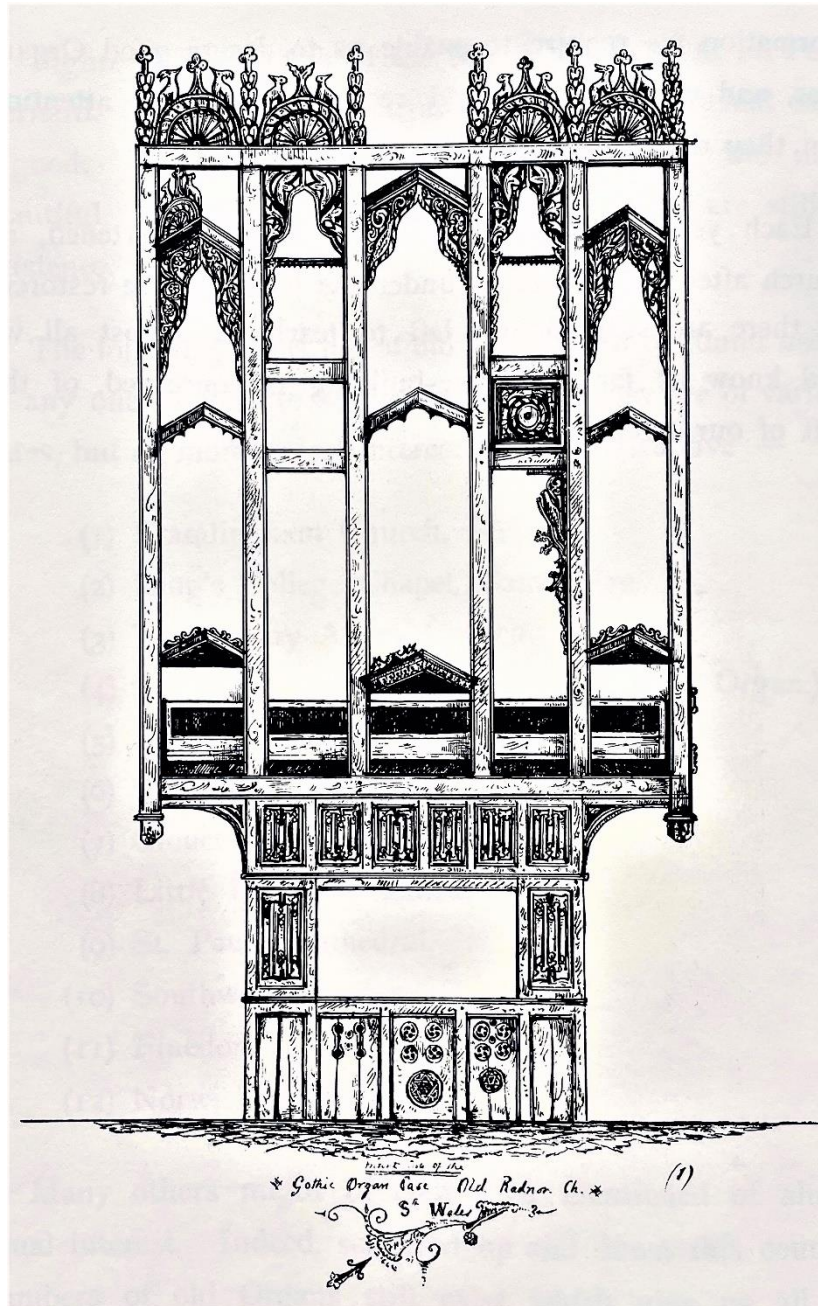


# MARTIN GOETZE and DOMINIC GWYNN Ltd



## REPORT ON THE EARLY 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ORGAN CASE AT ST STEPHEN'S CHURCH OLD RADNOR POWYS WALES

compiled by Dominic Gwynn from various sources

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# NOTES ON THE EARLY 16<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY ORGAN CASE AT ST STEPHEN'S CHURCH OLD RADNOR POWYS WALES

## SOURCES

- 1 F.H.Sutton, *Some account of the Mediaeval Organ Case still existing at Old Radnor, South Wales*, (London 1866), with comments on Gothic cases and drawings as an appendix. Drawings 1 and 2 (front and treble side elevations) are crucial evidence for the organ found by Sutton.
- 2 F.H.Sutton, *Church Organs: Their Position and Construction* (London 1872 and 1883) enlarges the appendix and turns it into the main text, with the (edited) Old Radnor material from 1 as an appendix.
- 3 C.H.Davidson, introduction to facsimile edition of 1883 edition of *Church Organs: Their Position and Construction* (Oxford 1998)
- 4 Susi Jeans, *Old Radnor* (The Organ no227 1991), and papers relating to her research now at Reading University.
- 5 Richard Morton, *Old Radnor* (Reading University MMus thesis 1998), and article in BIOS Journal 24 p108 (2000)
- 6 personal examination (including 10.11.99)
- 7 examination by Victor and Jan Chinnery, and Timothy Easton (10.11.99)
- 8 Sally Harper *Music in Welsh Culture Before 1650* pp289-90 (Aldershot: Ashgate 2007)
- 9 R.W.D.Fenn and J.B.Sinclair *Old Radnor Parish Church* The Radnorshire Society Transactions vol58 pp78-91 (1988)

The organ has appeared in numerous articles and publications, mostly repeating rather than contributing evidence, though with a unique object like this, with very little archival evidence, its history is going to consist mainly of expert opinion on the available archaeological and archival evidence, and is bound to evolve.

