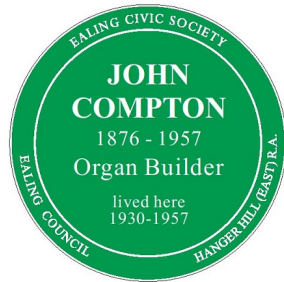


## JOHN COMPTON PLAQUE UNVEILING CELEBRATIONS

MONDAY 20 MAY 2013



The John Compton Organ Company Limited is best known for the 260 cinema organs built during the 1920s and 30s. But the company was established in 1920 to build, repair and tune traditional church organs and continued to do so until its demise in 1964. Notable examples are at Downside Abbey, Derby Cathedral and St Georges RC Cathedral, Southwark. Another important aspect of Compton's success was the development of electric organs. We are fortunate to have a 1947 *Electrone* still in remarkably good working order in the Church of the Ascension, Hanger Hill, Ealing, close to Compton's former home which is being played by well-known organ virtuoso and Compton enthusiast Richard Hills at the unveiling celebrations on May 20th.

The organs were manufactured in a purpose-built factory in North Acton opened in 1930 to cope with the boom in demand for theatre organs. This one-storey building was bombed in October 1940 but rebuilt soon after with a two storey frontage which still stands in Chase Road in Park Royal, now occupied by a firm of fashion wholesalers. The versatile workforce was employed during WWII in building Mosquito planes. Compton



himself spent part of the war in Italy as a prisoner of war, having been stranded there at the beginning of the war where he was able to serve the local community as an organist and restorer of organs in the vicinity.

The company failed to survive long after its founder's death in

1957 but this should not detract from its achievements over 40 years: it was the largest organ builder in the country employing 250 workers at its height. John Compton has been described as an "inventive genius": more patents were applied for by his company than by any other organ builder.

### **The Pipe organ range**

For all the diverse achievements of John Compton and his team, and their familiarity as makers of theatre organs to the cinema-going public of 60 years ago, John Compton's background and primary interest remained in the building of serious pipe organs for churches, concert halls and recording studios, and amongst these were by far the largest and most taxing of the projects they undertook. During its heyday in the 1930s the Compton company was by far the most prolific and commercially successful of Britain's organ builders, and thrived where others faltered, benefitting from the brief bonanza of



*St Bride's Fleet Street pipe organ console*

the cinema-building boom, but putting that investment in resources and expertise towards much more lasting achievements than music-making in the cinema was able to offer. Prestigious installations in iconic buildings of the 1930s, such as Broadcasting House and the new civic centres at Southampton and Wolverhampton, brought recognition and respectability not just for the company but for its founder and his unapologetically eccentric style of organ building. Compton symbolised, then and now, the triumph of personal vision and determination over the complacency of the Establishment.

### **The 'Electrone' organs**

The 'Electrone' range of electric organs evolved from Compton's introduction, in 1935, of an electrostatic tone generator designed to supplement the pipe ranks of small cinema organs. Although this device (now generally known by its stop name of 'Melotone') arrived towards the end of the cinema organ's boom years, the self-contained Electrone was one of the pioneers of the new field of pipe-less organs in which it gained a rapid foothold in the UK from 1947 onwards. With designs running the gamut from single-manual practice instruments to prominent installations in the Royal Festival Hall and Manchester Free Trade Hall, Compton maintained in the Electrone many of the admirable features and standards of construction that had distinguished their pipe organs. Flourishing during the 1950s and 60s and remaining in production until 1970, the Electrone was one of the few entirely British electric instruments to have achieved lasting commercial success.

The instrument installed in the Church of the Ascension (CoA) appears to incorporate a pre-war console, possibly from a Model II Electrone, updated in 1947 into an early model 347 with a new external tone generator cabinet. This process may have taken place as part of the development cycle of the 347, given the likely relationship between the church, the company and John Compton himself. The generator cabinet was probably replaced in 1977 with an overhauled exchange unit by the Compton Organ Maintenance Co, a firm run by ex-Compton staff member Fred Allen. Although it now uses a solid-state amplifier, in all other respects it is exactly as per the original 347 specification and sounds as it would have done 65 years ago.



*Interior of CoA Electrone cabinet*

### **Richard Hills**

Richard is one of the very few musicians truly to have bridged and mastered the divide between the world of the classical organ and that of the theatre organ. Having commenced classical organ studies under William Whitehead at Rochester Cathedral, he became Organ Scholar at Exeter College Oxford, studying with David Sanger. Further organ scholarships followed at Portsmouth Cathedral, where he studied with Rosemary Field and at Westminster Abbey. He now pursues a freelance career and is Organist at St Mary's, Bourne Street, London. His career in the theatre organ world has been equally prestigious. He has numerous prizes and awards to his credit, both in this country and in the USA, where he was named 'Organist of the Year' in 2010 by the American Theatre Organ Society. He has appeared



Richard Hills at Southampton Guildhall Compton (Grand Console) Photo©Webbwize

many times on national and international TV and Radio, including solo appearances on programmes as diverse as Radio 3 Choral Evensong and Radio 2's 'Friday Night is Music Night', and has several recording credits. His most recent solo recording was made on the magnificent dual-purpose Compton organ of Southampton's Guildhall (copies of the CD will be available for purchase after the event). When not on the organ bench Richard serves as Musical Adviser to the Cinema Organ Society and maintains a practical interest in organ building.

