

## Moot Hall Organ, Town Hall, Colchester

Colchester Town Hall is worthy to stand with the wealth of historic buildings which make up the town's unique heritage. The masterpiece of its architect, John Belcher, it is one of the most exuberant and confident municipal buildings in the country, remarkable in the richness of its design and furnishings. At its heart lies the Moot Hall, graced by the magnificent and splendidly-cased concert organ.

The Moot Hall organ is an outstanding example of work on the grand scale by Norman & Beard during the firm's finest period. At their large, well-equipped Norwich factory, Norman & Beard combined impeccable workmanship with the highest standards of artistry. Until the First World War drained many of its craftsmen and necessitated amalgamation with Hill & Son of London and closure of the Norwich plant, hundreds of instruments were supplied in East Anglia and throughout the country and the Empire, the last major production being a large organ for Johannesburg Town Hall. The efficiency of the Norwich works was such that plans for the Moot Hall organ were drawn up in 1901 and the contract signed on April 21<sup>st</sup> 1902, the firm promising "to...construct execute erect and complete in the said Town Hall by not later than the twenty-fourth day of May 1902 a three-manual and pedal organ" – Victorian production methods taking weeks instead of months or years – and all for just over one thousand guineas! The MP for the Borough, Sir Weetman Pearson, a generous benefactor of the town, donated this sum. The oak case was constructed by Kerridge & Shaw of Cambridge, and the carved work executed by Fabrucci & McCrossan.

The organ is distinguished by its daring design, producing a tremendous effect from what is in reality quite a small instrument. The Lewis organ at St. Peter's, Sudbury, has 40 speaking stops and the Binns at the Old Independent Church, Haverhill had 37 in its original state, compared to 28 at the Moot Hall. The Colchester organ, however, produces an effect far in excess of what might be expected, for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is built in an open, shallow chamber with the Swell above the Great so that all the pipework is heard to optimum effect. Secondly, the voicing is bold, befitting a concert organ. Lastly, the specification is quite exceptional for its time, with bold four rank mixtures on both Great and Swell. In addition, there are powerful reeds at 8' and 4' pitches on the Great (again, virtually unprecedented in a nine stop Great of the period), which are further enhanced by the provision of a coupler Sub Octave Reeds, giving the effect of a full 16.8.8.4 reed chorus. The single Open Diapason on the Great is rare, most organs of the time having two or three, and both it and the Claribel Harmonic Flute are voiced to give the grandest effect, with the other stops are scaled to match them. The Swell, too, has a Sub Octave Reeds coupler to give the effect of a full reed chorus and this, together with an Octave coupler for the whole department, combines with the favourable placing to give an unusually fine effect. This grandeur from minimum resources gives the Moot Hall organ its unique character and highest historical importance. Some influence on the scheme may have been had by Thomas C. Lewis, one of the leading Victorian organ builders, who retired from the firm he founded and, in 1902, worked for a short period for Norman & Beard. Lewis organs are noted for their bold, exciting tone, and if the French-style Bombarde and Trumpet stops specified (but not yet provided) for the Pedal Organ at Colchester were similar to those of the same name in Lewis's masterpiece at Southwark Cathedral, the effect would be truly formidable. The organ is controlled by its

original pneumatic action – a design patented in 1891, which earned a high reputation for its durability and continued in production (especially for instruments destined for tropical climates) until the 1960s.

For most of its life, the Moot Hall organ was played regularly for Mayor-Makings, Oyster Feasts, receptions and concerts by successive Borough Organists – W.F. Kingdon, Ernest H. Turner, Leonard Simpson and Ian Ray. During the Second World War, regular concerts were mounted for the troops when the Moot Hall was used as a forces' canteen. Many Colcestrians will remember the well-attended monthly concerts which Leonard Simpson gave during a tenure of over forty years from 1950, and the encouragement he gave to students at what is now the Institute by inviting them to contribute to his programmes. Hill, Norman & Beard maintained the organ and gave it its first clean and overhaul in 1919. In 1948 they carried out another overhaul, upgraded the console and gilded the front pipes. The last major work was carried out in 1973. Since then, time has taken its toll and the mechanism and leather-work has deteriorated to the extent that major work is essential to return the instrument to fully playable condition.

There is no doubt about the quality of the Moot Hall organ. Tonally, visually and mechanically it is in many ways unique in its design and effect. It deserves thorough restoration, after which it should serve for at least another fifty years without major work. In 1919, the cost of overhauling the organ was one hundred and twelve pounds. Today, a first-class restoration by craftsmen specialising in this type of work will cost in the region of a quarter of a million pounds! The Friends of the Moot Hall Organ are fortunate in having Dr. William McVicker, an experienced consultant and Organ Curator of the Royal Festival Hall, to guide them in assessing the work to be done and means of fund-raising. Restored to its full majesty, the Moot Hall organ will be a priceless asset to the town, a tremendous educational resource and a glorious adjunct to civic occasions.

**David Drinkell**  
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