The most judicious summary of the observations of the organ case is contained in Stephen Bicknell's 1996 *The History of the English Organ* (he also contributed an essay online <https://www.stephenbicknell.org/3.6.12.php>). There is a 1988 article about the history of the church by R.W.D.Fenn and J.B.Sinclair which covers some of the available source material, and contributes the important context. They make the point that St Stephen's is not some isolated community, but was in the Middle Ages a large collegiate church, patronised by the powerful Marcher lordship family, the Mortimers, and then the Crown. The seat of government for Wales in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century was in Ludlow Castle. St Stephen's feels like an English church, despite being on the Welsh side of the border.

Susi Jeans (4) carried out a thorough research project in the course of trying to prove that the organ case did not exist before Dryden saw it. She included in her research the early county histories, and the Sutton-Lewis-Rattee & Kett-Walker connection (also in Hilary Davidson's essay in 3), including an illustration of a photocopy of a coloured measured drawing, dated September 1872, which she claimed should have been in the British Library (catalogue no. 7896 h.10, which now makes no sense). Her caption claims that it was Dryden's drawing of the existing casework, but it looks more like an instruction to the casework restorers, Rattee & Kett. The case is not now coloured, so re-discovery of the drawing would be interesting.

Susi Jeans's main piece of evidence for her argument was a print of the rood screen looking east by Henry le Keux, from a drawing by the Rev. John Parker, dated 1835, in which the arch now containing the organ has a screen like the other chancel arches. But the organ appears in the book on Radnorshire written by the local antiquary the Rev. Jonathan Williams and published posthumously. Williams's prospectus is dated 1818, and the book was first published in 1859. Susi

Jeans saw a ms. copy made by the Rev. W.J.Rees in 1832 in Cardiff Public Library, where the reference was slightly different from the published version: “*There also stands on the north side of the chancel a ruinated old case of an organ despoiled of its pipes and an appropriate emblem of mortality. The old bellows lies in the Chantry behind*”.

There may be more archival evidence available, in unexpected places. Sally Harper (8, p356) found a payment to “*one John Sylvester, organist of Old Radnor*” in the accounts of St David’s Cathedral in 1620/1 (the earliest reference to an organ at Old Radnor).

Susi Jeans and Hilary Davidson have explored the Dryden and Sutton archives. The Rev. F.H.Sutton (in 1, p10) thanked Sir Henry Dryden of Canons Ashby “*for kindly giving him the first accurate information he could obtain respecting the Old Radnor Organ*”, which suggests that Sutton already knew it was there, not surprisingly as more publications were mentioning it, like [Topographical Dictionary of Wales](#) (London: Samuel Lewis 1849). Susi Jeans saw Sutton’s original drawing of the case in its ‘present state’, though Hilary Davidson gathered advice to show that it was by a different hand than Sutton’s, i.e. Sir Henry Dryden’s, or so he thought.

There is no doubt that the case is a basically unaltered structure. It would be clear if it were made up of pieces from other sources (as Susi Jeans thought it was). There are alterations made in 1871 to accommodate the new organ, but the case was evidently all made at the same time. The adzed and sawn backs of the panels and framework indicate a 16<sup>th</sup>/early 17<sup>th</sup> century structure (7). Victor Chinnery thought that the high-quality and extravagant linenfold panelling was made elsewhere, probably Flemish, and incorporated into an English structure, itself of high quality, perhaps for the Court culture (Ludlow Castle). The framework to the panels have a mixture of joiners’ mitres, masons’ mitres (the moulding continuing through from the rail into the post) and stop mouldings (the mouldings always part of the structural member of course). Timothy Easton has pointed out that the use of linenfold panelling was rare in church. Its appearance horizontally has been considered a solecism, but a side panel at impost level has a horizontal linenfold panel, which was copied in 1871. The panels and rails at the bottom of the pipe front, below the towers and flats, are all 1871 - the mortises for the rails may have been found in the posts, but flat panels on which brackets were fixed seem more likely.

There is nothing about it which is not consistent with an early 16<sup>th</sup> century organ, Susi Jeans and Richard Morton followed some earlier opinions in doubting the early 16<sup>th</sup> century style of the original, particularly the cresting along the top. According to Susi Jeans, “*the cresting of the case... according to expert opinion, is not earlier than 1630.*” The rabbit-like creatures in the cresting, the wyverns in the lower shades and the foliage in the shades have a mediaeval feel to them. I have not seen carving with so little carved surface detail elsewhere, but the shapes are quite common in the mediaeval carving of the Southern Marches; see Richard Wheeler *The medieval church screens of the southern Marches* (Logaston Press 2006). They have not been taken from a Renaissance pattern book, unlike the ‘sun-burst’ fan-shaped cresting between posts, which is a common early 16<sup>th</sup> century motif (in outline, if not in detail). The earliest English example that I have found is on the pavilion of the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520) and early terracotta tombs in e.g. Layer Marney Essex (1523). In furniture the earliest example that I have found is on Henry VIII’s writing desk, dating from before 1527. Also in Renaissance mannerist style is the carving of the wreaths and the grotesque heads in the spandrels of the panels between the two flats, though none of this carving is exactly expert.