### Ian Bell

Ian was born and educated in York. In 1960 he joined the John Compton Organ Company in London as an apprentice voicer. He moved to N P Mander Ltd, now Mander Organs, in 1963 as assistant voicer, taking charge of all voicing from 1965 to 1972. From 1972 to 1991 he took charge of the Mander design office, involving supervising the workshops and most site assembly, as well as extensive design work and estimating. Projects supervised included the organs of St Paul's, Canterbury, Birmingham Town Hall, Eton and Winchester College Chapels, and countless smaller new, restored or rebuilt instruments. He was Director of N P Mander Ltd 1981 to 1993, but he resigned from the company in 1993 to become a full-time Professional Organ Adviser.

### Lucien Nunes

Lucien is a London-based freelance electronic engineer with a particular interest in the conservation and study of early electrical and electronic technologies including the electric action of pipe organs and electronic tone generation. Within *Electrokinetica*, a working museum project that encompasses many aspects of electrical and electronic history, he is researching and conserving the electrical work of the John Compton Organ Company with artefacts including theatre-lighting controls and *Electrone* organs. Website: [www.electrokinetica.org](http://www.electrokinetica.org). He recently maintained the CoA *Electrone* organ much improving its tone as a result.



### Compton organs in the London Borough of Ealing

**Church of All Hallows**, Greenford (1940): 2 manual, 5 rank instrument. It started its life in 1923 as a standard model Compton *Kinestra* in the Hippodrome, Woolwich.

**Church of the Ascension**, Beaufort Road, W5 3EB (1939): 2 manual 1947 *Electrone 347*, still in use *in situ*.

**Forum** (opposite Ealing Town Hall, 1934, demolished 2008/9): 3 manual 9 rank. It is now in the chapel of Wormwood Scrubs Prison in good condition and played regularly.

**The Lido** (1928, previously the Kinema, West Ealing, demolished 2001): 2 manual, 5 rank now believed to be in private hands in the London area.

**Savoy, East Acton**, (1931 demolished 1996), 2 manual, presumably scrapped.

**St Benedict's Priory** (now Ealing Abbey) 3 manual (1935), destroyed during the Blitz in 1940.

**St Gabriel's, North Acton**, 2 manual *Electrone 357* installed in the late 1960s.



*Console Shop 1950*

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to many people who have been involved in organising this event in particular Mr & Mrs B Shaul, Simon Reed and the Church of the Ascension, Ealing Council, Hanger Hill Ward Forum, Ealing Civic Society, Hanger Hill (East) RA, Kelvin Meredith, Michael Tiley, Richard Hills, Ian Bell, Lucien Nunes, Suzy Perkins, Anita Compton, Stephen Duffield, Lee Dewsnap and David Walsby.

Contemporary photographs courtesy of Compton List (Ivor Buckingham).

### **Specification of the Church of the Ascension Electrone**

#### ***PEDAL***

Acoustic Bass 32  
 Contrabass 16  
 Violone 16  
 Dulciana 16  
 Bourdon 16  
 Octave 8  
 Flute 8  
 Trombone 16

#### ***GREAT***

Contra Geigen 16  
 Diapason 8  
 Gemshorn 8  
 Hohlflöte 8  
 Stopped Diapason 8  
 Dolce 8  
 Octave 4  
 Waldflöte 4  
 Twelfth & Fifteenth 2 2/3 & 2  
 Cor Anglais 16  
 Clarinet 8  
 Tromba 8

#### ***SWELL***

Contra Salicional 16  
 Principal 8

Viola da Gamba 8  
 Salicional 8  
 Flauto Pleno 8  
 Lieblich Gedeckt 8  
 Salicet 4  
 Lieblich Flöte 4  
 Flageolet 2  
 Mixture III rks.  
 Contra Fagotto 16  
 Corneopean 8  
 Hautboy 8  
 Clarion 4

#### ***COUPLERS & ACCESSORIES***

Great to Pedal  
 Swell to Pedal  
 Swell to Great  
 Overall tremulant controllable by manual divisions independently when keyed  
 Two balanced expression pedals  
 4 double-touch pistons to Swell, Pedal combination on second touch  
 4 double-touch pistons to Great, Pedal combination on second touch  
 Stoptab second-touch cancelling to all divisions