



# The Stephen White Organ

## in St George's, High Street, Belfast

This brief document mainly deals with the available evidence about the first organ in Belfast's Chapel of Ease, St George's Church, High Street. John Bowden's 1813 ground floor plan for the new Chapel of Ease does not mention an organ (the present-day organ chamber sits atop what was a 'Vestry Room' – perhaps the pipes also use part of that ground floor room?), but maybe there is a separate 'first floor' plan for the gallery which reveals a position for the organ.

Page 2 of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, Monday 17 June 1816 (and, somewhat belatedly, the *Belfast News-Letter*, 21 June 1816, page 1) reported the opening service in Belfast's newest church. Apart from the opening words, both reports are identical. No mention of music or an accompanying instrument.

### ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH.

Yesterday [16 June] this elegant structure was opened for public worship, when a Sermon was preached in aid of the funds by the Rev. Mr. FEA. He chose his text from the 24th Psalm. 'Who shall stand in his holy place', from which, in the happiest flow of eloquence and impressive and elegant language, he pointed out the high importance of the Christian religion — the advantages to be derived from public worship — the temper of mind and spirit of devotion in which its sacred rites should be performed — and the duty of its professors to countenance and cherish the temples dedicated to the Most High. He explained the nature of the collection he that day solicited, which had been contemplated for many months as necessary towards completing the building, and justly observed, that when their exertions should on any future occasion be required in aid of public charities, that church would not be withheld from the benevolent purpose, nor its audience unmindful of the calls of humanity. Among the collectors we noticed the Rev. Dr. BRUCE, JOHN McCANCE, Esq., A. ALEXANDER, Esq., NARCISSUS BATT, Esq., JAMES ORR, Esq., MAJOR WALSH, &c.

The Ulster Historical Foundation recently published an impressive volume, Brian M. Walker, *A History of St George's Church Belfast*, Belfast 2016. Walker mentions Edward Bunting's sojourn as the church's first organist, but the various mentions of the instrument itself do not touch upon its builder or its placing (presumably on the west gallery?) until the new 1863 organ by J.W. Walker & Sons was 'moved to its present position in 1883'.

Walker writes (p.28), 'After the opening some alterations were made to the new building, in particular in relation to the gallery ...' During those repairs, around November 1816 (Walker, p.33), 'its congregation was granted the use of Second Presbyterian Church, Rosemary Street'. That of course was another link to Edward Bunting, then organist for that Second Congregation.

Was an organ already in place in St George's at that stage or did those repairs include the installation of an organ, however temporary? Perhaps not, for Walker records that in July 1817, 'Alterations to the gallery and the placing of the organ were agreed'. Or maybe that agreement was in retrospect: Edward Bunting was the church's acting organist from around April 1817.

After ten years at the Second Congregation, Edward Bunting had clearly become unsettled there, not least because Dr Drummond, the enlightened minister and lover of the arts, had been called to a church in Dublin in late 1815. Without Drummond's support, there were now open criticisms of Bunting's playing of 'symphonies' between the verses of psalms, and of his lack of attendance and poor supervision of the boys from the Poor House. They may also have been unhappy at his leave of absence for his foreign travels in 1815. But the church committee had even greater worries in June 1817, having received a report from the church's music sub-committee:

Your Committee conceive it their duty to state that having heard that Mr. Bunting had made or was about to make an engagement to play the organ in the Chapel of Ease, they thought it right to make enquiry respecting the fact, from which they find Mr. Bunting had made such an engagement, and entered upon the duty of it 2 months ago.

All of which confirms that there was certainly an organ in the new Chapel of Ease by April 1817.

The Second Congregation committee took action:

Mr. Bunting is to be informed of regulations adopted respecting the music and asked whether the congregation can expect his conformity thereto, and his regular services hereafter as organist or not.

Answer came there none! At the committee's meeting on 3 August 1817 another letter was to be sent to Bunting stating that

... the committee considers he has resigned the situation of organist in this house, and request that he may furnish his account.

Still no response. On 7 September, the committee

Resolved that from henceforth Mr. Bunting shall not be continued as organist of this house ... that this be communicated to Mr. Bunting and the key of the organ required from him.

True to its word, the committee acted on its decision and advertised for a new organist in October.

