The Compton Organ in St Peter's Gloucester by Dr John Rowntree

The original organ was installed at the time of the building of the Church. This was replaced by the current organ in 1937. The new organ was the outcome of collaboration by two fascinating and talented figures of the pre-World War II period, the organ builder John Compton and Dom Gregory Murray, monk and organist of Downside Abbey and a well-known recitalist, broadcaster and composer.

John Compton (1894-1957) seems to have been a somewhat shy eccentric who, after working with organ-builders in the Midlands, set up his own workshop in 1900. After a variety of partnerships and business vicissitudes he established himself in London in 1919. He followed in the footsteps of another eccentric organ-builder Robert Hope-Jones. Both developed their building styles as a result of the application of electricity to organ mechanisms. Compton, however, developed a considerable interest in the tonal aspects of organ design. The decade following Compton's establishing himself in London was one in which there was a growing interest amongst organists in the relationship between the music of composers in different periods for the organ and the sounds, or tonal colours which were appropriate for them. A major figure in this area was Guy Weitz, Organist of the Jesuit Church in Farm Street, London. The provision of appropriate tonal colours meant that organs required numerous high-pitched stops, each stop being a separate row of pipes. Compton used electrical switchgear to derive a number of different pitches from a single row of pipes. This saved money on the making and voicing of pipes and resulted in impressive consoles with many stop knobs. Electricity was also applied to the stop-knobs, Compton making stop buttons which lit when pressed, the LED of the 1930s! The system however caused havoc for players whenever the bulbs failed! In the hands of many builders other than Compton this system, known as 'extension', produced less than artistic results, especially when the number of stops was small and the number of extension many. Compton, however, was a talented man and utilised the system with more subtlety than most.

The result was an impressive list of commissions in the period between the two world wars. The commissions included many cinema organs, then at their height of popularity, organs for public buildings such as Southampton Civic Hall, Bournemouth Pavilion, Wolverhampton Civic Hall. Alongside commissions for churches such as Derby Cathedral and Holy Trinity Church, Hull, very importantly Compton obtained the contracts for the BBC Concert Hall and the Maida Vale Studios, both remarkable platforms on which to advance his ideas. His magnum opus was however his organ built in 1931 for Downside Abbey. Here the whole organ is enclosed in stone and concrete chambers with swell shutter fronts, placed behind casework designed by Giles Gilbert Scott. It was over this organ that Dom Gregory Murray presided.

Anthony Gregory Murray (1905-1992) began his musical life as a chorister in the newly-built Westminster Cathedral where Richard Terry (1865-1938) had established an outstanding choir. Terry had been organist and choirmaster at Downside Abbey where he began his work of reviving English polyphony for the Latin liturgy. He was the first in post-Reformation times to restore to the liturgy the three- and five-part masses by Byrd, Tye's Euge bone, Tallis's four part 'Mass and Lamentations, Mundy's Mass Upon the Square and motets by Morley, Parsons, White and others. At Westminster Cathedral Terry established a tradition of musical treatment for the whole of the Roman liturgy in England based on the principles laid down in the Motu proprio *Tra Ie Sollecitudini.*

Westminster Cathedral offered an example to Catholic church musicians unequalled anywhere outside Rome itself. Standards were high and the repertory wide, revealing the great wealth of early English liturgical music, music such as Byrd's Gradualia and Cantiones Sacrae, the Cantiones of Tallis, White's Lamentations, Philips's Cantiones sacrae, and motets by Dering, Fayrfax, Sheppard, Tye and others. Terry, who was awarded both a doctorate and a knighthood for his work, must have been a remarkable inspiration to the young Anthony Murray.

Murray showed a precocious talent, gaining his Fellowship of the Royal College of Organists at the age of 17. In 1923 he became a monk of Downside, taking the name of Gregory. In 1929 he graduated in History at the University of Cambridge. As an organist he established a national reputation through recitals on the Compton organs in the BBC and on the organ of Downside. Indeed it was said at times that the BBC was permanently hooked up to Downside! A significant element of his playing was a remarkable facility in improvisation, both within and outside the liturgy. Stemming in part from his improvisations where his compositions for organ and also songs, choral and orchestral works. Stylistically his improvisation and composing was rooted in plainchant and the music of Delius.

Over a long period of time Dom Gregory made a significant contribution to music in the Catholic liturgy. In 1939 he re-edited Terry's Westminster Hymnal, which was staple fare until the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. The Council brought with it both developments in congregational participation - for which English Catholics were woefully unprepared and in the use of English as well as Latin in the liturgy. His 'People's Mass' in its Latin and English forms responded to both of the Council's developments. He was prominent in the use in England of the psalmody of the French Jesuit, Joseph Gelineau, whose psalmodic formulae worked well with the English Grail Psalter. In turn Dom Gregory's own adaptations for English of the plainchant psalm tones remain in regular use in the Catholic Church.

