

The Halletts — Organ Builders of Kington Magna, Dorset

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Summary

This research to locate the organs built by John Hallett (1825–1915) and his nephew, also John Hallett (1856–1945), of Kington Magna, Dorset, was initiated by a description of them in 19th century Census Returns and Post Office Directories as organ builders. As they did not name their instruments and little documentary evidence survives, it has been extremely difficult to identify the organs for which they were responsible and the list compiled is almost certainly incomplete.

History

Even before the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries, music in rural parishes was provided by village musicians, generally installed in the gallery at the west end of the church. It was they who led the singing by playing a variety of instruments, such as the bassoon, clarinet, flute, serpent and 'cello. It was said that the violin was absent because the parson shared the general opinion that it 'savoured of the public house' (Galpin 1905, 175). At Kington Magna, for example, the *Churchwardens' Accounts* in 1791 stated that they 'shall provide a new Bafs viol [cello] for the church' although no sum was mentioned, while in 1758 they had allowed two guineas to the singing master (Dorset Record Office: P4/CW1) Unfortunately these accounts do not survive after 1792, for they might well have contained details of the ultimate demise of this village band and installation of the organ.

Victorian enthusiasm for church restoration and the various reforming religious movements of the time, led to the disbandment of these musicians in favour of the barrel organ, harmonium or organ. The barrel-organs which displaced the old church 'bands' were popular during the mid-19th century for a period of about twenty-five years, and in Dorset at least, seventeen were in regular use. The harmonium then superseded the barrel-organ and was in its turn replaced by the manual organ (Flay 1969, 109). Thomas Hardy's story of Mellstock Quire, based on his personal knowledge, described in *Under the Greenwood Tree* how 'the parson set up a barrel-organ on his own account ... and the old quire went to nothing' and, even more graphically, the Vicar was 'to turn us out of the quire neck and crop' (1872, 32, 74). This feeling of injustice is shown by an amusing story relating to the organ of the parish church of Stalbridge, Dorset, in the 1840s. When a fire broke out in the West end of the Church, the churchwardens called 'Fire, fire', but members of the old West Gallery band shouted 'Stir it up boys, stir it up; let the old organ burn' (Letter in *Musical Opinion*, 1934).

The influence of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and improvements in the choral aspects of Anglican worship may also have hastened the introduction of organs into church services. The difficulties of providing rural churches with an organ at this period were obviously enormous both financially and in terms of finding a suitable place to house them in the existing building, so introduction was slow, but at least it was felt that the

'singing had been rescued from the parish clerk and musicians' (Thistlethwaite 1990, 65). It was not until the last quarter of the 19th century that a large number of provincial firms making organs emerged, and organs began to be used in Nonconformist worship (*ibid.* 49, 70). A strong influence in creating organs for rural parishes in the West Country was the Revd John Baron of Upton Scudamore, Wiltshire, who designed an organ with a very basic mechanism, without a case and with pipes exposed. His book *Scudamore Organs*, published in 1858, decried 'extravagance in organs' and consequently his ideas were applied by others (*ibid.* 317–18), but this does not seem relevant to the work of the Halletts.

John Hallett, senior (1825–1915), was the son of George Hallett, an agricultural labourer and his wife Elizabeth, both born in Kington Magna. From the 1851 *Census* when he was 26 years old, he was described as a carpenter, and at about the time of his wife's death in 1858, he moved to the Brick House in Kington Magna (Fig. 1), where he, and later his nephew, were to remain until the latter's death in 1946. Arnold Hallett of Shepton Mallet, son of Gerald Hallett and grandson of the younger John Hallett, was able to give some personal recollections of the family but apart from photographs and a list of organ tunings from 1912 to 1924, there was little information about the actual business.

From 1871 Hallett was listed as an organ builder as well as carpenter and glazier (he was also an undertaker), and ten years later was employing two men and a boy. He had also remarried. The Brick House, of late 18th century date, is the only building in the village of this period built of brick (RCHM 1972, 42), and yet the source of the bricks has not been determined, being too



Figure 1: Brick House, Kington Magna, home of the Hallett family for nearly 100 years

early for the local brickyard. An extension on the south side of the building housed the organ workshop on the upper floor, with a huge window which could be removed when necessary to lower the sections of the instruments on to a cart or wagon below. The sawpit lay at the foot of this wall. The logistical problems of moving these organs to their respective churches must have been considerable. By noting the distribution on the map, it is apparent that most of the parishes were within reasonable distance of a railway station which would seem to confirm that the bulk of the journey was by train. The most distant location at Idmiston, 9km from Salisbury, was close to a station.

