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A Reluctant convert - G M Holdich organ builder

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[Grace and Mary](#)
[War Memorial](#)
[Lancaster Priory a history of the organs](#)
[A Reluctant convert - G M Holdich organ builder](#)

G M Holdich (1816-1896) built around 500 organs over a 50 year period. He worked during a time in English organ building history when organs were being introduced into churches that had previously not had one, and when there were a good many new churches being built, usually being equipped with an organ. Holdich was born into a wealthy, well-connected, clerical family and this worked to his advantage in securing him work, clusters of his instruments appearing around the incumbencies of clerics related by family connections. This may also explain why his work list is so dominated by Anglican organs at a time when organs were being introduced in non-conformist churches.

This book is testament to the painstaking research of Dr Rodney Matthews (1935-2104). An unfortunate accident with a skip and a filing cabinet meant that such records as survived from Holdich himself were lost in the relatively-recent past. This gave Matthews a significant challenge to create a list of Holdich's work from three job lists published by him, from surviving records elsewhere, and the evidence of surviving organs.

If you have a Holdich organ surviving in your church, treasure it, especially if it is one of the relatively rare instruments that has survived close to its original condition. Although Holdich worked through a time of considerable technical and tonal development in English organ building, he seemed to adapt very few changes himself, after the technical innovation of the Diaocton. This is probably why many of his organs have either been rebuilt with alterations or not survived. Of the instruments that survive it is usually the smaller ones that are closer to their original condition. These instruments are praised for their tonal cohesion and musicality. It is also possible that his actions worked better on a smaller scale, the larger instruments did not fare well. His Lichfield Cathedral organ of 1860, was effectively replaced in 1884 (by Hill). This organ combined a forward-looking Pedal organ of ten stops with a stop list that was an uncomfortable mix of old and new styles of work.

Dr Matthew's writes with warmth about his subject, and over the course of the book this is gently infectious. The loss of the original documentation left the author the difficult task of drawing on secondary materials, of varying quality. At times he could have been more confident of his views and omitted some of the misconceptions of earlier writers. The book contains useful case studies of selected instruments and where Rodney was joined on his inspections by an organ builder these are especially interesting. Now and again I wished for a drawing to illustrate a technical detail, or had to re-read the text to see if a particular instrument had been seen by the author or not.

For readers who want to develop their own theories of Holdich's tonal schemes Matthews provides useful tables of this information for selected organs. There are maps of organ locations and a genealogy. The text is supported by well-reproduced colour and monochrome photos, which all benefit from being printed on good white paper. A facsimile of Holdich's list of his work published to celebrate his golden jubilee as an organ builder is an added bonus. An organ on Orkney, St Olaf, stood out, How did he get this commission? Mention of an organ in Reading Goal made me wonder if Oscar



Wilde heard the work of Holdich.

This book will interest you in particular if you have a Holdich organ, and is a valuable addition to the literature of nineteenth-century organ builders.

David S Knight

Rodney Matthews.

A Reluctant convert: the life and times of G M Holdich: organ builder

Published [At the Sign of the Pipe](#)
