Chester & North-East Wales Organists' & Choirmasters' Association

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Newsletter – October 2026: 'Autumn and Remembrance'

Dear Member,

As the weather is starting to turn, we hope you enjoy this autumn newsletter including Brian Moate's article on the origin of 'We plough the fields and scatter', a harvest classic in many denominations. Many of us will be preparing for Remembrance Sunday services approaching rapidly early next month, and so this month we remember the life and music of Jehan Alain, who died in World War 2. Finally, we hope you enjoy a quick look at the organ in Carlisle Cathedral which Ralph and I enjoyed visiting this summer – do please think about writing an article for us about any organs which you have enjoyed visiting - we are very grateful for submissions of articles on any topic.

A reminder that we would also appreciate shorter paragraphs on our upcoming themed issues where it would be great to have a selection of CNEWOCA members' contributions and expertise. We are particularly keen to see what our members at committing to learning in 2027 for our January newsletter. Please see Emily's details for submissions at the end of the newsletter.

Please do also submit upcoming concerts and recitals for inclusion (up to the end of February 2027) and any personal news that you would like included.

Submit by 1st of the month	**Theme**	**Ideas for a paragraph for the members' corner (but we'd love to receive anything, in theme or not!)**
November	Advent	Favourite advent preludes (and why)
December	Christmas	Favourite carol or descants or final verses (and why) Tips for surviving the intense festive season of playing/singing
January	New Year	What is your repertoire resolution for 2027?

Upcoming meetings

November: On Saturday 7th November at 2pm we will visit St Mary and St Helen Parish Church, High Street, Neston, CH64 9TZ, to play on their Forster and Andrews of Hull 1900 three manual pipe organ (NPOR A00056).



There is no parking at the church, but suggestions are here on the church website or the council website. There is free parking at Brook Street CH64 9XJ, or at 1 Chester Road CH64 9PA with disabled parking and electric vehicle charging.

December: No meeting

Previous meeting report: October

On 10th October we visited St. John the Baptist in Alford (NPOR K00425) and then the neighbouring church of St Mary the Virgin, Bruera (NPOR N04354).



St. John's was constructed from local red sandstone in 1866 although the sandstone lintel above the entrance from the porch was relocated from an earlier church close to the present site. The church was commissioned by Sir Richard Grosvenor, 2nd Marquis of Westminster. The organ dates from 1864 by Norman Hill of London and was the gift of Thomas Brassey (famous railway engineer and parishioner at St. John's). It has been sited in various positions in the church, moving to its present location in the Choir in 1902 to allow the Lady Chapel to be restored for use. You can read more about the history of St John's here.



Unfortunately, despite a recent service and a test in advance of our visit, the organ wasn't working so we were unable to play. A few members tested out the American Organ at St. John's (considerable exercise for the feet and ankles!), and we enjoyed some refreshments, before relocating to St. Mary's.



The present church at St. Mary's is mostly Norman although there is evidence of some original Saxon stonework used in the 12th century rebuilding. The church looks isolated geographically, but the parish is large stretching over several miles of countryside to nearby villages. Despite the sizeable parish, the church itself is rather small, with the nave measuring only 12m (40 feet) in length. Repeated renovations have resulted in the loss of many original features, but some original Norman carvings remain, possibly representing the Norse gods Woden, Thor and Freya on the arch linking the chapel to the nave! You can read more about the history of St. Mary's here.





The organ is a small two-manual instrument with pedal board and balanced swell, built by local builders H Moulding & Co of Huntington in 1869. It is fronted with 8 wooden pipes, with 6-4-6 diapasons tucked away on the west front facing the wall. There is no regular organist at St. Mary's but we had a good turn out of CNEWOCA members who played a variety of repertoire ranging from Stanley to Disney!

Organ news

100 years of BBC Choral Evensong
Since 7 October 1926, the BBC has been broadcasting live Evensong services from churches, chapels and cathedrals around the UK, showcasing our rich choral traditions. Tom Cameron contacted us to tell us about a recently launched website that archives all the recordings of BBC Choral Evensong to date, including full music lists, and where possible links to listen/watch the service. This is fully searchable by calendar, choir, music, composer and venue: https://www.choralevensong.org.uk/.

You can catch up on the 100th anniversary Evensong on 7th October which was broadcast live from Westminster on BBC Sounds or via the BBC website. The Evensong included music by Howells and Parry, whose repertoire has featured prominently over the last 100 years, together with an introit composed especially for the occasion by Kerensa Briggs.

Organ 100: Celebrating 100 Years of the Grand Organ, Liverpool Cathedral
Liverpool Cathedral is celebrating the centenary of its organ with a free exhibition, illustrated talk, new book and recital: more information on the website. Information on the recital is in the live music section of this newsletter.