John Hallett, junior (1856–1945) (Fig. 2), who was born in Rutland where his father was a groom, is recorded in Kington Magna as a carpenter and joiner in 1875 (*Kelly's Post Office Directory*), and it is assumed that he was working with his uncle. In the 1891 *Census* he is described as a 'master organ builder' and in an interview is quoted as saying that 'he learned his trade from an uncle' (Letter in *Musical Opinion* 1934). He had been left 'tools, benches and other implements' in his uncle's will (Dorset Record Office: MIC/R/440 1915). His eldest son, William (1879–1945) played the organ and 'cello as well as helping to tune organs, which became an important part of the business. He was known to have had the case of tools which survived but it has been



Figure 2: John Hallett, junior, aged 80, in front of Brick House, Kington Magna

impossible to see them. William Hallett was organist in Kington Magna parish church, and as the *North Dorset Chronicle* records in his obituary in 1945 'For more than a quarter of a century his musical abilities had enriched our Church music, and for nearly fourteen years he had regularly played our organ ... for he himself had assisted in its reconstruction some 28 years ago'. Gerald J. Hallett, William's youngest brother, was also a carpenter and obviously helped with the organs, as shown by his pencilled signature found under the soundboard of the former organ of East Stour Methodist Chapel, September 16th 1943 (Roger Hill, pers. comm.) and on a scrap of paper within a pipe at Kilmington, Wiltshire in 1938 (Valerie Donell, pers. comm.).

It is obvious that the Halletts could not have had any formal training in organ building and, therefore, must have used existing and redundant instruments, or even barrel organs, acquiring their skills with great ingenuity by trial and error, evidenced by some of the details of eccentric construction noted subsequently by professional craftsmen. It is only guessing to suggest that they had some expert help from a professional organ builder; there was for instance one recorded in Bourton, Wiltshire, only a few miles to the north, although his skills are not known.

In some cases the ivory has been pinned on the notes, a technique usually only seen on instruments destined for the tropics, but perhaps a reflection of the damp conditions in the various churches and also a carpenter's practical method of solving a problem. The soundboards and keyboards would have been bought in or used second-hand, but some of the wooden pipes are beautifully made and presumably demonstrate Hallett craftsmanship but elsewhere there are examples of rough work, perhaps through expediency or ignorance. A particular characteristic of Hallett work, economical of labour, is shown by the wedge-shaped rather than the normal wooden pipe hooks on the Buckhorn Weston and East Stour organs. As described below, the East Stour Methodist Chapel organ was thought to have been made from the base of a tallboy and a cut-down pianoforte keyboard, while Charleton Horethorne organ was second-hand. The old instrument from Motcombe church was sold to Hallett for £20 and that at Stalbridge was rebuilt using material from the old organ (it has been altered more recently). The original organ from Marnhull church was apparently seen in Hallett's workshop and was thought to have been a chamber organ in the 'big house' (probably Nash Court) at Marnhull, but this has not been verified. The wooden framework of the organs has been a partial means of identification of Hallett workmanship because of the characteristic motifs on some instruments, for example trefoil carvings at Buckhorn Weston, Motcombe and Stalbridge, and fretted motifs at Kington Magna, Henstridge, Milborne Port and Kilmington. Perhaps they were demonstrating their skills by providing cases for organs built without such refinements.

The surviving document in the younger John Hallett's handwriting is a double-page entry for organ tunings from 1912–1928. These include 10 parish churches and 11 Nonconformist chapels of varying denominations. The charges varied from £2.10.0. to 10s. (the chapels seemed to be cheaper), and included places as far afield as Templecombe, Wincanton and Horsington in Somerset, Salisbury Primitive Methodist Chapel, East Knoyle, Stourton and Semley in Wiltshire, as well as the Dorset organs of Marnhull, Enmore Green, Sturminster Newton and Gillingham. It is a remarkable list and makes a statement about their skills, contacts and time spent in travelling. It has been said that they were away for long periods of time, which is self-evident. The local churches of Kington Magna and Buckhorn Weston are not mentioned; perhaps these were done free of charge. There was also a reference to a Timber Dealer in Cumberland Basin, Bristol and 'Compo Tubing' (for pipes) from Colston Street, Bristol, where they obtained materials.

