

Organ Restoration: Good Conservation Practice

This paper was agreed at a joint meeting of Institute of British Organ Building (IBO) and the Association of Independent Organ Advisers (AIOA) on 31 January, 2018.

It 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. The information outlined here is of particular relevance if you are applying for a grant to support restoration work to an organ, as some grant-awarding bodies, such as the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) or the Church Buildings Council (CBC), will normally expect the scope of work undertaken by an organ builder to be strongly orientated around an ethos of conservation. The Church Buildings Council, for example, normally considers applications from Anglican churches in England for organs over 70 years old. The HLF prioritises applications in respect of organs of historic merit, which should be accompanied by an Historic Organs Certificate (HOC) issued by the British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS). <http://www.bios.org.uk/resources/hocs.php>

Grants, when awarded, are usually for the conservation of an organ in its present state or for schemes where the proposed works restore a clearly established earlier historic state, but not for additions or conjectural works. 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 in a scheme such as that operated by the Institute of British Organ Building.

When considering grant aid for historic organs, grant-awarding bodies will normally require that the chosen organbuilder should adopt historically appropriate methods. For example, organbuilders are expected to avoid the use of modern synthetic materials and components inappropriate to the original design of the organ, to refrain from revoicing, alterations to pitch or replacement of pipework, and to respect historic woodwork 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 express 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 the leatherwork of all bellows or actions
- 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 with the organ 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'.

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

Church Buildings Council (CBC)

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

Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) Case studies e.g., <https://www.hlf.org.uk/our-projects/21st-century-gallery-park-extending-access-whitworths-collections>

British Institute of Organ Studies (BIOS)

<http://www.bios.org.uk/guidance/index.php>

Institute of British Organ Building (IBO)

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

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