There is no reason to doubt the drawing of the “*present state*” of the organ, published in 1866 (1). There may be one or two pieces of wishful thinking in the reconstruction drawings; the position of the stop action lever pivot in figure 1, is converted into five pivots on the bottom rail of the upper case side in figure 2, perhaps interpreting evidence in the soundboard.

There may be a few later additions and alterations, though fairly superficial. The carved apertures in the lower case are relatively crude and are later and local, according to Victor Chinnery. They certainly have nothing to do with a second manual. The carved ends to the corner posts may also be later.

There is more to be learnt from the case itself. There are disappointingly few indications of fixings for the organ mechanism on the inside, though a few more may be visible when the organ is next dismantled. There are questions about the case which might be answered by the experienced eye:

- can the style of the woodwork and ornaments be connected to any specific area of contemporary woodwork, like the rood screen which is similar to the screen in Cirencester church, and may have been made by a workshop in Gloucester?
- is the organ in its original place against the arcade? It is too tall to be on a loft. Much of the original evidence for placement has been covered or altered. The organ was moved when dismantled and stripped in 1870, the chancel floor level raised, the monumental slabs and mediaeval tiles moved around, etc.
- can the two styles of linen-fold be dated?
- are the projecting tower toeboards, cresting, caps and shades an afterthought?
- how were the voids below the pipes originally filled and were they removable for access to the pallets?
- are the carved animals heraldically significant?
- what are the signs of original roof and back?
- small puzzles: e.g. the front treble corner post in the lower case has stop mouldings when the others carry through

## **SURVIVING PARTS**

### **POSITION**

According to Susi Jeans, the earliest record of the organ in its present position is the 1818 History of Radnorshire by Jonathan Williams, in an ms. copy, copied “by the Rev. W.J.Rees, M.A., Rector of Cascob. 1832.....: *There also stands on the north side of the chancel a ruined old case of an organ despoiled of its pipes and an appropriate emblem of mortality. The old bellows lies in the Chantry behind.*” (4. p120)

A sheet of rough notes taken by Sir Henry Dryden about the church survives in the Northamptonshire Record Office (paper watermark <1861> so post-1861). It includes a very rough sketch of the “*Curious organ case/ temp Hen VIII or Eliz.*”, a plan of the church with the organ in its present position, and the note quoted below. If this is its original position, it has merely been raised 200mm (8”), when the floor of the chancel was raised. The floor level of the aisle seems to be original, though it is paved with 18<sup>th</sup> century tiles. There may not have been enough room for the folding shutters at the back, as Sutton describes, to have opened. But the rear finials in the cresting are flat on the back to butt against the wall.

### **CASEWORK**

Below Sir Henry Dryden's rough sketch of the church is a note “*See thin folio on organ case/ by Rev. F. Sutton/ + large drawings by me in/ portfolio ½ Imp + box.*” (4. p121) Perhaps these included the “*present state*” drawing in Sutton’s book, and the measured drawing once in the British Library, copied from the copy on pages 125-6 of Susi Jeans's article.

There has been some re-working of the lower case, including providing a bottom rail (the “*present state*” drawing has no bottom rail, as if the uprights were tenoned into the mediaeval flooring). The organ has been raised by the 82mm of this rail more than the rise of 200mm of the chancel floor in 1871. Some of the uprights have also had new wood included.

In the centre of the square panel between the two flats on the treble side, there is a 10mm hole, visible from behind, but covered by a 1871 carved rose in front. This must have been for a revolving sun or star. Within the wreath is an unornamented area, which suggests a similar mounted ornament.

The Chinnerys drew attention to the discrepancy between the sophisticated ornament of the case and the popular nature of the random pierced decoration in the panels under the keys. They thought that the linenfold panels could have been bought ready-carved from the Netherlands and incorporated in the case.

According to Sutton (1 p8) at the back of the case he found “*large folding shutters, which open, so as to allow the pipes to be tuned, and any needful repairs to be done, without unscrewing, or taking any part of the case to pieces.*” On the back corner post on the treble side, a mortise for a cross rail is visible. Presumably the shutters were below that.

The cresting, and the V-shaped towers, could all have been added to the framework as an afterthought (i.e. they are not part of the structure, but are added to it). It may indicate a stage in the development of the flat-fronted, rectangular case to the more varied outline and projecting towers of later cases. The most awkward element in the case for an organ builder is the lack of apparent support to the tower toeboards; usually there would be a bracket underneath.

The Chinnerys noted the re-carving of the bottom end of the corner posts with acanthus buds, and of the toeboard of the centre tower (but not the side towers) with rudimentary leaf, both in the style of the later 17<sup>th</sup> century.

## PIPES

In a postscript to a letter to Lady Lewis, dated 6.3.1871, Sutton writes that “*Mr Moggridge [the Vicar] said that there was a tradition of some of the old pipes being in some of the cottages. if such could be found it would teach us a great deal and be very useful.*” (3. p16)

A single toeboard in the case survives (unless there are toeholes beneath the 1871 tower toeboards), for the upper flat on the treble side. This toeboard has 13 large holes for conveyances underneath, and toeholes on top. There are now 45 pipes at impost level: 7 – 13 – 5 – 13 – 7. The likelihood is that the original front also had 45 pipes, with an extra 26 on the upper level (perhaps for a second Principal 5ft). These could have been for a second Principal. 45 pipes would produce a compass of C to a<sup>2</sup>, without C# or g#<sup>2</sup>.

