

Oxford, Connecticut
St. Peter's Episcopal Church

Organ by Jardine, ca. 1860

Notes from Stephen Roberts

My organ student, Mark Corbett, who is a freshman at Western Connecticut State University, where I teach organ, was just appointed the organist of St. Peter's Episcopal Church in the village of Oxford, Connecticut. St. Peter's is a little "Carpenter Gothic" church built in the years before the Civil War, and it is remarkably original inside. The parish dates from the 18th century, however, and since it isn't far from the home of Samuel Seabury, the first Episcopal bishop in the USA, I am fairly sure that he must have visited the previous church building at some time. The present church building still has the old handmade paneled doors with iron latches and forged hinges for door hardware, original mid 19th century glass stained glass, original pews, and floors of wide sawn boards. The gallery, where the organ stands, looks as if it has never been changed at all from the 19th century.

I knew that this church had an old 19th century tracker organ, but I didn't recall exactly what it was. Mark described it to me, but he didn't remember whose name was on the nameplate. I decided to visit the church with Mark, as he said that he needed some advice about how to use the organ.

I had expected the organ to be a garden variety late 19th century tracker of about ten stops. On entering the church I was really surprised to see a very handsome and richly decorated case; the organ was obviously much earlier than I had suspected, since it was completely encased. I'll say more about that later. When I went up to the organ, the label revealed that it was a Jardine, one of the finest New York organ builders of the 19th century. I wrote my old friend, Barbara Owen, an authority on American organs of the 19th century, about the organ, and she replied that she knew it well. I hope that Barbara won't mind if I quote part of her message to me:

(quote from Barbara Owen)

In fact I know the little Jardine organ well (although it's been many years since I last saw it), and even gave a recital on it once, many years ago, when I lived in Portland and was a friend of the then Rector at St. Peter's, Fr. Wm. Soule. Probably some people there still remember him, as he was quite a character. For a while, when he couldn't find an organist, he even played the organ for services, running upstairs for the hymns and running downstairs for the sermon and communion! Anyway, the Jardine is said to have originally come from a residence in or near NYC, which certainly explains its compact size and unusual casework, although it was acquired by Fr. Soule for the Oxford church from Grace Church in Monroe in 1953. It would appear to date from around 1860. As I recall, the pipes are so tightly crammed in there that it's

virtually impossible to tune. It's had a little maintenance occasionally done on wide intervals by [Richard] Hamar, Andover, Thompson-Allen and, most recently, Scot Huntington.
(end quote from Barbara Owen's message)

The flue work of the organ has never been altered tonally that I could tell, and it is very delicate and sweet sounding. Someone must have been able to tune it somehow, because it was pretty well in tune when we visited. The very handsome case must have been built for Jardine by a New York cabinet maker. It is completely encased with sides and a top, and very fine carving. I have a set of Empire chairs from about 1840-1850 by the New York cabinet maker Smith Ely, and the casework of this organ has some similar features: bird's eye maple panels with the original French polish finish, and either red maple or mahogany stiles between the panels. The whole case looks very similar to some very fine New York secretary bookcases from that period. There is one main feature that shows that it is an organ, and not just a piece of furniture: the gilded wooden dummy pipes in the facade. Though it's very unusual for an organ case, it's a very high quality piece of furniture of high artistic merit; it would have been quite in keeping with the decoration of a high style New York residence of that time. As Barbara mentioned, the pipe scaling must really be tiny to fit all of that inside that little case! I didn't have time to look inside, but I intend to do that the next time I'm there. The Swell has a tenor C compass, and the Great appears always to have been a C compass manual, not the earlier G compass. The organ has terraced stop jambs on either side of the manuals--rather atypical for this period, I think-- and the stop knobs are the tiniest ones I ever saw: about 3/4 inch (slightly less than 2 cm) in diameter. I think that the pedal was originally 12 notes (the pedal stops are still only 12 notes) but someone put an AGO standard pedalboard on it at some time and added an additional 8 notes to the pedal coupler to make it 20 notes. The panel above the pedalboard is missing; I wonder if it's around somewhere. It's a really important little instrument in my estimation, and one that has been largely overlooked, I think: the OHS did not visit it during their last convention in Connecticut, for example. The keys have scalloped fronts and the ivories are still in perfect condition. It's in pretty good playing condition, too. Mark was quite amused when I showed him some 19th century pump boy graffiti from behind the organ. Since the Jardine was only moved to Oxford in the 1950's, there must have been an earlier organ in this church in the same location. Mark found the caricatures of 19th century ladies (with big bosoms!) to be especially funny. Boys then seem to have been interested in some of the same things as boys are now...

I told my student, Mark, that the organ is what it is, and he will simply have to learn to play it properly and work around its idiosyncrasies. They have not been able to keep an organist there at St. Peter's, because they don't pay a great deal, and the amateur organists they have often had haven't appreciated the organ or understood it at all, I don't think. If they could spend just a little money to fix a few minor things over the course of time, it would be a great thing.

The best news of all is that this little church will be a great first position for Mark, who is a really talented and nice young man. It will give him a chance to get some more practical service playing experience, and to begin to learn about choirs. The Jardine will also be played by someone who will soon understand and appreciate it, and will protect it from harm. It's a very rare and unusual little organ: I have never seen an organ quite like it, in fact. For those interested in stoplists, I will post the stoplist separately.

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