The following advertisement from page 3 of the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, Wednesday 22 October 1817, was similar to advertisements in the *Dublin Evening Post* (e.g. Thursday 16 October 1817, page 1) and the *Belfast News-Letter* (e.g. Friday 17 October 1817, page 2).

### **AN ORGANIST**

WANTED by the SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CONGREGATION of Belfast, a Person to preside at the ORGAN, and take charge of the VOCAL MUSIC, at a Salary of £60 per annum.

Application to be made by Letters (post-paid) addressed to Mr. WILLIAM RITCHIE, Belfast, previous to 1st November next.

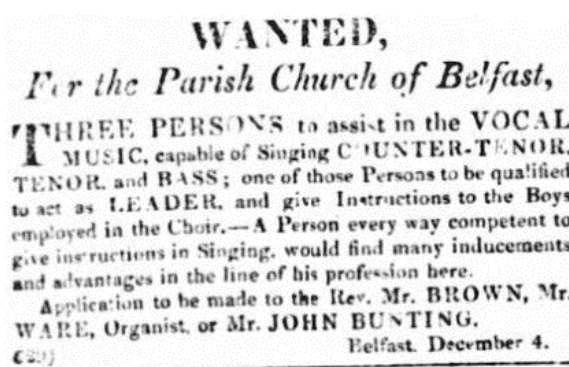
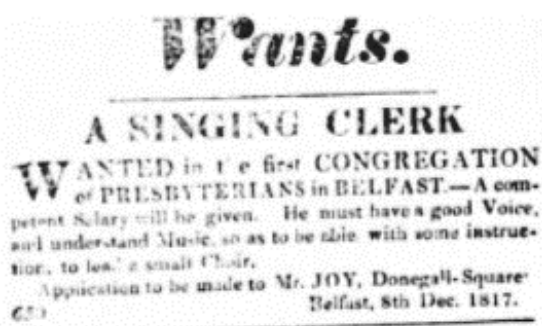
At long last, in December, Bunting replied to the committee, furnishing his account for two months' salary, which was promptly paid.

Jobs for musicians were in the news that month. These two advertisements were placed together in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, Saturdays 06 (p.2) and 13 (p.1) December 1817. Also in the *Belfast News-Letter* (e.g. 19 December 1817, page 2).

A singing clerk was wanted for the First Congregation of Presbyterians ('A competent Salary will be given. He must have a good Voice, and understand Music, so as to be able, with some instruction, to lead a small Choir.').

And Three Persons were wanted for the Parish Church [St Anne's] of Belfast. They were needed 'to assist in the VOCAL MUSIC, capable of singing COUNTER-TENOR, TENOR and BASS; one of those Persons to be qualified to act as LEADER, and give Instructions to the Boys employed in the Choir. – A Person every way competent to give instructions in Singing, would find many inducements and advantages in the line of his profession here.'

Most interestingly in this latter case, 'Application to be made to the Rev. Mr. BROWN, Mr. WARE, Organist, or Mr. JOHN BUNTING.' Edward's brother was an important player in Belfast's music scene.



Bunting may have played the organ at St George's from April 1817, but he did so without initial payment. Which was right and proper, given that he was still officially in the employment of the Second Congregation!

Walker (p.35) reprints a resolution from St George's minute book for January 1817 which records 'That the thanks of the subscribers be presented to Mr. Bunting for his obliging conduct in playing the organ in the church to the 1st inst [January] gratuitously ...'

They then appointed him organist from the 1 January 1818 at a salary of 40 guineas per annum. He was to provide his own deputies and assist 'in instructing the choir'. Interestingly, in 1816 Bunting had negotiated a salary with the Second Congregation 'of £60 a year for the conducting of Musick' (Roy Johnston, *Bunting's Messiah*, Belfast 2003, p.100). And indeed £60 per year was the salary offered in the Second Congregation's advertisements for a new organist to replace Bunting.

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The first mention I could find of St George's organ is the advertisement on the next page from the *Dublin Evening Post*, Saturday, 13 March 1824, page 1. The organ 'at present in the Belfast Chapel of Ease ... built in Belfast, by Stephen White of London ... about twelve years ago' is for sale. Enquiries to Mr. Edward Bunting ... or Mr Joseph Wright, Belfast'.