In 1871, 8ft G (A430Hz) became the longest pipe in the front, so 5' C (equivalent to 8ft F at about A475Hz, i.e. at the higher 'organ' pitch) is not unlikely for the lowest pipe of the original organ. Inside the case there is sufficient height above the wind chest inside the organ for a stopped 10' rank, or basses. The present 8ft G is 342mm plate width. In the Wetheringsett organ (a smaller organ) the 5ft C is 305mm plate width, about 3 pipes smaller.

According to Sutton there were five stops, though there may have been more. Traces of the openings for three stops survive though, spaced to suggest about five or six stops. Five would suggest two Principals, two Octaves and a Fifteenth. From the stops available for the player of the

Wetheringsett organ, it would seem likely that there were more pipes, perhaps not all available as stops. In an organ of the size of Old Radnor one would expect basses from the 1510s onwards, and one would expect two Fifteenths and perhaps a two-and-twentieth.

## BELLOWS

Sutton wrote that there were “*also remnants of the bellows in existence.*” (1. p9) The casework extension behind the organ survives on the bass side. (6) The bellows could have been laid side by side, projecting into the lower case. The extension was 173cm wide, about 90cm deep plus 82cm for the lower case depth, 110cm high (limiting the opening of the top leaf). So the area of the top leaf could have been about 150cm long and 75cm wide (or 5ft by 2ft 6ins), which looks usual.

Sutton shows (drawing no2) a slot for a bellows handle. In this panel, there is a 1871 piece on the front edge, and the moulding from the middle upright is missing. These things may be connected.

## WINDCHEST

Sutton wrote that “*part of the wind chest remains*”. He shows what must have been that part in the “*Present State of the Gothic Organ Case Old Radnor Ch. Sth Wales*” (1. p11). It is not impossible that this is Dryden’s reconstruction, since the bar frame looks like a hollow, though the top surface is level with the slot for the sliders on the treble side of the case.

## KEYS AND ACTION

Nothing survives, except for the height of the middle rail of the lower case (896mm), which may give the height of the keys (to be played standing?), and the width of the opening (902mm). This width accommodates a C – f<sup>3</sup> keyboard and two narrow jambs. The original C – a<sup>2</sup> keyboard (27 naturals) would have been about 621mm wide, with two 25mm cheeks making it 671mm wide.

## STOP ACTION

Sutton describes the stop mechanism (1. p6) and shows it in his drawings. “*The Stops... appear at the East end of the Organ, and seem (figure 2, B.) to have been worked entirely by the blower, by means of iron levers about 18 inches long.*” It “*contained Five Stops.*”

In the elevation of fig 1 (1. p12) he shows two fixings for the stop action, and in a finished drawing for the ‘restored state’ in the 1883 edition, he shows the levers hinged at the lower of the two fixings, and attached to the sliders at the upper fixing, which may be a guide for the slider. This is a likely arrangement, but a 1871 piece of wood now covers the slot for the sliders, and there is no trace of nail-holes for the lower fixings. The lower fixings would have been where the only original piece of horizontal linen-fold is now. The only sign is a couple of nail-holes in the back corner post at the correct level. The equivalent place on the front corner post has been replaced with new wood. Perhaps the pivot points for the slider levers spanned the linen-fold panel.

The slot at the treble end for the stop action is visible from the inside. There may have been five holes originally, but there is now a single horizontal slot. It is not clear now that there were five stops, but the three holes (for stop action) at the back have left traces above and below the slot. They are quite widely spaced.





The horizontal linenfold panels beneath the pipes copies the panel at the same level on the treble side. It looks a bit odd, partly because there are no brackets supporting the tower toeboards, which would be usual at this date. The rails dividing the two panels are also a bit odd.



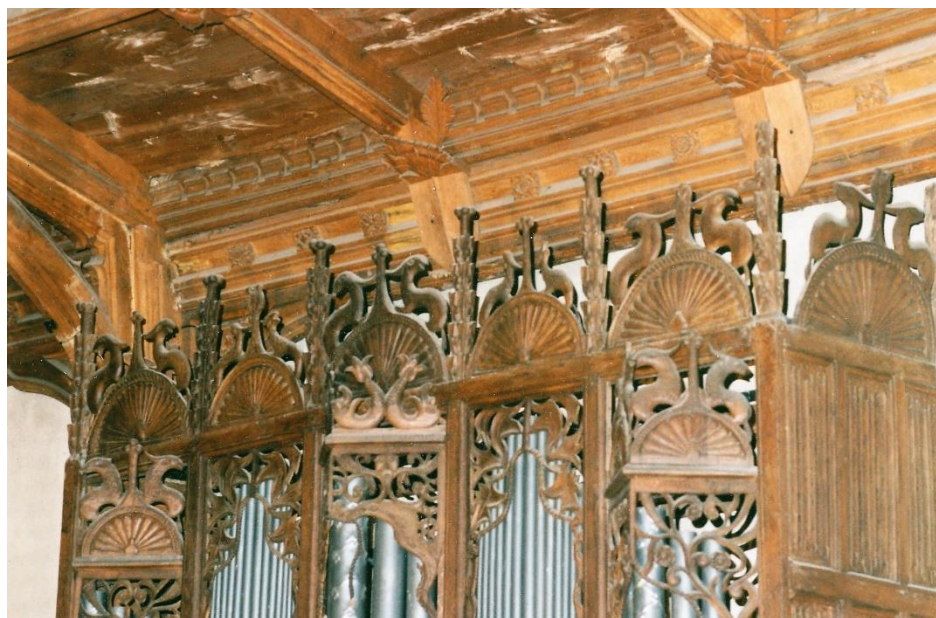
View of the bass side, with two of the original three panels housing the bellows behind the lower case. The other woodwork above and behind the bellows housing and behind the old case is all 1871, including the pumping handle.