Exhibition: Organ 100
Main exhibition 5-19 October (Memorial Chapel), reduced format 20-31 October (Choir Aisles)
Free admission
This special exhibition explores the rich history, craftsmanship and musical legacy of the Cathedral's iconic instrument, honouring the vision of the organ builders, the dedication of its organists, and the enduring role the Grand Organ has played in worship, concerts and the cultural life of Liverpool.

An Illustrated Talk to Celebrate 100 Years of the Grand Organ
15th October 1pm, £20
Explore Liverpool Cathedral's iconic organ with Ian Wells (Deputy Organist, Liverpool Cathedral) and Geoff Williams (Director of Music at St Anne's Stanley), featuring live demonstrations, performances and stories.

Book: The Grand Organ of Liverpool Cathedral – A History by Peter Lynan
Peter Lynan (former chorister and organ scholar at Liverpool Cathedral) explores the detailed history of the Cathedral's Grand Organ in a 267-page book with colour and historic greyscale images. Available in paperback, alongside a limited number of signed hardback editions. It can be purchased on the Church Organ World website.

Free to a good home: Technics SX-EX5L
Please contact Assumpta O'Brien for more information: assumpta.obrien@gmail.com

Two manual electronic digital organ with pulse code modulation sound engine



Origin of hymns: We plough the fields and scatter

Written by Brian Moate, CNEWOCA member

It is appropriate that at this time of year I should explore the harvest hymn 'We Plough the Fields and Scatter', which is well known to have German origins as '*Wir Pflügen und Wir Streuen'*. It seems most denominations of churches sing this at their harvest festival service.



The author was Matthias Claudius (1740-1815), son of a pastor at Reinfeld, south-east of Lübeck, (his name had been 'latinised' from the German). He studied theology at the University of Jena but later turned to law and languages and joined the staff of a Hamburg news agency in 1768. After a spell of illness, he returned to Christianity and started writing poems. When invited to visit by a friend in 1782 he was asked to bring one of his Christian poems and produced our subject hymn, supposedly based on Psalm 144 (though I can't see the connection), but it had 17 verses! It was later published as a peasant song and then began to appear in several German hymn books, most editors cutting down on the number of verses. It was the third verse which began '*Wir pflügen'*.



It wasn't until 1862 that in England Jane Montgomery Campbell (b1817) began translating several German hymns including '*Wir Pflügen'*. Jane was the daughter of a Curate in Paddington, (who was later Rector of Little Steeping in Lincolnshire). She did not translate all 17 verses. Rather she produced a compact English hymn that kept the main point – thanks to God for harvest and daily provision – and rejected the remainder. She was not trying to be a literal translator, rather producing something that could be sung easily in an English parish school and church. She taught the hymn to the children at the Church of England parish school in Paddington where her father had become Rector. She later moved to Bovey Tracey in Devon. It was first published in her friend Charles Bere's 'Garland of Songs' (1862). Bere was a Rector at Uplowman (er, not pronounced 'you plowman'!!) near Tiverton, Devon. In 1868 it appeared in the appendix to the first (1861) edition of 'Hymns Ancient and Modern. A revised version appears in the musical 'Godspell'. Another of her translations was 'Stille Nacht' (Silent Night). She died in a carriage accident in 1878.



Earlier, in 1800 a musician from Lüneberg, Johann Abraham Peter Schulz (1747-1800) set the poem to music soon before his death. He had been in Berlin, a student of Johann Kirnberger, himself a pupil of JS Bach. In 1768 he became a teacher and accompanist to a Polish princess, travelling across Europe with her for several years. He was conductor of a French theatre in Berlin (1776 to 1780), and then Kapellmeister to Prince Henry in Rheinsberg. His last position was as Court Kapellmeister in Copenhagen (1787), not returning to Berlin until 1795. He wrote operas, stage music, oratorios and cantatas, also folk songs and piano pieces (I did find the score of a piano sonata, but it seems to me to be of little merit, compared with those by his famous contemporaries Haydn and Mozart). Schultz died in Schwedt, north-east of Berlin in 1800.

In Memoriam: Jehan Alain (1911-1940)



Among the many lives sacrificed to war in the twentieth century, are composers and musicians whose death has deprived us all of their potential full impact on music. Despite being killed at the age of only 29 during the Battle of France in 1940, Jehan Alain, the French organist-composer, left a legacy permanently altering the organ repertoire.

Alain was born in 1911 in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in Paris, into an exceptionally musical family. His father, Albert Alain, was an organist, composer and amateur organ builder (including of the Alain family's four-manual house organ), who had studied with Alexandre Guilmant and Louis Vierne. Jehan's younger brother Olivier and youngest sister Marie-Claire, both had later careers as organists and (for Olivier) as a composer.

