it as having originated from the Troxy Theatre. This has been quite deliberate, despite the organ's history, since our purpose was to reproduce the specification of that organ but with some small changes to enhance its capabilities both musically and technically. We also realized that the public identified the organ with what they could see — the console — and with what they could hear, so we concluded that it was necessary to have an objective identity in spite of the aggregation of equipment from numerous locations. The final result, therefore, is the re-creation of the Troxy Wurlitzer but with a little more refinement.

We are, however, dedicated to the presentation and rejuvenation of popular organ music in suitable surroundings and are not motivated by any devotion to nostalgia. We believe that if there is to be a future for theatre organ music, the prerequisite

is a good concert hall and an installation equipped to modern standards.

In rebuilding the organ we have taken advantage of all the relevant aspects of modern materials and technology — much in the same tradition of Robert Hope-Jones, the creator of the Wurlitzer organ, who most certainly in his time advanced the capability of his instruments to the limit by such means.

A semiconductor relay system has been specially designed for the instrument, as has an electronic micro-processor combination action capable of holding the piston settings of up to four organists for immediate use. All of the contact systems throughout the organ have been replaced by reed switches or gold contacts, and the entire installation has had the benefit of about 150 miles of new wiring of various kinds.

The woodwork throughout has been restored to new condition and the new wood screws have been electroplated for corrosion protection. The traditional gasket material used by organ builders has hitherto been leather, but this has little long-term capability for sealing purposes and has been replaced in this organ by closed-cell expanded neoprene. Recovering of every pneumatic motor in the organ was a formidable task lasting some years, and every pneumatic valve used in the instrument was also replaced.

The blower motor has been replaced, and the old DC electrical supply generator coupled to it has been superseded by a new system of four highly reliable DC stabilized supplies. All of the old metal wind trunking has been replaced by modern PVC and ABS plastic tubing.

The console has had a number of functional items renewed, such as

stop key springs, second-touch springs, indicator plates and some stop keys. The shell was stripped and refinished with ten litres of fine white coach-building paint, specially blended. The scrollwork was finished in gilt and red. The original mahogany of the horseshoe rails was treated very badly over the years, and after removing numerous coats of indifferent paints from this beautiful wood it was French-polished to its correct finish.

We were fortunate in having an old chapel to serve as our workshop for the four years of restoration work, and we are indebted to the Worthing Borough Council for making these premises available.

A record of this project would be incomplete without some mention of the ancillary aspects of the installation. The lift, which was purchased from the Granada, Woolwich, and brought to Worthing in October, 1977, had to be lengthened by twelve inches in order to accommodate the Steinway concert grand piano, since an essential use of the lift is to move the piano and console from the stage to their understage storage rooms. The lift's electrical system was replaced, and a new electronic control system was incorporated enabling its use at a number of different levels.

The large manual chests and a number of the larger tonal percussions had to be placed in the chambers at an early stage because of access limitations. Therefore it was necessary to complete their restoration coincident with the building programme, crate them and lift them through a hole in the floor when the chambers were being built. Heavy-duty hoisting equipment had to be fitted in the roof of the hall for the occasion.



The complete and rebuilt console was moved into the hall in January, 1981, a formidable undertaking which was carried out by an expert team with all of the necessary care and skill one must apply to such a task.

Though the Assembly was built in 1935, the auditorium is of modern appearance and is fitted with a sprung dance floor, which is carpeted on concert days. When equipped with seats, the main floor and small balcony together accommodate about 1000 persons. The side walls of the hall angle inward toward the rear of the two-level stage, and it is in the space behind the right-hand wall that the chambers are situated, side by side.

The organ contains ten ranks: Main chamber — Diaphonic Diapason 16', Concert Flute 16', Violin 16' TC, Violin Celeste 8', Saxophone 8'; Solo chamber — Tibia Clausa 16' TC, Harmonic Tuba 16', Krumet 8', Vox Humana 16' TC, and English

Post Horn 8'. The standard range of Wurlitzer tonal percussions, traps and effects is provided, and the console contains stop keys for the later inclusion of a Tuba Mirabilis as an eleventh rank.

The sound carries well in the high and spacious auditorium and the organ produces a rich and satisfying blend. Organists had to hand-register at the opening concert, the micro-processor system being incomplete, and the tremulant positions and settings were obviously in need of further regulation, all of which will be corrected with time — and patience!