View of the front corner treble side, showing the original horizontal panel, the 1871 board above it hiding the hole for the original sliders (visible on the inside, right), and showing the way the pattern has been duplicated in front in 1871. If the pivots for the stop levers were in the position shown in Dryden's and Sutton's drawings, this panel must have been plain and not decorated. The picture on the right shows notches for the sliders, where they projected through the case for the stop action levers.







Some of the cresting decoration was made in 1871, but all of the newer work copies an existing motif in a similar position. To me, the original design looks quite sophisticated, but the execution is rude, though accomplished in its own way. The form of the case is clear, a framed box based on posts and rails without mouldings, like cupboards of the period (see e.g. a similar construction of the same date in Carlisle Cathedral.)

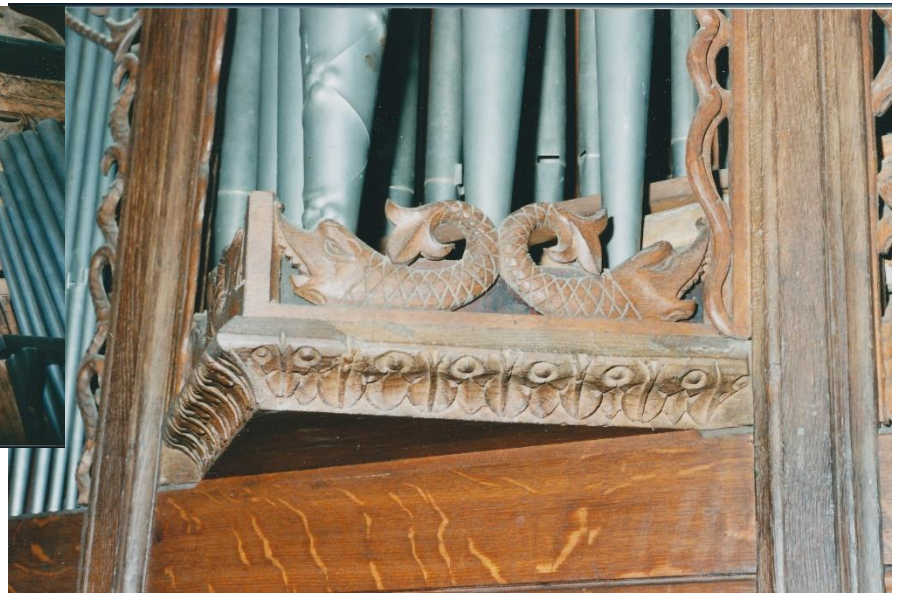
Above right: The Victorian pipes stand on a toeboard from the same period. It is likely that the original pipes would have stood further back, and that the tops would have been framed by the shades, i.e. not behind them, as now.



Left: the treble side panel between the upper and lower flats – the original panel in Dryden's 'present state' drawing. The rose is an 1871 addition to cover the hole for the axle of the revolving star or sun, which would have filled the flat area within the wreath. The profiles in the four spandrels look more like Renaissance grotesques than mediaeval, but perhaps executed by a hand unfamiliar with them.

Above: the inside of the panel, with the toeboard for the upper flat, with surprisingly large holes for conveyances. These pipes were probably for the second Principal, the same scale as the first Principal below.





Top left: the middle tower cap from the inside, and left: the treble tower cap from the inside, showing how they could be fixed as an afterthought, set within the framework rather than forming an integral element of it. They are fixed with wooden nails, and do not provide much support.

Above: the toeboard, or rather the baseboard to the toeboard of the middle tower was reinforced in 1871. In later 16<sup>th</sup> century organs, there would have been scrolls acting as brackets under these baseboards. The other surviving English 16<sup>th</sup> century organs had the front pipes standing along the front edge of the soundboard, which would have been possible for the flats, but would have needed extensions to the upperboard for the towers. The Chinnerys thought the carved decoration along the edge was C17, or perhaps 1871.

Below: showing the difference in the two designs of linenfold, though note the extracted roll from the two middle folds (2 and 4 as it were), which suggests the same workshop. The pictures also show the use of the panel mouldings and the construction of the jointed structure. The middle rail (right) is 1871, but using the original mortise.