Jehan attended the Paris Conservatoire between 1927 and 1939, achieving 1st prize in Harmony (taught by André Bloch) and in Fugue. He also studied organ with Marcel Dupré (achieving 1st prize for Organ and Improvisation) and composition with Paul Dukas and Jean Roger-Ducasse (being awarded the *Prix des amis de l'orgue* for his Suite for Organ, op. 48: Introduction, Variations, Scherzo and Choral.

Alain's career as a composer was short, starting at the age of 18 and ending 10 years later in 1939 at the start of the Second World War, although he continued to carry manuscript paper in his military kit bag and work on sketches during rest times. His music was influenced by other French composers including the earlier Claude Debussy, and his contemporary Olivier Messiaen (seen in Le jardin suspendu). He also composed pieces inspired by his interest in music, dance and philosophies of the far east (Deux danses à Agni Yavishta and Deuxième fantaisie), in Baroque music (Variations sun un thème de Clément Janequin, here played by Marie-Claire Alain), and in jazz (Trois danses). Alain's bibliography also includes choral music (with a Requiem Mass and various songs), chamber music, and piano music, but it is his organ music for which he is most famous, with his most celebrated piece Litanies composed in 1937.

In September 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War, Alain was mobilised into the French Army, enlisting as a motorcycle dispatch rider with the 8th Cuirassiers. On 20th June 1940, during the defence of Samur in western France, Alain was dispatched on a solo reconnaissance mission. As he emerged from a wooded trail, he came suddenly face-to-face with an advancing squad of German infantry. Refusing to surrender, he positioned himself behind a low wall and held off the entire unit single-handedly with his carbine, killing several enemy soldiers, until he was fatally wounded. In recognition of his exceptional courage, the German troops buried him with full military honours. He was posthumously awarded the *Croix de Guerre*.

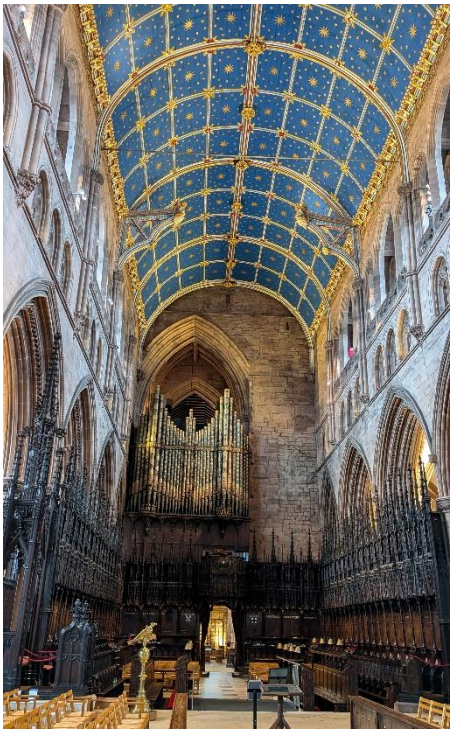
Sheet music for much of Alain's organ repertoire is available free from IMSLP. If you've not played any before, Arthur Wills in his Yehudi Menuhin Music Guide - Organ recommends his Choral Dorien for the 2nd term of learning for the beginner organist, as a fairly straight forward introduction to more modern pieces. It is a deeply emotional and slow-paced piece that would be ideal for communion.

« C'est dans la douleur que naît la force véritable. »
("It is in tribulation that genuine strength is born.")
Alain in a letter to his Godmother, March 1940

The organ at Carlisle Cathedral



En route to a summer holiday in Scotland, CNEWOCA members Ralph and Emily Burgess called in to Carlisle Cathedral and, although we didn't have the chance to hear the organ played, we did enjoy having a look around. The cathedral dates from 1122 and is the smallest ancient cathedral in England. The East Window, which still includes some medieval glass, is considered the highlight of the cathedral. However, the most photogenic feature is the starry ceiling of the choir dating from 1856 by British architect Owen Jones, which was heavily inspired by Islamic art.



The earliest reference to an organ at Carlisle dates from 1571 and is mentioned in 1634 by three military officers who were touring the northern counties of England:

'We repayr'd to the Cathedrall, where is nothing soe fayne and stately as those wee had seene, but more like a great wild country church. The organs and voices did well agree, the one being like a shrill bagpipe the other like the scotish tone.'