Although rooted in the Solesmes tradition of plainchant he made a significant contribution to the reassessment of the early chant manuscripts and to the debate over the rhythmic interpretation of plainchant. This then, is the monk-musician who was instrumental in the installation of the Compton organ in St Peter's. The cost of the St Peter's organ was £1500. Since then the organ has remained almost unchanged other than minor cleaning and repair after a fire in 1984, and the removal of one rank, G, where a Viole Celeste was replaced by a Lieblich Flute. This alteration has been reversed in the present restoration. The original, and current stop-list, is:

GREAT			SWELL		
Bourdon	16	A	Contra Viola	16	F
Contra	16	B	Open	8	D
Salicional			Diaspason II		
Open	8	C	Viola de	8	F
Diaspason I			Gamba		
Open	8	D	Viole Celeste	8	G
Diasposon II				(TC)	
Flute	8	A	Flute	8	H
Salicional	8	B	Salicional	8	B
Octave	4	D	Viola	4	F
Flute	4	A	Celestina	4	G
Salicet	4	B	Flute	4	H
Twelfth	2 2/3	B	Twelfth	22/3	F
Superoctave	2	D	Fifteenth	2	F
Actua II		B	Cymbale III		B
			Trombone	16	E
			Trumpet	8	E
			Clarion	4	E
			Tremulant		

PEDAL			COUPLERS
Sub Bass (to E)	32	A	Great to Pedal
Contra Bass	16	C	Swell to Pedal
Bourdon	16	A	Swell to Great
Salicional	16	B	
Octave	8	C	
Flute	8	A	
Flute	4	A	
Trombone	16	A	
Compass	Manual c-c""		
	Pedal C-g'		
Action	Electric		
Two swell pedals			
Crescendo Pedal			
Five double touch thumb-pistons to Great, Swell and Pedal			
Two reversible thumb-pistons to Pedal Couplers			
Four toe-pistons to Great, Swell and Pedal			
Stop-key double touch canceller			
General cancel			

In common with Compton's practice it can be seen from the stop list that the organ is a unit, or extension, organ of two-manuals and pedal, with 8 ranks of pipes from which are derived 35 stops, a rather smaller instrument than Downside with its 142 stops over four manuals and pedals derived from 38 ranks of pipes, though the proportion of derivation, or extension, is similar. While little specific knowledge is known of Dom Gregory's input, the relationship between the Gloucester organ and that of Downside Abbey is plain.

Architecturally the organ is totally enclosed within two swell-boxes, essentially the Great Organ on the north side of the gallery and the Swell Organ on the south side. The boxes have exterior casework, the eastern prospect of which is in a simple 'classical' syle having a central five pipe pointed tower and a flat of three pipes either side of the tower, the whole surmounted by a cornice. There is an attempt at pipe-shades but in a somewhat emasculated manner. Beneath the central rose window and between the two cases is a small dummy case-front and pipes. Though well-made it has to be said that while John Compton made a shot at formal casework, the result is a not entirely convincing composition, in particular the off-centre vertical strut supporting each case is a less-than-elegant feature. The detached stop key console is located facing west, in the centre of the gallery and is a straightforward but nonetheless handsome, piece of furniture. The blower and re-lay-stack are placed outside the main gallery area on the north side.

In 2004 Rushworth and Draper (who were originally responsible for the maintenance and tuning of the Compton Organ) produced a report highlighting a number of problems. The principle problem was that in their opinion, the organ constituted a major fire risk due to the condition of the low voltage wiring, since it was only covered by cotton which had worn away in many places. There were also so many solenoids and magnets not working that, in the opinion of Rushworth and Draper, a complete restoration was necessary.

After discussing the problems of the organ's condition with Canon Michael Fitzpatrick (Parish Priest in 2004), advice on the procedure for the organ restoration was sought by Anthony Smith (Chairman of the Fabric Committee) from Dom Charles Watson OSB, a monk at Prinknash Abbey who specialised in organ building, together with writing music and contributing to the panel of monastic musicians.

After reading the report of the organ's condition, Father Charles' advice was to contact Dr John Rowntree at Douai Abbey and consider applying for a "Heritage Lottery Grant" for the complete refurbishment of the historic Compton Organ. This advice was taken and Dr John Rowntree was appointed as Consultant. After receiving and comparing quotations from a number of organ builders Nicholson of Malvern were awarded the contract for restoration of the organ.

After much hard work and fund raising in the Parish, detailed submissions were made to Heritage Lottery and to The Council, for the Care of Churches in order to assist with the completion of the project. To the delight of the Parish, substantial grants were awarded from both bodies. By this time Father Charles had become quite ill, but he still wanted to be kept up to date on progress. Unfortunately, he passed away in January 2007 but it was with the knowledge that John Compton's historic organ at St Peter's Church (which he had played) would be restored by Nicholson.

From the outset Andrew Moyse, Managing Director of Nicholson's, adopted a very thoughtful and sympathetic approach to the work of Compton. Whilst the work has largely been careful restoration of the original Compton case-work, pipe-work and mechanisms, there has had to be some changes to parts of the organ. Although Compton's original cotton-covered wiring and switch stack remained and worked, though by 2004 increasingly erratically, it was essential for these systems to be replaced with the most sympathetic contemporary equivalent ones. This said, it has been very pleasing to find that it has been possible for the original solenoids in the wind-chests to be re-wound, thus avoiding intrusive change to Compton's wind-chests. Where Compton's original material has had to be replaced, examples have been retained, labeled and stored in the organ gallery, in particular Compton's original relay stack.

This collection of historical technological material should enable further study of the work of Compton to take place in future and benefit those concerned in the restoration of other Compton organs. Alongside the work of Nicholson it should also be recorded that the blowing plant has been restored by the local firm of Anstee & Ware, together with all the 240 volt electrical installation by Anthony J Smith (Gloucester) Ltd.

The importance of the restoration of this organ is two-fold. Firstly it is important that the organ is restored so as to play its full part in the liturgy of St Peter's and in the musical life of Gloucester. Secondly, it is an important example of the conservation of significant technological material from a remarkable period of organ development in the inter-war years. It should be of benefit both today and long into the future. The organ at St Peter's is a significant part of Catholic and English heritage, and a precious link to two important figures in the musical life of the Catholic Church in England in the twentieth century, Sir Richard Terry and Dom Gregory Murray, and to a pioneering figure in English organ building - John Compton.