The first organ recorded, that at Kington Magna in 1867, would seem to be a response to the almost total rebuilding of the church in 1862, including the nave where the organ is sited, and possibly the enthusiasm of a new Rector, the Revd John Smith, inducted in 1866. But to encompass the other diverse parishes, it seems likely that the Hallett skills were spread by word of mouth among the clergy and also on the Methodist Circuits.

This inadequate tribute to such a remarkable family can only hint at their ingenuity and skills, coping with almost insurmountable difficulties in dealing with these complicated and originally unfamiliar instruments, hindered by damp conditions and lack of suitable materials in churches and chapels a long way from home, and perhaps with some opposition from the old church gallery musicians and congregations.

The following details of the individual organs by the Halletts are listed in the order in which they were built as far as is known. Some of the specifications may seem bizarre but are correct as far as can be ascertained and can only serve to emphasise the inexperience of the Halletts as organ builders without adequate training.

**ALL SAINTS' CHURCH,
KINGTON MAGNA, DORSET**

The organ (Fig. 3) was built by John Hallett in 1867, reconstructed by both the Halletts in 1919 and subsequently rebuilt in 1968 by Osmonds of Taunton. Case with panel above manuals with a row of four fretted motifs (said to be angels), which are presumed to be an example of Hallett's organ case design. Information from Dr K. Mole, organist.

Two-manual tracker: pedal pneumatic		Pedal compass: 30 CC-f	
Manual compass: 56 CC-g"		Swell	
Great		Swell	
Bourdon	16	Open Diapason	8
Open Diapason	8	Gamba	8
Stop Diapason	8	Principal	4
Dulciana	8	Fifteenth	2
Keraulophon	8	Trumpet	8
Principal	4		
Flute	4	Pedal	



Figure 3: Organ in Kington Magna parish church, 1991

Swell octave coupler	Bourdon	16
Great to Pedal		
Swell to Pedal		

**PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHAPEL, KINGTON
MAGNA, DORSET**

Although the chapel the Hallett family attended was built in 1857, there is no record of the date of this simple organ where the manual slides in so that the hinged cover comes over it, and its origin must be in doubt. The pedal is worked by the player to provide wind, with a lead weight to show the amount of air in the bellows, the whole set in a wooden frame with inset panels of false, graduated pipes. The ivory keys are pinned on, with ebony semi-tones and a brass candlestick placed on each side of the frame. Information from David Grierson, owner and musician.

One-manual tracker
Manual compass: 54 BB-e"

Left side	Right side
8ft 8ft	8ft 4ft

**ST JOHN THE BAPTIST'S CHURCH,
BUCKHORN WESTON, DORSET**

John Hallett installed a new organ in 1875 at a cost of £100, the opening of which was recorded in the *Sherborne, Dorchester and Taunton Journal* as 'reflecting great credit on Mr Hallett'. There had previously been an organ, possibly a barrel organ, since 1846, with many entries for repairs and tuning although not by Hallett, but the new organ was obviously part of the church restoration and enlargement from 1871 (Dorset Record Office: PE/BCW; CW/1, 1767–1906). From repairs in 1990, it was said that the manual pedal coupling action was unusual, wooden flutes on the Great looked home-made and the roller

board in front was planed on one side but rough on the other, suggestive of local work (Derry Thompson, pers. comm.). Trefoil carvings on the frame above the manuals.

Two-manual tracker: pedal pneumatic			
Manual compass: 56 CC-g"		Pedal compass 30 CC-f	
Great		Swell	
Open Diapason	8	Open Diapason	8
Gamba	8	Gamba	8
Principal	4	Principal	4
Lieblich Flute	4	Oboe	4
Fifteenth	2		
(prepared for recent addition)			
		Pedal	
Swell to Great			
Great to Pedal		Bourdon	16