Of course, the interpretation of the words 'at present in' are open to interpretation. A basic assumption would be that the organ has likely been there for some time (I reckon since 1816/17) and is now being replaced. However, there is also the possibility that St George's simply permitted the vendor to store it in the church until it was sold. I think that's less likely – but the option should be considered.

**T**O be SOLD, the ORGAN at present in the BELFAST CHAPEL of EASE, which for Sweetness and Brilliancy of Tone, in all the various Stops, cannot be excelled.

This Instrument was built in Belfast, by STEPHEN WHITE, of London, a man of eminent abilities in that line, about twelve years ago. The Timber is of the best seasoned wood, most carefully selected, and the Pipes were brought from London, and being built under the direction and immediate inspection of an eminent Organist, renders it every way desirable.

This Instrument contains the following Stops

*In the Great Organ, viz.,*

Open Diapason,		Fifteenth,
Stop Diapason,		Fierce,
Flute,		Sequialta,
Principal,		Cornet, and
Twelfth,		Trumpet.

*In the Swell Organ,*

A Stop Diapason, Dulciana, Flute and Hautboy with Stop Diapason Bass. This Instrument has two sets of Keys, long Octaves from F Alt. to Double Gamut, and twelve Pedals with complete Pipes of extra Pedal size attached; a Pedal to take off the loud Stops of the great Organ, the greatest number of which Stops draw in halves. It would answer for a Church, Concert Room, or a Chamber.

Application to be made (if by Letter, post paid) to Mr. Edward Bunting, Professor of the Piano Forte, 28, College-green, Dublin, or to Mr. Joseph Wright, Belfast.

25th February, 1824.

‘Built under the direction and immediate inspection of an eminent Organist’ must surely refer to Edward Bunting himself.

Walker records that (p.39), ‘The preacher’s book notes that from 10 April to 22 May 1825 the church was closed “in consequence of the taking down and rebuilding the portico”.’ Perhaps the opportunity was taken to install a newly commissioned organ at that stage, having advertised the old organ with over a year’s notice. It is surprising though that, if so, there appears to be no newspaper mention of such an important event.

In the PDF on my Edward Bunting webpage which lists the currently known instruments (April 2018) by Stephen White, I have already noted the remarkable similarity between this 1824-advertised instrument from St George's and the organ built for Belfast's dancing-master, Thomas Hull.

The Hull instrument is first heard of in an editorial comment in the *Belfast News-Letter*, Tuesday, 30 August 1808, page 3:

... During his short residence in this country, he [Stephen White] built for Mr. Thos. Hull an organ on an extensive scale, consisting of open diapason, stop diapason, principal[,] flute, fifteenth, terse, six-quarter [sesquialtera], cornet and trumpet, [sic] stop, which completes the chorus of the great organ. Its swell contains stop diapason, dulceana, flute, and hautboy. This instrument has also pedal pipes, and is constructed to play with barrels as well as the fingers.

The instrument, probably dating from sometime in 1806/07, would surely have been erected in the ball-room of Hull's establishment in Telfair's-entry in Ann-street. That likely setting is referenced in an advertisement in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, Saturday, 28 September 1816:

'The Adelphi Exhibition, of Robert Lefevre's celebrated whole-length portrait of Napoleon Bonaparte, as large as life, is now open for a short time only, at the Ball-room, 2, Telfair's-entry, Ann-street, formerly occupied by the late Mr. Thomas Hull'.

The Hull organ's next mention after 1808 is in the *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, Monday, 11 June 1810, page 3:

### **AN ORGAN FOR SALE**

TO BE DISPOSED OF, AN ORGAN of the Finest Tone, built by WHITE, of London. Its compass from Double G in the Bass, to F in Alt, Full Octaves, with Eighteen Stops; also, Twelve Large Pedal Pipes.

To persons in want of an Organ on the grandest scale, for a place of Public Worship, or a Nobleman's Library, such an opportunity will seldom present itself.

In order to accommodate a place of Public Worship, the Proprietor will accept of payment in Annual Instalments, for a reasonable consideration. The Organ is new, and built entirely of Mahogany.

Apply to THOMAS HULL, Ann-street, Belfast, where the Organ may be seen on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays.

Price, 500 Guineas, which is only one half the London charge. Belfast, June 9.

