

Alexandra Palace Organ Appeal (APOA)

A brief history for AP Consultative Committee

The Organ Appeal was launched in 1968 by two local residents: the distinguished musicologist and organ music specialist, Felix Aprahamian, and Fred Clarke, for the specific purpose of raising funds to rebuild the Father Willis Grand Organ in the Great Hall. Built in 1875 for the second Palace, it has had a chequered history: vandalised in WWI, bomb damaged in WWII (1944), then subsequently dismantled for the preservation of its components. These were eventually stored in the Willis factory, which is where they are today. However, the main case with all the largest pipes of the Pedal Division, the building frame and expression boxes were left *in situ* and so were totally destroyed in the fire of July 10th 1980.

This meant that whereas the Appeal was first tasked with rebuilding just the dismantled parts of the organ, (cost estimate in 1980: £300,000) after the fire it had to face total rebuilding, with the biggest and most expensive components completely destroyed. This was a huge setback; the process of restoration had started on July 1 and Willis's men were actually at work on July 10 when the fire started in the bowels of the organ, during the rigging of the Capital Radio Jazz Festival. The cause was never established. [For the record: the Appeal never received any of the insurance pay-out, although Henry Willis IV estimated the value of the burnt components in 1980 at upwards of £100,000].

No further restoration work could be done until the Great Hall was re-roofed and the new organ gallery was constructed. In fact, Willis started rebuilding in 1986, so that enough of the organ to be musically useful was playable soon after the Hall was reopened in 1988. Since then the Appeal, has continued to raise funds and seek estimates from Willis for incremental tasks, then commissioned them, as permitted by available funds. To date we have restored 49 of the total of 98 stops of the original specification, including the complete Choir Organ. The Appeal achieved charitable status in 1982.

As part of our fund-raising activities, we stage six concerts per year, one of which is a highly successful Silent Movie show, with the organist of the Odeon, Leicester Square accompanying the action on the Grand Organ. Many of the audience for this show have never been to hear the Grand Organ before and so we are building up a growing clientele of friends of APOA. We also organise a dinner before this event, which is both profitable and popular.

To give our members a chance to play the organ they are helping to rebuild, we hold an annual Members' Evening in August, which is also growing in popularity and works to bring in new members for the Appeal, because only members are allowed to play. This means people join on the spot so as to 'have a go'.

Our concerts have been greatly enhanced as the result of a successful bid to the Lottery 'Awards for All'. We have been able to buy two complete back-projection television systems, with giant screens, one to show the player's hands, the other his feet. This provision is becoming increasingly popular in achieving accessibility of organ concerts for both players and non-players alike. There is no doubt that the use of this equipment has helped to attract more people to our concerts, and has hugely increased the enjoyment

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factor for the audience. It is particularly important here, because, with the audience on a flat floor and the player on a high gallery, all that can be seen is the organist's back view and the console itself is invisible. Another virtue of using the projection system is that it diverts attention from the unsightly appearance of the unfinished organ, all too visible on its gallery at one end of the hall. To that end we have a plan to clad the organ with a 'virtual case' by hanging painted cloths round the existing frame, as was done at London's Broadcasting House while it was being renovated and in Berlin, to test public opinion on a restoration project.

None of our activities would be possible without the support of the Palace Management, for which we are immensely grateful. We are always looking for opportunities to offer the organ for any events in the Great Hall which could use it: we have in the past made it available for the Haringey Schools Carol and other choral concerts. Finally, can I remind you that Marcel Dupré, the leading Parisian organist of his day, called it 'the finest concert organ in Europe' The future for the Alexandra Palace Organ is very exciting, when we can achieve completion of our restoration programme.