Two composition pedals

METHODIST CHAPEL, EAST STOUR, DORSET

After disposal to a breaker's yard in about 1984, this dilapidated organ came eventually into the hands of Roger Hill, a restorer in Parkstone, Dorset. The date of 25th July 1879 was found inside the bellows with the names H Read [a carpenter and joiner of Kington Magna] and J Hallett (*sic*), and was obviously the date of construction, while in a different place indistinctly written was 'Repaired 2nd March 1890'. Under the rear grooveboard of the soundboard was the pencilled signature 'Sept. 16th 1943, GJ Hallett' (Fig. 4). According to records, the chapel was rebuilt in 1883 at a cost of £297.0.0. (Dorset Record Office: NMS:C3/TS1/7). When Roger Hill, to whom I am indebted for all the technical information, began the restoration he stated that the organ had apparently twice been moved without first removing the pipes, so that the pipe feet had telescoped. All the metal pipe work was 'lean' metal and very thin, but was beautifully soldered and so had obviously been bought in. On the Stop Diapason the pipes were a random mixture of solid and pierced stoppers and some were missing. The base was thought to have previously come from another instrument or had been the bottom plinth of a tallboy or chest of drawers. The keyboard had been made from cutting down a pianoforte keyboard of lime wood, (visibly susceptible to woodworm), from 85 notes and giving a short bottom octave, which is an early survival. The lower front panel under the keyboard had been so designed that it could not be opened and the whole of the middle of the panel had subsequently been cut out to gain access to the bellows. The ivory keys were pinned on, the black notes were ebony. The stop jamps were not engraved but adjacent to each was an ivory name plate, after the early continental pattern. There was a round Mutac silent switch for a former electric blowing plant (probably a Discus blower), now missing. In fact the soundboard was so small it was surprising that the organ was viable. Although the manual compass is CC-F, the bottom note B is really G below C, with the next note C sounding like C, but although the following note looks like C# there

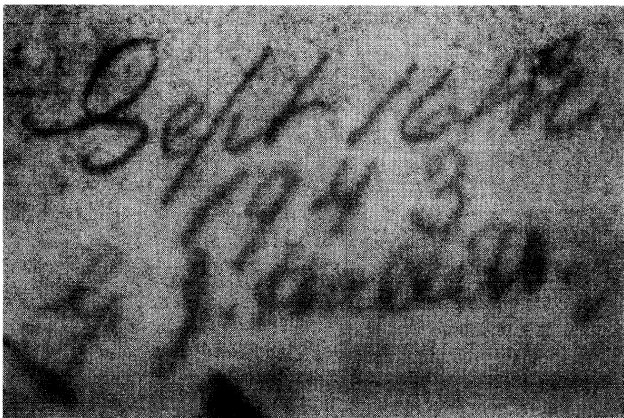


Figure 4: Signature of Gerald Hallett from East Stour Methodist Chapel organ in 1943 (Photograph taken and reproduced by kind permission of Roger Hill)

is no C# pipe. The restoration was not completed due to the cost of the extensive repairs required and the organ has been virtually scrapped.

One-manual tracker			
Manual compass: 54 CC-f"			
Right Hand Treble Jamb		Left Hand Bass Jamb	
Open Diapason	8*	Principal	4*
Dulciana	8*	Fifteenth	2
Stopped Diapason	8+	<i>Spare place</i>	
*Fiddle G up only			
+Bass permanently on		*Low G a stop pipe	

ALL SAINTS' CHURCH, IDMISTON, WILTSHIRE

(now redundant)

Built by Hallett in 1886 at a cost of £73 (Neil Skelton, pers. comm. Redundant Churches' Fund). It had been moved to the back of the north aisle in the 1980s. The notes were covered with bone or ivory both horizontally and vertically and panel-pinned in position at the base, just above the frame, diminutive pedalboard, unenclosed. Handle for bellows on left side.

One-manual electric blower			
Manual compass: 54 CC-f'		Pedal compass	(not ascertained)
Open Diapason			
Stop Diapason Bass		Pedal	
Stop Diapason Treble			
Dulciana		Bourdon	16
Flute			

ST MARY'S CHURCH, KILMINGTON, WILTSHIRE

The organ has recently been repaired with funding from the HLF. A pencilled signature on the pallet guard on the small Bourdon chest is of John Hallett 1888 and in one of the wood pipe stoppers with the name GJ Hallett 1938, Kington Magna. A new organ was recorded in the Bath and Wells *Diocesan Kalendar* for 1890. Sited now in the archway to the south transept, the case has Hallett fretted motifs. Substantial spotted metal display pipes and lead mouse on upper left above stops, which have china name discs with Gothic lettering. Hand-blowing mechanism preserved. Although the pedals of the radial, concave pedalboard are standard size, the strips of wood are remarkably small. Restored by Michael Farley, Organ Builder, Budleigh Salterton, Devon. Information from Valerie Donell, organist).

