

Organ case conservation

The principles behind a report on an organ case are the same as those for the report on the organ itself:

- Set out what the object is, and assess its importance – is it significant?
- Assess its condition
- Show an understanding of the causes of deterioration
- Make recommendations for treatment
- Make recommendations for long-term care

The following notes draw attention to matters that will need to be considered by organ builders and advisers preparing proposals for organs involving work to an organ case, or to an organ with a carved or decorated case.

An organ is seen more often than it is heard. It is therefore worth taking as much care over its appearance as over the playing parts. On some occasions the work to an organ case may reveal the approach to the organ inside it and will have an impact on the public perception of what has been done. There are also some organ cases that are more significant than the instrument that they enclose. Its significance might be on account of its setting as part of an architectural scheme for a church, its joinery and carving, decorative metalwork or painted decoration.

The repair of an organ case will sometimes require specialist skills in paint analysis and conservation of timber or metalwork where some of the treatments will require skills unfamiliar to the organ builder. The role of the organ builder in such cases may vary from total involvement to none, and this will therefore require consultation between conservators, the organ builder and the professional adviser.

Unintentional damage can be caused by the wrong choice of material or its incorrect use. A domestic cleaning product, for example, is rarely appropriate for cleaning historic surfaces and advice should always be sought from an appropriate conservator over the choice and use of treatments and materials. The removal of dirt from a fragile surface is usually a job for an appropriately experienced conservator.

The timber of an organ case should be considered and treated with the same care given to the timber inside it. There is a strong argument for using a separate conservator for the joinery aspect of the works, especially if the organ builder no longer has a joiner or carver on the staff.

A wide range of approaches are possible for treating an organ case. These might include the restoration of the form and finish of a case, possibly including replacement of missing elements, refinishing surfaces with varnish, paint or gilding following a known earlier design. In particular, painted schemes should be conserved, with damaged areas consolidated with suitable materials. Overall repainting should not be carried out. As with all other treatments the proposal must be supported and detailed, before commencing works.

When an instrument has acquired a finish that is of no, or negative, significance, its removal or covering might be considered, but this should be adequately justified. Analysis can usually identify what remains underneath, and when removal of paint will reveal an earlier decorative scheme, which might then require consolidation or infilling. The relationship of the organ case to its setting will need to be considered, since changes to the one – either proposed or in the past – could well have implications for the other.

There is a further discussion of organ cases in Dominic Gwynn *Historic Organ Conservation* (Church House Publishing, London, 2001), pages 55 to 57.

Church House
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3AZ

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