

St Mary's Catholic Church, Castletown formerly in the Nunnery Chapel, Douglas



Gt: 8,8,8,4, Ped: 16.

The builder of this tiny instrument is unknown, but whoever it was had a sure sense of style in its outward appearance, and was skilled in the organ-building practices of their day. Originally built without pedals, this may well have been a chamber organ intended for a private

house. There is a date of 1869 written on the ends of one of the soundboard pallets (the valves which control the air supply to the pipes), but this is probably a repair date, rather than the date of manufacture.





With its black and gold colour-scheme and neatly-decorated pipes on 3 sides, it would be an ornament to any large house with a music-room or gallery.

Then it fell into the hands of H. W. Hewitt of Leicester, presumably at some time in the 1880s.

There is almost no direct evidence for this, excepting for a tiny scrap of paper - part of an envelope - glued to one of the soundboard bearers (strips of wood which support the boards on which the pipes stand.) Part of a postmark is visible, with the letters '... ices ...'. This, together with the way in which the instrument was 'rebuilt' (to put it kindly) makes it very likely that it is one of the victims of the infamous Hewitt, who supplied several small organs to Island churches in the 1880s.

Whoever was responsible added an additional manual stop (the Principal) and a pedal stop (the Bourdon), cut into the case-front to add a set of pedals, fitted a new and larger set of bellows (to cope with the additional pipework) altered the wind-trunking (very inexpertly) and re-positioned the painted wooden pipes, placing them all on the bass end, with 4 inside. The new bellows made it impossible to fit the case sides to the organ.

It was installed in a gallery at the west end of the private chapel in the Nunnery, on the outskirts of Douglas, presumably in the 1880s when Hewitt was active over here. (It was at this time that the owners of the Nunnery altered part of the stable block to form the chapel).

In its half-assembled condition, with the bellows

projecting from each side and parts of the case and other components left leaning against the wall behind it, the hand-blown instrument was used for services until it finally fell into an unplayable condition in the 1990s, by which time a woodworm infestation had set in. There it remained untouched until a project to restore it, funded by the then Manx Heritage Foundation (later Culture Vannin) culminated in its installation in St. Mary's Catholic Church, Castletown in 2014.

The work of restoration was carried out by Peter Jones, Organ-builder, who went well beyond the initial brief of cleaning and overhauling the organ as left by Hewitt. The pile of miscellaneous parts found behind the instrument (untouched since the 1880s) gave clues to the original appearance of the instrument and the way in which it had been altered. By restoring or reproducing the original case, modifying the blowing system,

rebuilding the key and stop action and re-voicing the pipework, the organ now has its original appearance (aside from the pedal pipes, behind), is mechanically stable, and musically useful.

Thanks to H. W. Hewitt and his bodging approach to organ-building, leaving behind a pile of bits and pieces which were ignored for more than a century, the Manx Heritage Foundation for their funding and the months of work by Peter Jones and his assistants, St. Mary's now has one of the most attractive small organs on the Island.

If you would like to see a video of Gareth Moore playing this instrument in its new location, then click on the link below:

<https://vimeo.com/93261408>

