BACKGROUND TO BIRMINGHAM TOWN HALL ORGAN (Copy from web site)

Upon its opening in 1834, visitors to Birmingham Town Hall were awestruck not only by the building’s impressive Roman Revival civic architecture, but also by the magnificence of its specially commissioned organ.

What made the organ so immediately and visually impressive to those first audiences were the huge 32 foot pipes that were, for the first time in England, incorporated into the decorative case front.

One of the very few organs of the time to have four manuals and a complete set of pedals, the size of the organ grew over the years, from 3,000 to 6,000 pipes.

Paid for from public funds, the instrument was a record breaker; being the largest organ in England at the time. Even today it is still comparable with the most powerful of cathedral organs around the world.

The organ’s reputation as one of England’s finest historical instruments has been confirmed by the excellence and reputation of the Birmingham City Organists who have continued to demonstrate the instrument’s versatility.

With recitals and organ-related educational activity planned upon the building’s re-opening, the internationally recognised instrument is integral to the musical past and future of Town Hall.

**RESTORED TO GLORY**

TOWNHALLORGAN CD

Released to celebrate the re-opening of Town Hall, Birmingham, and the restoration of its historic 1834 William Hill organ, Thomas Trotter presents a new recording of dazzling organ showpieces. Drawing from the great Town Hall tradition, the disc features pieces that demonstrate the instrument’s full range, including original organ works together with colourful orchestral transcriptions.

*Restored to Glory* is available for the price of £12.50 from the Symphony Hall Gift Shop on 0121 200 2382.

Produced by Regent Records, in association with Town Hall, Birmingham.

**THETOWNHALLTRADITION**

TOWNHALLORGANDVD

A dazzling display of virtuoso showpieces drawn from the concert hall tradition, including Wagner’s Ride of the Valkyries, Thalben-Ball’s Paganini Variations and Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture, performed by Birmingham City Organist Thomas Trotter, in the stunning surroundings of Town Hall, Birmingham. Filmed in high definition and recorded in surround sound, this is a must for all visitors and music enthusiasts alike. The package also includes a separate audio CD and booklet. *The Town Hall Tradition* is available for the price of £17.99 from Symphony Hall Gift Shop on 0121 200 2382.

Produced by Regent Records, in association with Town Hall, Birmingham.

# CONSTRUCTION

At 70 foot high, the organ case is as tall as two double-decker buses stood end on end. The largest metal pipe is 35 foot and 3 inches long, equivalent to the height of an average house.

Like the original ownership of the Town Hall itself, the organ was originally commissioned and owned by the General Hospital of Birmingham, with the instrument being handed over to the City of Birmingham in March 1890.

A splendid example of Georgian organ building, it is widely acknowledged as a landmark instrument in terms of its engineering and mechanics.

Thought to have been designed by Neukomm or Vincent Novello, the organ builder was William Hill, who was also responsible for building the organ at York Minster. He had been commissioned by the Governors of the General Hospital in Birmingham to build the instrument at a total cost of £3,000.

Like the Hall itself, the organ had been built and designed first and foremost to meet the needs and demands of the Birmingham Triennial Music Festivals. At the time of the opening of the Town Hall, the organ was a major feature of much of the choral and orchestral music of the time.

The largest wooden pipe has an interior measurement of 24 cubic ft, and would hold enough water to fill 7 bath tubs. The organ originally had 3000 pipes; today it has over 6000. To enable the organist, as the principal accompanist, to be close to the conductor, the original position of the console was set very far forward at the front of the concert platform. At 18 feet from the organ, this was a huge distance and presented the organ builder with a fair degree of engineering problems.

Hill had made the organ’s pipes on the largest scale thought practicable. It was inevitable that at a time of ever-increasing engineering technology that Hill should want to take advantage of such abilities and improve further on the instrument.

Over the first 15 years of the Hall’s opening, many other improvements were made, and it was after these improvements that the Birmingham Triennia Musical Festival commission of Mendelssohn’sElijah was first heard.

By 1849 it was the first organ in the world to have a high pressure reed – its now famous Tuba (or Ophicleide), which was believed to have been inspired by Hill’s designs for railway engine steam whistles. The same year also saw the console moved back to the position that it is in today and the introduction of a larger 16 stop pedal organ.

# REFURBISHMENT

The organ case has been decorated three times in its history. The first time it was decorated by the Crace family who had earlier undertaken much work at Brighton Pavilion, including the lavishly exotic music room there.

Contemporary descriptions said that “under the direction of Mr Crace of London” the organ case was “splendidly embellished, and the pipes gilt, with scrolls.” The Craces also decorated the Hall’s ceiling at the same time.

A second redecoration of the case was made in 1890 by John Henry Chamberlain, a Birmingham architect. The current and third decoration was by Anna Plowden who undertook her work during the 1983 refurbishment to the organ.

Rebuilds of the organ were made in 1889 by Thomas Hill (William’s son); in 1932 by Henry Willis III; and in 1983 by N P Mander. The organ was also refurbished in readiness for the re-opening of the Hall in October 2007.

# PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Despite the fact that the organ was not quite finished, an organ recital was first given on 29 August 1834.

The first performance on the completed instrument was given by Mr S Wesley on 26 December 1834, although the records do not tell us if this was Samuel or Samuel Sebastian.

There then followed a succession of recitals given by many famous players; the first given by Mendelssohn was in 1837.

Over the successive years it was used for the weekly organ recitals by the City Organist and for the Festivals, culminating in the great Elgar commissions of The Dream of Gerontius (1900), The Apostles (1903) and The Kingdom (1906).

# BIRMINGHAM CITY ORGANISTS

Integral to the success of the organ was the establishment of the post of Birmingham City Organist.

From the outset, the organ played a major role in the life of Town Hall and the City Fathers were anxious to allow its citizens free access to a regular series of weekly recitals.

The appointment is made by the City of Birmingham, with the first appointment in 1834 to coincide with the opening of the Hall.

Town Hall has always been the traditional home of the City Organist, and it was under one of the earliest City Organists, James Stimpson, that the popular weekly recitals began. So popular were the recitals that audiences of around 1,500 packed in every Monday evening in the 1840s.

The weekly recitals, now held on Monday at lunch time, have continued to the present day. The re-opening of a renovated and rejuvenated Town Hall in October 2007 will see some concerts returning to their home in Town Hall, Birmingham with others performed at Symphony Hall on the Klais organ.

**Birmingham City Organists**  
Thomas Munden 1834-1837  
George Hollins 1837-1841  
James Stimpson 1842-1886  
C W Perkins 1888-1923  
G D Cunningham 1924-1949  
Sir George Thalben-Ball 1949-1983  
Thomas Trotter 1983-present day

The present City Organist, [Thomas Trotter](http://www.thsh.co.uk/page/symphony-hall-birmingham/the-symphony-organ/thomas-trotter-city-organist/), was appointed in August 1983 following the retirement of Sir George Thalben-Ball. Thomas gave his first recital on the newly refurbished organ in October 1984.

In 1986 he celebrated the Hall’s 150th anniversary with a special concert given together with Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra.

The last concert to be given in the Hall before its closure for the recent refurbishment was given in July 1996, again with Simon Rattle conducting the CBSO and joined by Thomas Trotter as soloist in a performance of Poulenc’s Organ Concerto and the Saint-Saëns Organ Symphony No 3.

As City Organist, Thomas gave his 500th recital in October 2003 and gave the inaugural recital in the refurbished Town Hall in October 2007. Thomas also performed in a lunchtime organ concert on Monday 6 October 2008 to celebrate 25 years as Birmingham City Organist.