Two-manual and pedal: mechanical action throughout			
Manual Compass 56: CC-g "		Pedal Compass: 30 CC-f	
Great		Swell	
Open Diapason		Open diapason	
Stop Diapason Bass		Stop Diapason Bass	
Stop Diapason Treble		Lieblich Gedackt	
Dulciana		Gamba	
Principal		Principal	
Flute		Fifteenth	
Fifteenth		Oboe	

Swell to Great		
Great to Pedal		Pedal
Swell to Pedal		
Two composition pedals		Bourdon

ST NICHOLAS' CHURCH, HENSTRIDGE, SOMERSET

Church rebuilt in 1870, organ said to be by Bishop c. 1880, but thought to be attributable to Hallett from the fretted motifs on the case over the manuals. Vertical shutters on the Swell Box, a third manual was removed in 1948. Rebuilt by Osmonds of Taunton 1965 and Hele & Co of Plymouth, undated. Pine case, two centre panels two full length either side. The church is currently undergoing major repairs and it is hoped the organ will be restored in the future. Information from Peter Clarke, organist.

Two-manual: electric pump		Pedal Compass: 30 CC-f	
Manual Compass: 56 CC-g"		Swell	
Great		Violin Diapason	8
Open Diapason	8	Rohr Flute	8
Viola	8	Echo Gamba	8
Lieblich Gedackt	8	Gemshorn	4
Dulciana	8	Cornocean	8
Principal	4	Oboe	8
Wald Flute	4		

Swell to Great		Pedal	
Great to Pedal			
Swell to Pedal		Open Diapason	16
		Bourdon	16

Four composition pedals

UNITED REFORMED CHURCH, MILBORNE PORT (now English Organ School and Museum) previously CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, WINCANTON, SOMERSET

Organ built 1910 by Hallett but said to have been originally by Bevington about the turn of the century; the round tops and stoppers on the Bourdon pipes are characteristic of his work. Overhauled in 1938 by Hallett and sold c. 1959 when Congregational Church closed, to United Reformed Church, Milborne Port for c. £75, costing £300 to be moved and cleaned (information from the late Mr C. Bowden, Wincanton). Due to lack of space, the casework had to be mutilated and the largest front pipes were mitred to fit (Dr David Hunt, pers. comm.). Plain pipes in front with blue painted area surrounding flue. Sides have squared wooden pipes. Folding wooden cover and Tremulant. This church has since closed and is now the English Organ School where the organ remains. Additional information from Mr John Budgen, organ builder of Warminster.

Two-manual tracker: pedal pneumatic		Pedal Compass: 30 CC-f	
Manual Compass: 54 CC-f"		Swell	
Great		Open Diapason	
Violin diapason		Stop Diapason Bass	
Stop Diapason Bass		Claribel	
Lieblich Gedackt		Dulciana	
Salicional		Principal	
Gemshorn		Fifteenth	
Oboe			
Swell to Great		Pedal	
Great to pedal			
Swell to Pedal		Bourdon	16

ST MARY'S CHURCH, MOTCOMBE, DORSET

Faculty for new organ resulted in Hallett installing a new organ in chancel arch for £187 in 1907 (Wiltshire Record Office D1/61/43/24). Old instrument sold to Hallett for £20. Total cost of alterations were £220, subscribed by parishioners and recorded in the *Three Shires Advertiser* in 1905. In 1977 the organ was moved to the west end of the church and re-dedicated in 1980, rebuilt by George Stansfield. Tuning contract 1951, Hill, Norman, Beard Ltd of Lewes, Sussex (Dorset Record Office: PE/MOT/PCF4/1), now Roy Head of Taunton. Pitch pine frame and cover. Vertical wooden panel on right with four fretted motifs, plain boarding on left, wooden frieze above. Whole enclosed on east side by wooden panelling, blind arcading with trefoil decoration at head of each panel 3ft 6in high, set on plain wooden base. Pipes very elaborately painted green with decoration over holes at various stages to top. Swell box has 'Nag's Head' lever. Information from Miss Una Moore, organist.

