HRBA presentation 10 March 2021 (revised – as given)

Good morning everyone

What you have just seen is part of a feature length documentary film made by James Dawson called ‘Organ Stops – Saving the King of Instruments’. This will go on tour to music and film festivals and other places this summer, all being well - and a trailer for it is now available on James’ Vimeo webpages: <https://vimeo.com/520060433>

I hope that the pain felt by those people at Winston near Barnard’s Castle in County Durham came over in that film just now. Certainly, we felt it while we were there four years ago to remove their organ, an organ that, as they said, some of them had helped to install sixty years before. I had heard about this organ just by sheer chance, and saw it first while in the area while researching music in medieval buildings. It is an astonishingly well-made organ, and for its date highly unusual. It is now securely stored, but we are still looking for just the right place to put it.

Loss of churches implies the loss of organs. Buildings can be sold, but organs have to be found another building. So, as the stock of churches gets smaller, it’s like pouring water into ever smaller jugs : some gets split and lost. In the 1960s and 70s, churches were being demolished ; now they are more often repurposed, and we are surprised that such buildings were allowed to be lost. But organs are still being lost in the same way. I and some like-minded people can sometimes find new places for fine old instruments, but I have to say that there does seem to to be a general institutional indifference to the loss of organs. We sometimes hear about the problems faced by rural  **medieval** churches but very rarely about the wholesale disappearance of both rural and urban Methodist and other chapels. But these can – and do - have unexpectedly interesting contents, as we saw at Winston. For instance, an organ from a chapel in a small mining village in County Durham, now accompanies one of Britain’s most-accomplished choirs, in Oxford cathedral.

The rate of loss of these buildings is high : last estimates were that thirty Methodist chapels are being closed every year. As we have heard just now, many churches in Scotland will close over the next few years (and let’s remember that Andrew Carnegie gave money for about 191 organs in Scotland) and that half the churches in the Roman Catholic diocese of Salford will also shut their doors and turn off the lights.

Organs get caught up in this process ! And it will be only by working together that we might be able to safeguard the best of the organs threatened by these closures. So I’d like now to suggest two ways in which we can work together :

We’re dealing with very expensive items of high-class craftsmanship ; organs are handmade and each is uniquely made for its original location. It’s not easy to find the right new place for an organ, and help is often needed to find temporary storage places for especially good organs that are ‘in transit’. So I will be asking for your help to find temporary ‘transit’ places for organs.

That’s one long-term challenge ; a shorter-term one is to revive organs that have fallen into disuse. With very little more than seed-corn money we can get organs back into playable condition so that their music can be enjoyed again. It will so good to hear their uniquely lively sounds of wind breathing through pipes - as opposed to the noises from dead loudspeakers that we’ve had to put up for with these last twelve months.

Organs are a huge capital investment for any church – usually the largest one in fact – but they also have a huge potential for cultural and educational uses too. We have been deprived of live music for a whole year now and organs can help supply it again – for instance, at open days, or church tea or coffee mornings and flower festivals.

This is an initiative I hope to get going with the help of local organists’ groups. By using seed-corn money from a small Trust, we’ll get organs maintained and ready for use. I hope that churches you are involved with will feel able to take part in this initiative. It should be a win-win situation : to train musicians, to provide enjoyment for everyone and to help keep the centuries-long tradition of organ-making alive as well.

Let’s not think of organs as problems - quite the reverse ! By turning the pain of Winston into musical pleasure, organs can help to bring churches back to life again.

Thank you.