

A History of the Blue Coat School Christie Organ and its Organists

The Blue Coat School is not unique in having a pipe organ installed in its premises—there are many schools and colleges fortunate enough to possess such an instrument. Indeed records show that the Blue Coat School itself had an organ installed in "The School Room" as long ago as 1852 but how long this remained is not known, although one of the School Trustees, Mr. Charles Hunter, presented an organ which was opened on November 20th 1901. Again, what became of this one is unknown and the pedigree of both organs has long since been lost in antiquity.

Neither is the Blue Coat School unique in having a cinema organ. There are several schools and colleges so equipped. Northampton Boys Grammar School, Wellingborough Technical High School, Peterborough Technical College and the famous City School in Sheffield immediately spring to mind. These installations combine the theatre organ building work of Conacher, Compton and Wurlitzer, but Blue Coat is unique in that the organ here is the only Hill, Norman and Beard "Christie" Unit Organ in a school and perhaps even more startling is that it is the only one with two consoles. In fact, it is now the only original theatre organ in any building outside America with two consoles (one excludes here the dual purpose twin console Compton Organ in the Southampton Guildhall which is not a theatre organ).

The instrument you are listening to today was conceived in 1933 and appeared as Job Number 2908 in the Hill, Norman and Beard order books being destined for the new Pyramid Cinema/Theatre in Washway Road, Sale, Cheshire—a 2000 seater of large and lavish proportions. Despite the fact that the building provided two large organ chambers (one above the other), blower room and relay room behind the ornamental grill at the stage end of the right hand wall of the cinema, the organ was subsequently installed in two much smaller chambers constructed under the stage with the pipework speaking through swell shutters into the orchestra pit. The orchestra pit console was static in the centre with Chamber A (Main) to the left containing Open Diapason, Flute and the two rank Celeste, together with the Chrysoglott/Vibraphone. To the right was Chamber B (Solo) containing the wooden Tibia, Viole, Vox Humana and Tuba and the Chimes, Glockenspiel, Xylophone, drums, cymbal, castanets, tambourine, sleigh bells and comedy effects. Installation of the organ cannot have been easy as the chambers were seriously lacking in height and mitring of all full length eight foot pipes together with the sixteen foot octave of the Diapason was necessary. The difficulty over the big wooden bass octave of the Tibia was overcome by laying the pipes on their backs on the chamber floor. The construction of the organ in this manner has, however, proved a boon at Blue Coat where similar chamber height restrictions were encountered.

As its name implies, the cinema was designed and decorated in Egyptian style and this was carried through to the casework surrounding the stage console, which was placed on a mobile platform which could be moved to any position required on stage. There are several elaborately carved consoles around the world but hardly another like this one. At each end are towers bearing a Pharaoh or sphinx head and other decorative work together with a matching bench.

In complete contrast, the orchestra console is contained within a small and neat polished wooden casework. Another unique feature of this organ is that the console casework is interchangeable and, in fact, on several occasions during its life in the cinema, the stage console surround was found in the orchestra pit and the pit console surround on stage.

Although built in 1933, problems with the granting of the necessary licenses by the local council delayed the opening of the cinema until Saturday, 24th February 1934 when Reginald Liversidge, the theatre's first resident organist, presided at the consoles, although it is known that the theatre was opened to the public for inspection free of charge on the 4th February and public meetings were held there on the 7th and 21st February to enable protests to be made at the delay. After the second protest meeting, the Press reported that "The Pyramid organist, Mr. Liversidge, first entertained the audience to a varied repertoire on the beautiful new organ". Whether this or the 18,403 names on the petition persuaded the authorities to grant the licenses is not reported! But they did, and the theatre opened to a packed house with a full film programme, variety acts on the stage and the Augmented Pyramid Orchestra directed by J. Fielding Crompton, as well as the organ. The orchestra made its first broadcast on the 27th July 1934 and Reginald Liversidge his first of some thirty broadcasts on the 18th September 1934.