Mr Hull knew his target audience as plans for the new Chapel of Ease were very much 'in the air'.

The 'eighteen' stops mentioned of the 'for sale' organ don't quite tally, though perhaps that depends on how one counts those stops which 'draw in halves'. And then there's the suggestion that in 1824, the organ is 'about twelve years' old, whereas it must have been at least 16 years old. There's also the disparity between a Twelfth in one specification and not in another, but it does seem likely that all three listings are for one and the same instrument.

Did Mr Thomas Hull find a buyer? Did St George's pay for it in instalments, recognising a bargain and anticipating its eventual use? Where was the instrument stored in those intervening years before its usage in St George's? Who bought it in 1824/25 and where did it end up? And if it was actually sold, who built the new replacement organ for St George's in 1825?

Even that organ was eventually replaced.

### NEW ORGAN FOR ST. GEORGE'S CHURCH, BELFAST

—Not the least important of the alterations and improvements in St George's Church will be the new organ, which has been specially constructed for this church by Walker, of London. This instrument has been specially designed by Dr. Chipp, and built under his directions, and is not so much an example of a great organ to display the capacity and execution of the player as an adequate instrument for the accompaniment of voices in the service, which is its true purpose. The very extensive swell organ is almost as large as the Ulster Hall organ. The organ was to have been publicly tried on Saturday evening at the manufactory in London by Dr. Chipp, in a performance of sacred music. It will be ready for the opening in St. George's Church early in October. The instrument has two complete manual organs, compass of each from CC to G, 56 notes, and pedal organ, compass from CCC to tenor F, 20 notes, and is enclosed in a handsome stained and varnished case (with gilt speaking pipes in front) 19 feet high, 15 feet wide, and 15 feet deep.

The following stop list is from page 2 of the *Belfast News-Letter*, Saturday, 12 September 1863. The original listing has the couplers and combination pedals, along with the numbers of pipes, but my copy of the newspaper is indecipherable at the edges!

#### GREAT ORGAN

Prepared for double Diapason (16')  
Open Diapason  
Open Diapason, small  
Dulciana, tenor C, continued by stopped Diapason  
Stopped Diapason  
Octave  
Flute (4')  
Twelfth  
Fifteenth  
Prepared for mixture, 3 ranks  
Prepared for Trumpet

#### SWELL ORGAN

Double Diapason, (metal and wood) (16')  
Open Diapason (metal through)  
Viol di Gamba, tenor C, continued by stopped Diapason  
Gamba  
Flute  
Twelfth  
Piccolo  
Mixture, 3 ranks  
Double trumpet, tenor C (16')  
Horn  
Oboe  
Krumhorn

#### PEDAL ORGAN

Open Diapason (16')  
Bourdon (16')  
Octave

The church had been closed for six months for extensive repairs, during which time the new organ was installed. The church re-opened on Sunday 11 October 1863. On the previous Thursday, the *Northern Whig* described 'at considerable length, the nature of the renovations which this fine edifice has undergone.' On page 2 of Monday's *Whig* the comments were:

'... The new organ is a fine instrument, and, under the hands of Dr. Chipp, it yesterday "discoursed most eloquent music" in every sense of the word. It possesses a deep, mellow tone; and, although it cannot, with justice, be compared, as a whole, with the Ulster Hall Organ, it is, in the opinion of competent judges, superior in some respects to that magnificent instrument. The weather yesterday was very inclement, but the congregations were, notwithstanding, very large, especially in the evening. Contemporaneously with the erection of the new organ, the Rev. Mr. Macllwaine has, with the co-operation of Dr. Chipp, exerted

himself most strenuously in drawing together a large and efficient choir, which yesterday numbered about sixty voices. The services of the day were choral, and the music was gone through in a most creditable manner.'

The newspaper then listed the details of both services and gave lengthy paraphrases of the sermons.

The current specification of the St George's organ can be found online at:

<https://www.pipeorganpage.ie/node/1362>

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Post-script: I have discovered relatively little about Thomas Hull. He was Master of Ceremonies for the society balls which were advertised as the Belfast Subscription Assemblies. His last year in that role seems to have been in spring 1811. I note the burial of a Thomas Hull in Dublin on 02 July 1815 in St Mark's. Might that have been Belfast's dancing master?

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