

# Abbey Church, Ballasalla



**Sw & Gt: 8,8,8,8,4,2,8 Ped: 16.**

The present instrument was built by the Aeolian Organ Company, probably at their factory at Garwood, New Jersey, USA. The components are almost all of job no. 1162, a house organ for Sir W G Watson of Sulhamstead House, near Reading, Berkshire (ordered on August 27th, 1910 and shipped on January 24th, 1911). Aeolian's British subsidiary was the Orchestrelle Company, based in Hayes, Middlesex, and they would almost certainly have handled the order and installed the instrument.

The Garwood plant had a staff of some 250, and made these instruments in large numbers, the production process relying heavily on machinery to produce the many components to a high level of accuracy. Even so, like all organ building, there must have been a great deal of skilled craftsmanship involved, and the finished product was a high quality, commercial job, with no compromises. In their earlier years, Aeolian

did not make church organs; they even advertised this fact. The majority of the instruments were destined for the homes of the wealthy and some went into ballrooms and the like. The special feature of the Aeolian of this date was that the console contained an automatic playing action, which worked in a similar way to that of a player piano. (The company made many other instruments, including pianos and reed organs, which all featured automatic playing actions). The rolls produced for the pipe organs included orchestral arrangements. The roll-playing mechanism was so responsive that it could reproduce effects which would be impossible for a human player, because of the many notes and speed of repetition involved, and these arrangements were one of the attractions to potential customers. A number of Aeolians (including the largest ever built) still survive in the States.

There is some confusion over the details of



the Abbey Church organ, as the order book states that job 1162 had 9 ranks of pipes, whereas that in Ballasalla has only 8. Certainly, the instrument has been altered somewhat, and has (unfortunately) had its console replaced with a conventional church organ detached console, very probably when it was installed in its Island location by A E Davies (of Northampton) in the early 1950s. Davies replaced some of the pipework, presumably to make the instrument more suitable for church use, and the decision was taken at that time to site it in an architecturally convenient, but musically unhelpful, chamber in the tower. This chamber has an admittedly wide opening into the church, but Davies initially sited the console within this opening, effectively reducing its area by about 50%. Matters were made worse by the fact that they fitted an inadequate number of swell shutters, through which the sound has to emerge. The console was later moved downstairs to a position much more convenient for (and less

dangerous to) the organist. The front pipe display is made up entirely of dummies.

The arrival of the Aeolian displaced a chamber organ (Victorian or earlier) which was moved by Francis Kitts (an organ-builder then at work on the Island) to St Peter's, Cregneash. Most unfortunately, the vicar and congregation at St Peter's allowed this instrument to be removed by a local piano tuner, who eventually sold it off-island. They have since had to make do with a reed organ, and a least 2 electronics.

In 2005/6 the Aeolian was completely dismantled and renovated by Peter Jones, of St John's, when its remarkable mechanism



(partly electric, partly pneumatic) could be appreciated. The action contained some 1,359 leather pouches (ie. thin leather discs of varying size) which had to be painstakingly removed and replaced with new. Every part of the mechanism and pipes was cleaned and refinished, and an additional stop (which automatically plays the pedals for non-pedal players) had been added – something of which the original builders would no doubt have approved. The keys of the replacement console (which is of a poor design) were replaced with 2 of the 4 manuals from Chester Cathedral. (These were the Swell and Solo manuals. The Great and Choir manuals from the Cathedral organ are also on the Isle of Man, fitted to one of the Peter Jones' house organs). All of the original electro-magnets on the Aeolian action were found to be working after 95 years. As part of the work, the chamber was cleaned and repainted, and a radiator installed, to keep the room

(previously cold, dark and damp) pleasantly aired in the winter.

Although the sound which the organ makes may be considered old-fashioned by professional players, and its position in the building less than ideal, it still fulfils perfectly its job of service accompaniment, and it is remarkable just how much of the sound (which is heard, only by reflection from the walls and ceiling of the building) actually emerges into the church.

Like many pipe organs, this one has survived several moves, the attentions of a number of organ builders and tuners (not all of them of the most skilful or careful) and years in an unfavourable environment. Its smooth, orchestral sounds may no longer be in favour with the professional organist, as fashions continue to alter, but it continues to give reliable and faithful service. The efforts of the workers in Garwood, almost 100 years ago, have not been wasted.

