

Playing and hearing the organs

These organs are intended to be heard and seen, especially in the kinds of buildings for which they were originally built. The Early English Organ Project has raised funds to send the organs on residencies, where they can be played and heard in services, workshops and concerts. The organs are already giving fresh insights into music of the Tudor age, enabling players, singers and listeners alike to experience and explore their unique sounds.

The Wingfield Organ

Compass of 40 notes: keyboard $F-a^2$, sounding just over 6 semitones higher.

Five stops: equivalent of principals 8ft, 4ft, 2ft – all open and made of wood. The 8ft stop is permanently on, as in the original. The 4ft and 2ft ranks are doubled.

The Wetheringsett Organ

Compass of 46 notes: keyboard $C-a^2$, sounding just over 6 semitones higher.

Seven stops: equivalent of principals 8ft, 4ft, 2ft – all open and made of metal, regal 8ft, diapason 16ft – $C-f$ only, stopped and made of wood. The 8ft and 4ft principal ranks are doubled.

The organs have been built by Goetze and Gwynn of Welbeck, a firm internationally renowned for restoring early English organs and building new organs on historical principles. Much of the practical research has been in the hands of Dominic Gwynn. Other musical research has been guided by Professor John Harper. The casework and decoration has been overseen by Timothy Easton.



“One of the most exciting organ projects ever. Unique. These reconstructed instruments tell us so much about a long-lost tradition of organ building, playing and composition.”

Dr David Baker

“These two instruments are already transforming our understanding of organ playing, organ accompaniment and choral performance in 16th-century Britain.”

Professor John Harper

“Completion of the project brings about a major advance in our knowledge of the history of music and its performance in Britain, and is therefore of major importance to scholars and musicians all over the world. These benefits are applicable across the board in vocal, choral and other instrumental music.”

Sir David Lumsden

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Rediscovering the Sound of the Sixteenth-Century English Organ



THE EARLY ENGLISH ORGAN PROJECT

The Early English Organ Project

Rediscovering the Sound of the Sixteenth-Century English Organ

For the first time for many centuries we can hear the sound of the 16th-century English organ. The Early English Organ Project has reconstructed two English organs, both originally built before the Reformation. Now we can explore at first hand the ways in which these organs were used in churches, cathedrals and monasteries in the 16th century.

How were the organs found?

The 16th century was a high point in English music – the time of great composers like Taverner, Tallis and Byrd. But we have known very little about the organs they played and heard. That all changed a few years ago.

The chance discovery of important parts of two organs made between 1520 and 1540 in East Anglia opened up the possibility of exploring this unknown sound world. Each of these parts is a soundboard – a large wooden chest with holes for the pipes, where the air supply and the key mechanisms connect with the pipes. It is right at the heart of the organ. These were lucky finds. One soundboard had been used as a door to a dairy in an old house, and had been plastered over. The other was quite unrecognised, hidden behind lumber and old pews in the churchyard shed.

The Early English Organ Project has copied these soundboards. To complete the organs we used knowledge of the surviving music, information held in contemporary records, and evidence of fragments

of early 17th-century English organs and of 16th-century organs in Spain and Italy. Altogether that gave us enough information to be able to make two instruments which reflect 16th-century English practice and design.

What are the organs like?

From the soundboards we can tell that these were organs of differing sizes. The smaller soundboard, from Wingfield in Suffolk, was probably used in a side or Lady chapel, perhaps located on a gallery. The larger soundboard, from Wetheringsett, also in Suffolk, is more typical of organs that stood in the choir. The Wingfield organ has five ranks of wooden pipes. Most of the seven ranks of pipes in the Wetheringsett organ are made of metal. The wind is blown by hand, using bellows covered in cowskins. Here, and throughout the organs, we have used traditional materials and techniques. You can find more detailed descriptions of the organs on the back of this leaflet.

The soundboards themselves tell us much about the layout of pipes and position of wooden supports for the casework. Further analysis of contemporary church screens and furniture has ensured that the wooden casework of the organs is true to the 16th century. The Wingfield organ has also been painted, using old methods of making, mixing and applying colour.

Both are ‘transposing organs’ (rather like modern French horns or clarinets). So, organ music played on the reconstructed instruments sounds at a higher pitch than written, giving it a brighter, more transparent quality.

A lost tradition rediscovered

Why, when we know from records that there were probably several thousand organs in Britain in about 1535, do we have so little evidence of 16th-century organs? Some disappeared with the dissolution of all the monasteries and most collegiate churches between 1536 and 1552. Many fell into disrepair in the 1560s and 1570s when the style of worship restricted or excluded their use. Those that survived in cathedrals and Chapels Royal were replaced in the early 17th century. Only in Old Radnor in Wales has a 16th-century organ case survived in a church. The case was restored in the late 19th century, but with a new organ inside.



Through the discovery of the Suffolk soundboards we have, at last, been enabled to translate our historical awareness of early organs into practical reconstruction based on solid evidence and research. The archaeology of the East Anglian organs, the advance in understanding of the early techniques of organ building, and the knowledge of early performance practice have all come together to enable the building of these two unique and important organs.

Now we can recapture a lost tradition and explore anew the heritage of one of the richest periods of English music. It was, after all, on organs like these that Tallis and Tye played, for which Byrd and Bull wrote their early keyboard music, and on which Gibbons, Weelkes and Tomkins learned their craft.