This "shrill bagpipe" organ was replaced with further organs in 1661 (NPOR R00512) following damage during the Civil War, 1684 (NPOR N03524) and 1806 (NPOR N03525). However, the current organ dates from 1856 (NPOR D03590) when Henry Willis was commissioned to build a new instrument, with the specification jointly prepared by resident organist Dr. Henry Ford and Liverpool's W.T. Best. This was only Willis' second cathedral organ (Winchester was built two years earlier) and came at a time of significant change in English organ building. Thumb pistons were installed on the Great and Swell from the start - this was probably only the third organ in the world to have them. It was also the first instrument in an English cathedral to be screened by a simple pipe display without formal casework and was blown by huge cylinder air-pumps driven by a gas engine. The 32-foot open metal pipes were added in 1875.



Subsequent rebuilds in 1907 by Harrison and Harrison (NPOR N03526) substantially enlarged the organ, adding a fourth manual. A further rebuild in 1962 by J.W Walker & Sons (NPOR N03527), tonally remodelled much of the pipework along classical lines and added a substantial amount of upperwork. Work from 1997 by David Wells (NPOR D03404) included restoration and minor tonal modifications attempting to regain some of the Father Willis/Harrison character. Fundraising is currently ongoing for further restoration.

You can read more about the history of the Carlisle organs here and hear it played by longstanding assistant organist Edward Taylor on his YouTube channel, including a lovely rendition of Vierne's Carillon de Westminster.

Upcoming live music for organ and choir

Chester Cathedral

Organ recitals: Thursdays 1.10pm, suggested donation: £5

15th October	Philip Rushforth (Chester)
22nd October	Friedhelm Flamme (Germany)
29th October	Graham Eccles (St Asaph)
5th November	Daniel Mathieson (Chester)
12th November	Alessandro Bianchi (Italy)
19th November	David Hirst (Mantes-la-Jolie, Paris)
26th November	Philip Rushworth (Chester)

Kelsborrow Choir

5th December, 7pm	As part of "Together in Song" celebrating the 20th anniversary of The Joshua Tree, Chester Cathedral
13th December, 3pm	Christmas Concert, Tarvin Community Centre
18th December, 7.30pm	Saughall Methodist Church

Wesley Church Centre, St. John Street, Chester, CH1 1DA

Saturday organ recitals, 12.45-1.35pm, retiring collection

17th October	Christopher Enston (St. Asaph Cathedral)
21st November, 10.30am-2.30pm	"Organ Day" Recitals Sequence
19th December	Christmas Music Concert (Claire, Jeremy and Brian Heald)
23rd January 2027	John Hosking (Blackburn)

Hoole Methodist Church, Hamilton Street, Chester

18th October, 3pm Popular and classic songs and organ solos, free admission
Gilly Godwin (soprano) and John Evans (organ)

Neston Parish Church, CH64 9TZ

Organ recitals 10.45-11.30am, Coffee and homemade cakes from 10am!
All with Daniel Wakefield (Neston Parish Church)

Sunday 18th October Annual organ recital: This has been postponed to 29th March 2027
Tuesday 29th December, 10.45-11.30am Coffee, Cakes and Classics for Christmas

Liverpool Cathedral

Saturday 17th October, 3pm	Festival Evensong and 100th Anniversary Recital, £15 Ian Tracey (Organist to the City of Liverpool)
Saturday 7th November, 6pm	2026 Centenary Organ Recitals, £15 Isabelle Demers (Quebec, Canada)

Liverpool Philharmonic Hall

Tuesday 22nd December, 1pm	A Christmas Organ Treat: £18 Ian Tracey (Organist to the City of Liverpool)

St. George's Hall, Liverpool

Organ recitals with Ian Tracey (Organist to the City of Liverpool), £10, 12.45-1.30pm
Tuesday 13th October
Tuesday 17th November
Tuesday 8th December

Birkenhead Choral Society
St Saviour's Church, Birkenhead, CH43 2JZ
14th November, 7.30pm Verdi – Requiem (with soloists and Liverpool Concert Orchestra): £15
19th December, 2.30pm Carols with BSC Brass Quintet: £15

Tony Warren's workshop for musicians and singers
14th November Buckley
For more information, please contact Tony at ndtl3@yahoo.co.uk.

St Asaph Cathedral
The website has not been updated with organ recitals since 2025, but we do check every month.

Bangor Cathedral
The website has not been updated with organ recitals since August, but we do check every month.

Ucheldre Centre, Holyhead, Anglesey
10th October, 7.30pm Classical organ concert, Matt Walters. £12, £10 concessions

Neuadd Pendre, Tywyn
25th October, 7.30pm Wurlitzer Concert, Matthew Bason
7th November, 7.30pm Wurlitzer Concert and Silent Film, Aaron Hawthorne

Your 2026-2027 Committee

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