Two-manual tracker: pedal pneumatic		Pedal Compass: 30 CC-f	
Manual Compass: 56 CC-g"		Swell	
Great		Open Diapason	8
Violin Diapason	8	Clarabella	8
Stop Diapason Bass	8	Principal	4
Keraulophon	8		

Flute	4	Harmonic Flute	4
Twelfth * B			
Oboe	8		
* there is no 2ft stop		Pedal	
Swell to Great		Bourdon	16
Great to Pedal			
Swell to Pedal			

Two composition pedals

ST MARY'S CHURCH, STALBRIDGE, DORSET

Organ rebuilt in 1906 by Hallett using material from old organ, maker unknown, and by Daniels 1935. Cleaned and restored in 1963, the gift of Miss L. Curtis. Recessed carved trefoil motifs over manuals. Pipes above in blue with elaborate gold decoration. Details recorded in *Musical Opinion* 1934 'Some Dorset Organs' with story about burning of original organ as protest at breaking up of old village band. Reference in *Dorset Organ Specification*, Pt II 1975 & Pt III 1976. Information from Mrs M. Chubb, organist.

Two-manual tracker: electric pump		Pedal Compass: 29 CC-e	
Manual Compass: 54 CC-f"		Swell	
Great		Fifteenth	2
Open Diapason	8	Harmonic Flute	4
Stop Diapason	8	Principal	4
Cornocean	8	Dulciana	8
Salicional	8	Stop Diapason	8
Vox Angelica	8	Double Diapason	16
		Open Diapason	8
Swell to Great			
Great to Pedal		Pedal	
Swell to Pedal			

Two composition pedals	Open Diapason	16
	Bourdon	16

ST PETER AND ST PAUL'S CHURCH, CHARLETON HORETHORNE, SOMERSET

Organ bought secondhand, erected by John Hallett, junior (*Musical Opinion* 1934), and for this reason it is an obvious hybrid and atypical of Hallett's work. Since moved from nave to centre of north aisle facing south. Stops horizontally above manual, short bass octave, with old pump handle still in position. Case round keyboard in plain pine/deal with plain panels either side to floor. No maker's name, in poor condition. Panelled, hinged door covering console. Elaborately decorated blue and gilt pipes with crossed bands and *fleur-de-lys* in gold within each diamond. Arched panel over manual with text 'sing ye praise with understanding' on descending scroll pattern with decorated border. May originally have been a barrel organ and is said to have a chamber-like quality, but no evidence of a pre-existing barrel behind the music stand. Has suffered from amateur restoration in the past (Peter Clarke, pers. comm.). Information also from Miss Rosemary Cowan, organist. Now tuned by Roy Hoad of Taunton.

One-manual tracker		Pedal Compass: G-g (13 notes)
Manual Compass: 58 GGG-f"		
Open diap[ason]	8	
Open diap[ason]	8	
Stop d[iapason] Bass	8	
Clarabella	8	
Dulciana	8	
Principal No 1	4	
Principal No 2	4	

BRICK HOUSE, KINGTON MAGNA, DORSET

Home-made organ in the family home with 3 stops: Open Diapason, Bell Gamba, Stopped Diapason (*Musical Opinion* 1934). Sold to Mr Stephen Herring of Dorchester following the sale of the house and contents c. 1950 for £25. Pedal board and electrically operated bellows since added but permission to view was refused.

Other organs possibly by Hallett

**HENSTRIDGE CONGREGATIONAL CHAPEL,
SOMERSET**

Recently dismantled and removed to Deane Organ Builders, Taunton, Somerset who were unable to name builder.

ST GREGORY'S CHURCH, MARNHULL, DORSET

Organ in mahogany case seen in loft over Hallett's workshop at Brick House and said to be original organ of Marnhull Church. Thought to be by Robson and might have been the chamber organ of Nash Court, Marnhull. Said to have gone to Yeovil, Somerset, but not traced. Reference in *Musical Opinion* 1934, states 9 stops, 3 composition pedals, two octaves of pedal pull-downs, dummy gilt pipes in front. Pipes since used on another organ.

PRISON CHAPEL, SHEPTON MALLETT

Chaplain had no knowledge of a previous organ.

**ST SIMON AND ST JUDE'S CHURCH, MILTON-
ON-STOUR, DORSET**

Said to be by Hallett but not identified in parish or diocesan records.

MERSTHAM, SURREY

Organ by Hallett said to have been in use because a member of the family had moved here. Not possible to trace.

Other churches and chapels in the list of tunings were visited but none of the organs was apparently by Hallett as far as could be ascertained.

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