Nigel Ogden, host of the BBC radio series "The Organist Entertains," said in the September issue of *Organ Player*, "The sound produced, which is what it's all about, after all, is quite superb; it's what I call true, full-blooded Wurlitzer theatre organ sound, with an English Horn rank of such power that it blows people from the front stalls to the rear balcony! In all seriousness,

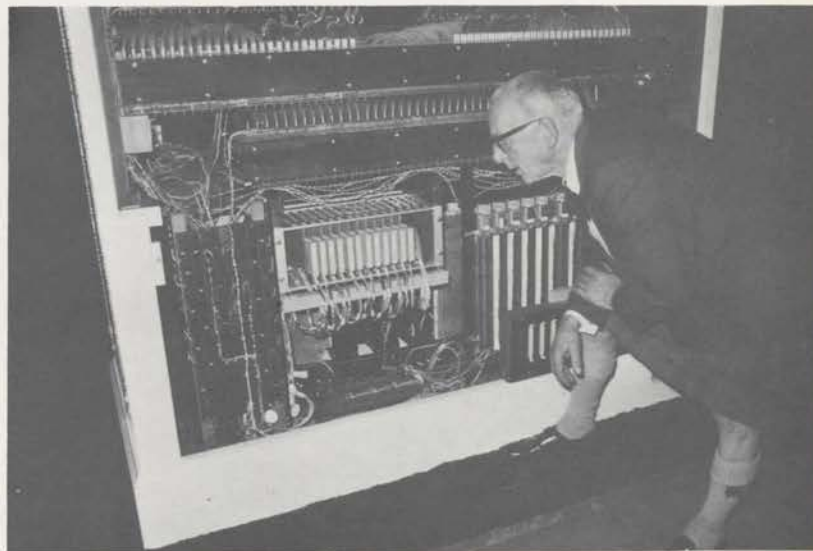


One of the rebuilt manual chests going up through the chamber floor. The new steel work on the left was part of the chamber reinforcing structure that was needed.



The console nears completion.

One of the manual chests during rebuild. Note the use of sponge neoprene gasket material.

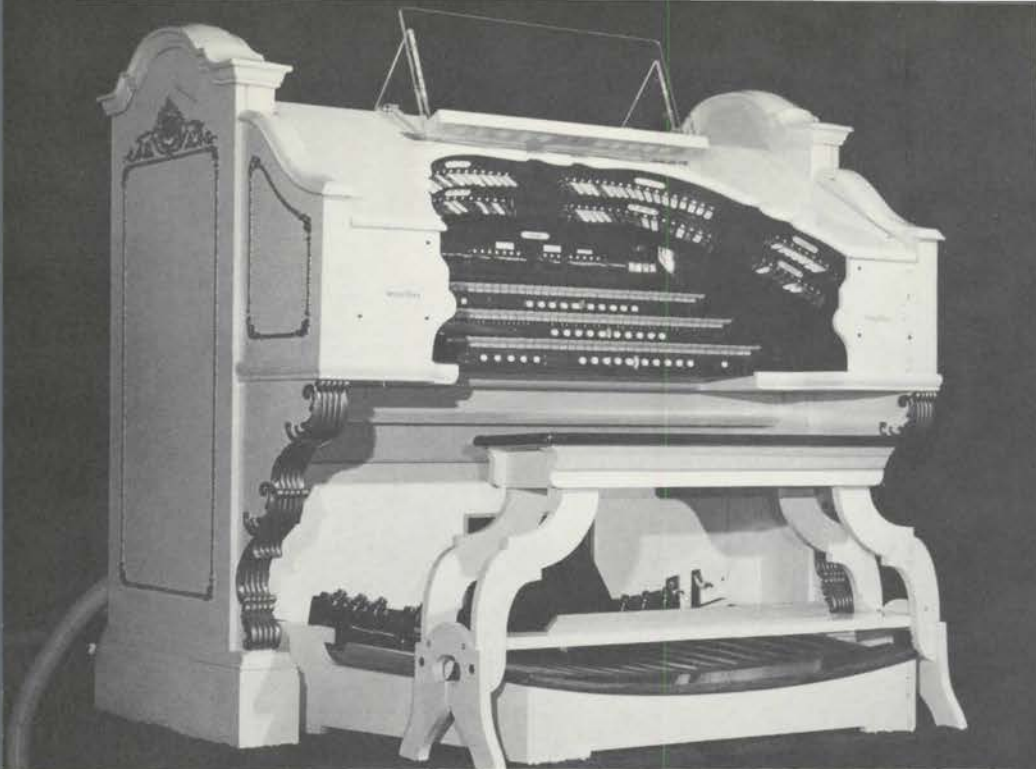


Bobby Pagan looks at the new electronic equipment in the console. Left: Stop key marshalling board; Center: New setter computer; Right: New coupler switches.