Left: the bass side of the 1871 console, showing the middle rail of the lower case, sawn through, the end grain visible above the key cheek. Presumably the original keyboard rested on this rail. A filled groove for a panel is visible above this rail, in the upright but not the rail, suggesting that the original keys projected from the case, though there is a chamfer in the rail, which makes assumption dangerous. Below left: difficult to see, but at the height of the 1871 grey-painted pipe stay there is a mortise for a rail supporting a back panel

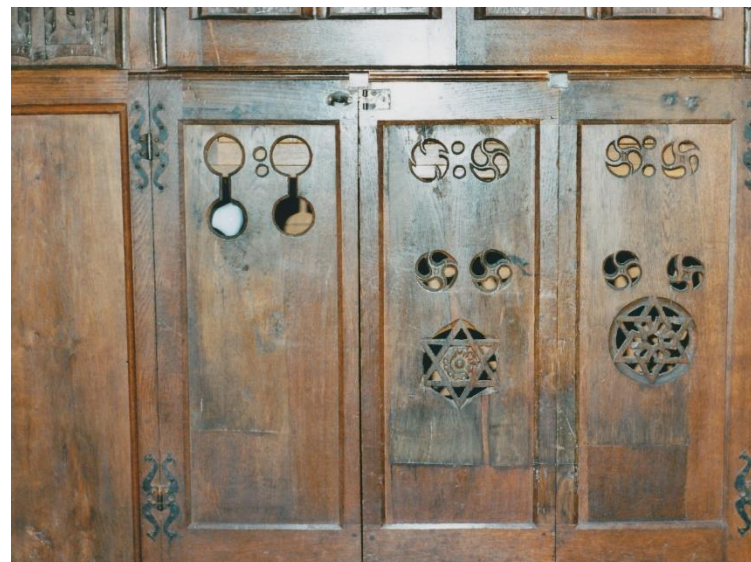


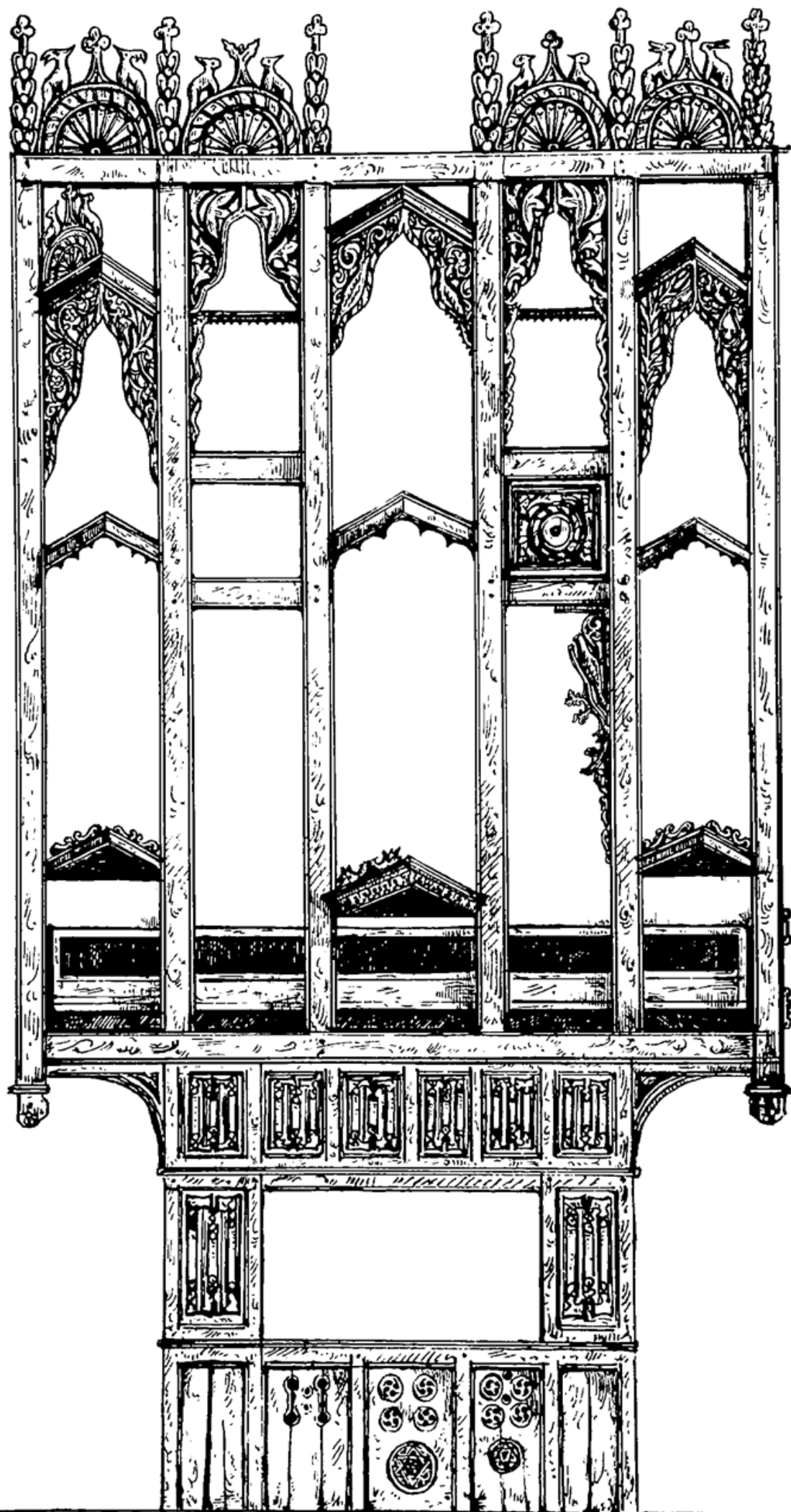
Above right: behind the lower case, bass side, showing the extension for the bellows casework,

Left: showing the view to the same area with solid back to the lower case. Note that the whole case, with the bellows extension, is made of oak, of good quality. It would be interesting to know whether the back and bellows case were painted, but the Rattee & Kett caustic soda tank did its job too efficiently.