Reg. remained as resident organist until March 20th 1937, his last broadcast from there being on March 12th 1937, when he left to open the new Lido, Bolton Christie organ and later its twin in the new Carlton, Salford. Both of these organs were built to his design and he continued his broadcasts from the Lido.

However, he was not lost entirely to Sale audiences because he returned there only a month later for a special Sunday Charity Concert and he continued to play for the annual "Festival of Remembrance" Concerts held each November until 1944 and again in 1946.

In October 1935, Guest Organist Andy Hulme appeared for a week and it was during this period that Reg. Liversidge occasionally visited other cinemas, which were then on the same circuit, namely the Broadway, Eccles; Capitol Didsbury (both Christie organs) and the Kingsway, Levenshulme (Jardine organ). However, after Reg. left the Pyramid, no resident organist was appointed and the organ was used only on special occasions. For instance, in April 1939 Sydney Gustard, the famous broadcasting organist from the Apollo, Ardwick, Manchester, played for a week. In December 1939 and May 1940, the Halle Orchestra and the Sale and District Musical Society gave special performances of the "Messiah" and "Elijah" with Harold Dawber at the organ and at a Sunday variety concert in April 1942, Reg. Liversidge himself returned to play the organ.

The theatre was taken over by the Rank Organisation at the end of 1942 and from the 18th January 1943 the organ was "re-opened" by Gordon Banner who was appointed resident. The following week, 14-year-old Eric Easton played but Gordon Banner returned the week after and remained until June 1943. During the previous month he had been joined for a week by Peter Kenyon who played the organ whilst Gordon transferred to the piano for organ and piano duets. Earlier, on 14th March to be exact, a "Grand All Star Charity Concert" featured the famous Stanley Tudor from the Gaumont Theatre, Manchester at the organ. He was at that time serving in the Royal Air Force.

From October 1943, Eric Easton, by then 15 years of age, returned as resident organist, remaining until February 1944. A special one-night guest appearance by the celebrated BBC Staff Theatre Organist, Sandy Macpherson, took place on November 12th 1943. Although Eric Easton had left Sale, in February 1944, he appeared there again for one of the Saturday Morning Children's Matinees in June 1944. In August, September and October 1944, Harold Eadie played guest weeks and Charles Saxby, from the Odeon, Manchester, did likewise in September.

In October 1944, Harold Dawber was again at the organ for a special performance of "Judas Maccabaeus" performed by the Sale and District Musical Society. From March 1945, Jess Yates was appointed resident and for the following three months patrons were treated to a series of quite lavish stage shows presented by him in which both organ consoles, two grand pianos, vocalists, singers and dancers were featured.

On the 15th June 1945, the cinema changed its name from Pyramid to Odeon, although in practice this made little difference as it had been operated as an Odeon Theatre since December 1942 when it was taken over by the Rank Organisation. From October 1945, Edna Collier was to be found playing for the Saturday Morning Children's Matinees and when Jess Yates made a spectacular return for another week in November 1945, she appeared with him at the organ.

For the first time since the annual "Festival of Remembrance" concerts had been held at the Pyramid in 1934, the November 1945 concert did not include Reginald Liversidge, Jess Yates playing instead.

The week after this, Gordon Banner re-appeared for a week. He was then the resident broadcasting organist at the Odeon, Manchester and he made his final guest appearance at Sale during the first week of October 1946. The November 1946 "Festival of Remembrance" concert saw Reginald Liversidge back again for what proved to be his last appearance there for many years.

Early in 1947, the last full time resident organist was appointed. This was Charles Alien, and although his appointment was to last only until the June of that year, he remained closely associated with the theatre for the next 14 years playing for the weekly Saturday morning Children's Matinees, the annual "Festival of Remembrance" concerts and for other special occasions, such as on the General Election nights of February 23rd 1950 and October 25th 1951 when cinemas remained open for most of the night waiting for the results to be announced.