Removal of the organ from Buckingham Town Hall.







Worthing Wurlitzer console ready for action.

(John Sharp Photo)

it's one of the finest theatre organ transplants that I've come across in a long time." (The Post Horn rank, incidentally, is on loan and is soon to be replaced by a somewhat quieter one of British manufacture.)

Critic Mather Cripps, in a review of an orchestra concert in September said, "Expertly played by Donovan Brown, who kept a tight rein on the powerful instrument . . . it showed off its paces as a concert organ in a performance of the Third (organ) Symphony by Saint-Saëns . . . honours must go to the organist, who demonstrated that the mighty Wurlitzer has considerable possibilities as a concert organ."

It might be said that this was Bobby Pagan's second go at opening the organ; it was Bobby who opened the original organ in the Troxy in 1933. Born at Cupar, Fife, in 1905, he developed a built-in musical talent at an early age and after a period of legal endeavour and a spell of locomotive engineering, he became a professional organist at the old Doncaster Picture House in 1926. His residency at the Troxy was interrupted in 1938 when he was "lent" to the Palladium, Copenhagen, for two years. Fore and aft of his naval service, he was at the Astoria, Aberdeen, followed by a winter in 1946/47 with Granada in London. Then came five years with the Gaumont and Odeon circuits playing widely throughout England before joining the ABC circuit in 1952, where he

stayed till retirement in 1970. Composer, conductor, arranger and author, Bobby is now mainly involved in both electronic and theatre organ recitals around the country.

Unlike other great theatre organists who were well established by 1939, George Blackmore entered the profession straight from school into the Majestic Theatre, Rochester, only a few months before the outbreak of war. At the age of twelve he became the youngest ever to win an organ scholarship to the King's School where he studied under Percy Whitlock and H. A. Bennett. His was a unique apprenticeship because, while being immersed in classical studies, his interest in cinema organ was becoming stronger. Eventually he began to deputize at the local theatres and began to develop his easy, popular but totally musical style. After the war he was appointed to the Gaumont, Birmingham, and in 1951 left for seven years at the Capitol and Astoria cinemas in Aberdeen. It was while in Scotland that he obtained his Fellowship in the Royal College of Organists. Returning south in 1957, he joined ABC, and then became involved in the world of music publishing and broadcasting, and with orchestras in radio, film and recording sessions. More recently the electronic organ dominated his life, in turn being chief demonstrator for Hammond and Conn in the U.K.

A Lancastrian by birth, Ernest

Broadbent began musical studies after his family moved to Leeds. At the Leeds College of Music he learned orchestration and accompaniment, and also won the Marquis of Normandy prize for pianoforte. He began a career in the cinema world working his way up via the Dominion, Tottenham Court Road, to become resident at the famous Regent, Brighton. While there, he also gave many widely acclaimed recitals on the dual-purpose organ in the Dome. Following war service he left the cinema world to become accompanist to the famous tenor, Joseph Locke, until 1952 when he joined the Blackpool Tower Company. Here he played Hammond organ and piano in the Tower Lounge until, upon the retirements of Horace Finch and Watson Holmes, he returned to pipes, playing the Wurlitzers in the Empress, Palace and Tower Ballrooms. In 1970 he was appointed solo resident at the Tower, where he delighted many thousands of visitors with his playing. A broadcasting organist since 1938, he has also played with many orchestras on piano, and his concert tours always include a piano selection when a suitable instrument is available. Following a serious illness, he retired from the Tower Company in 1977. Now fully recovered, he is once again touring the country giving concerts on both organs and piano.

It would be impossible in the space available to list the names of all the individuals and organizations without whose help the reinstallation of the organ would have been impossible. Their efforts during the thousands of hours of voluntary work have been superb, and we thank them for everything they have done. This includes the donations of substantial amounts of new materials, equipment and funds.

We have also had the invaluable support of professional organ builder Dennis Coffin, whose knowledge and ability in respect to Wurlitzer and other organs is quite profound.

Since the official opening, the Worthing Wurlitzer has been used not only for our monthly concerts but also to support the choir and symphony orchestra. With this encouraging start, it suggests that the organ will play an important part in the musical life of Worthing for many years to come. □