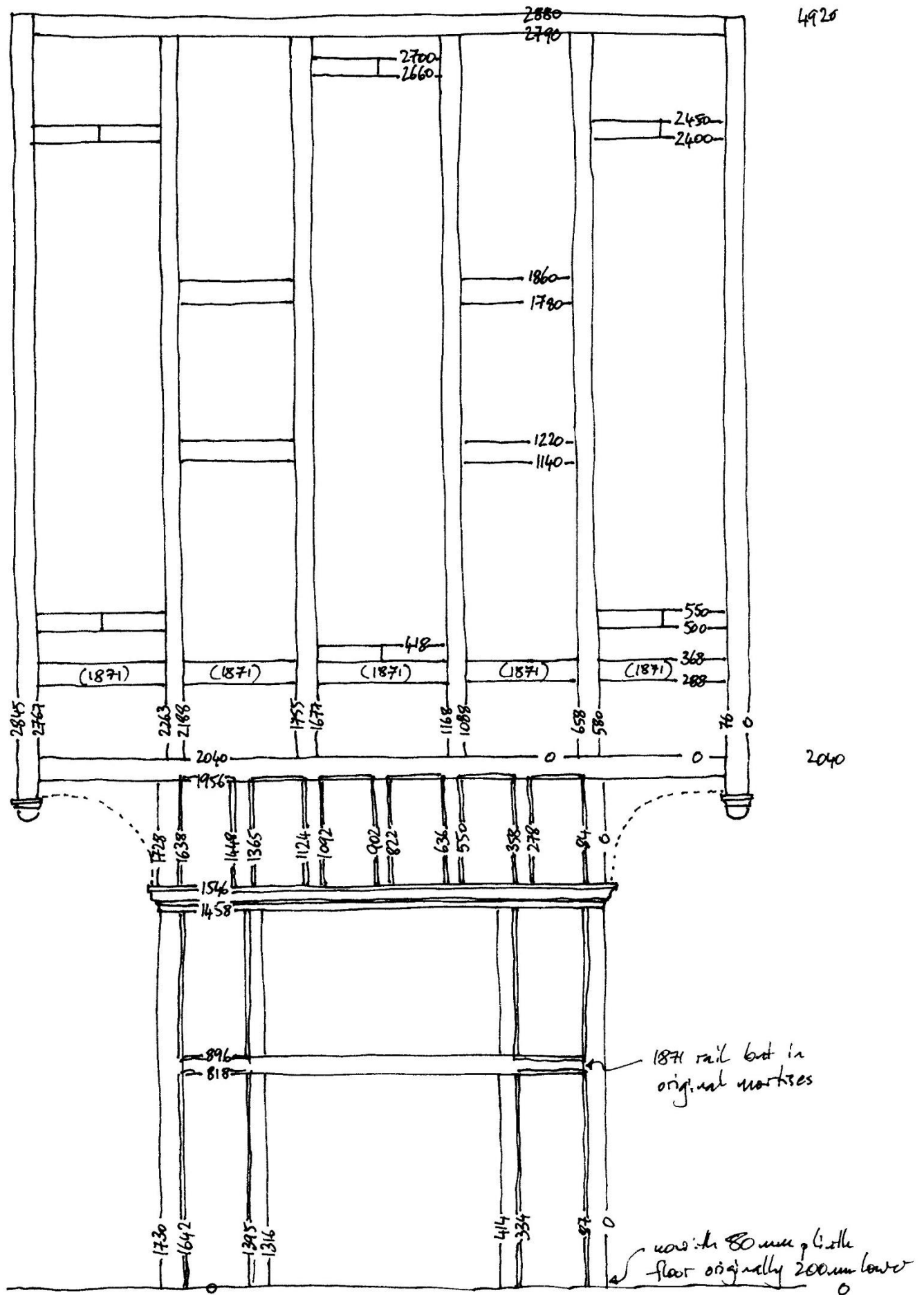
Right: a view of the lower case below the keys now re-fashioned as doors, with 1871 bottom rails to close over the pedal couplers and above the pedalboard. The pierced motifs are puzzling. They are nothing to do with a second manual, as the Victorians thought, let alone a two stop Choir organ. The patterns may mean something.