In December of 1947, Tommy Nicholson from the Odeon, Blackpool, played for a week but it was to be almost four years before the stage console was next revealed to the public when Stanley Tudor played for a week in November 1951. He returned for another week in March 1952, this being the last occasion on which the stage console was used in public. As a matter of interest, the Saturday Morning Children's Matinee of this week featured Stanley Tudor and Charles Alien in duets using, both consoles.

The theatre had a large and well-equipped stage and this was put to good use in January and November 1953 when Ice Shows were presented. For "Babes in the Wood on Ice" in the January the organ was played by Pierson Webber with the orchestra, and for "Puss in Boots on Ice" in the November, Gerald Shaw was at the organ with the orchestra.

Between 1957 and 1965, the Sale Amateur Operatic and Dramatic Society produced 12 splendid musical shows on the stage, in each of which the organ was played with the orchestra by Tony O'Brien or Alan Hallmark and on one occasion by the Musical Director himself, A. Stanley Jones.

The 1962 and 1963 "Festival of Remembrance" concerts were played by Jeffrey Barker, who was Sunday organist at the theatre from 1961 to 1964. From 1964 until the last one of all in November 1972, Raymond Wallbank from the North Pier, Blackpool, was the organist.

Although, the condition of the organ was deteriorating seriously and had suffered floodwater damage on at least two occasions over the years, it was taken off maintenance around 1960 and it was left to local enthusiasts in their spare time to minister to its many ailments and keep it playing. By so doing, regular use was maintained on Sundays and on other rare special occasions.

The policy of Sunday use had been established by Roy Perry around 1954 and subsequently occasional Sunday visits were made by Mike Slater and Ronald Curtis between 1957 and 1960. Regularity was firmly established with the arrival of Jeffrey Barker in 1961 and carried on from 1964 to 1972 by Brian Robinson. It was he who gave what was the organ's first, and last, broadcast since 1937 when it was aired by BBC Radio Manchester on 6th October 1972. There had, however, been one other moment of glory when BBC Television televised an edition of the children's programme "Screen Test" from the theatre in December 1971 and Robinson Cleaver was seen, heard and interviewed at the console.

At the end of 1972, it was announced that the theatre was to close and the organ was for sale. In fact, there was to be much nail biting and burning of the midnight oil plus long and hurriedly arranged cross country journeys for discussion and negotiation before the organ was, happily, secured by the Lancastrian Theatre Organ Trust and rescued from what might have been the "breaker's yard". It was removed to storage early in 1973 but not before the Theatre Organ Club was able to turn a rather sad occasion into a happy, though nostalgic, event by holding a Farewell Concert in the theatre on Sunday, December 10th 1972 at which the theatre's first resident organist, Reginald Liversidge, returned to the console to delight everyone present. He included in his programme a special Christmas Slide Show, which he had first used in the Pyramid in 1934.

And so our story is almost up to date. The years between 1973 and 1983 are ones of storage, moving, frustration, more storage, negotiations for re-installation, disappointment, more negotiations and finally agreement here at Blue Coat School followed by some five years of installation in their spare time by the Lancastrian Theatre Organ Trust Technical Team.

We hope that you enjoy the performance today and think that the results were worth waiting for. Our only sorrow is that you won't hear "The Desert Song" played by the man who used it as his signature tune from the day he was appointed organist at the Pyramid, Sale in 1934, Reginald Liversidge, as, sadly, he passed away on the 17th October 1979.

Although the organ was first heard here in the Blue Coat School in its unfinished state by those from outside the School on September 25th 1982 when it was played by Nigel Ogden at a special L.T.O.T. "Open Day", it has been in limited use for some time for school purposes, but the next few months will see it settling in to a regular series of concerts. As a matter of interest, the Odeon, Sale never did close and is operated today as the Tatton Theatre, Sale—still with its large stage but with the organ chambers empty.

Keith Phillipson © 1983