Dominic Gwynn  
revised 22.2.23









OLD RADNOR front framework scale 1:20 DG 24.2.2023

OLD RADNOR

Side framework

Scale 1:20

DG 24.2.23

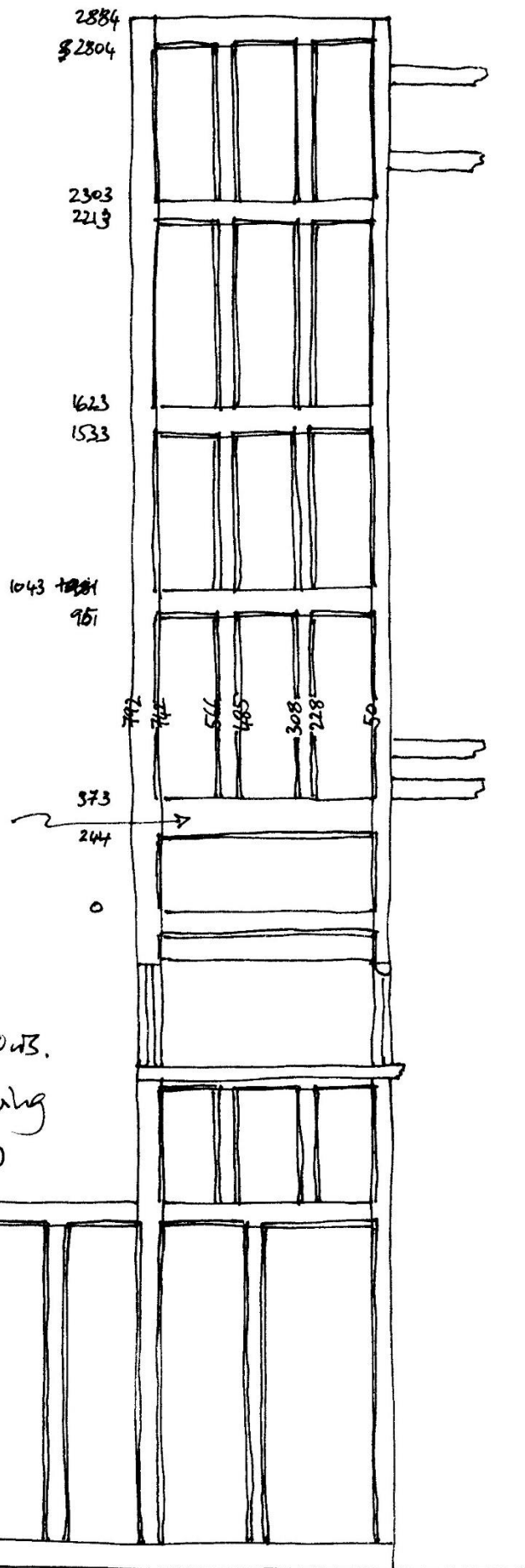
The framework mouldings round the panels have a mixture of mitred joints, using a conventional 'joiners' method, masons mitres, in a more usual medieval method, and stop mouldings, all integral to the posts and rails. The only applied moulding is above the keys.

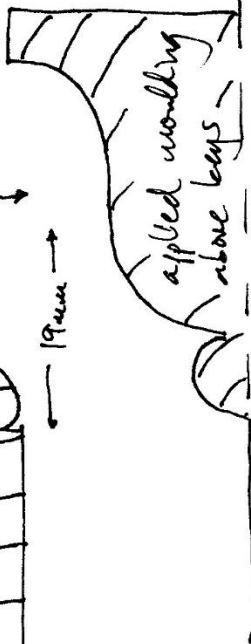
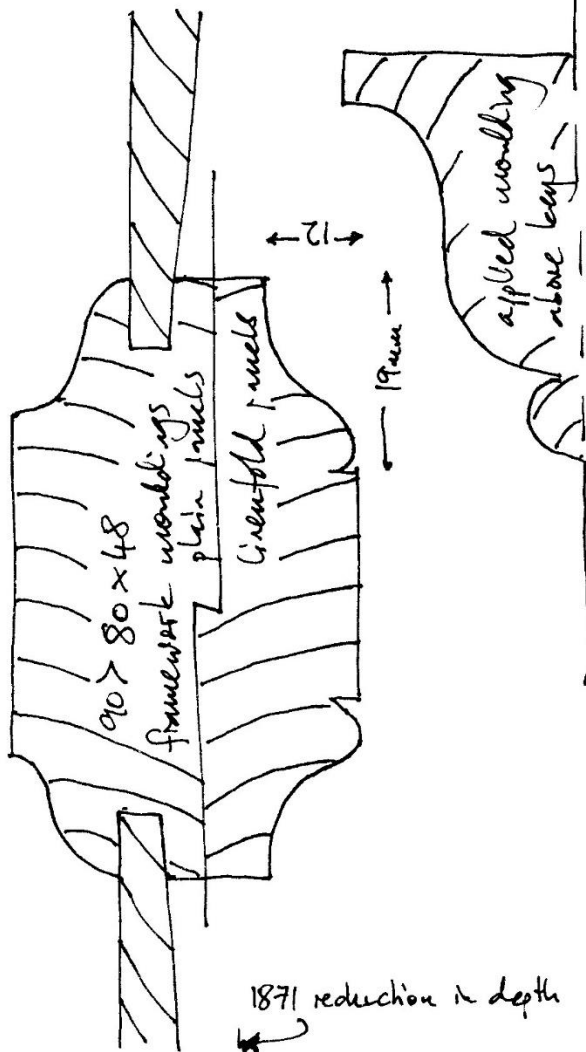
On the table side there is a slot, now covered with a 1871 panel, for the original sliders to project from the case

The bellows case was reduced in depth to accommodate the 1871 bellows.

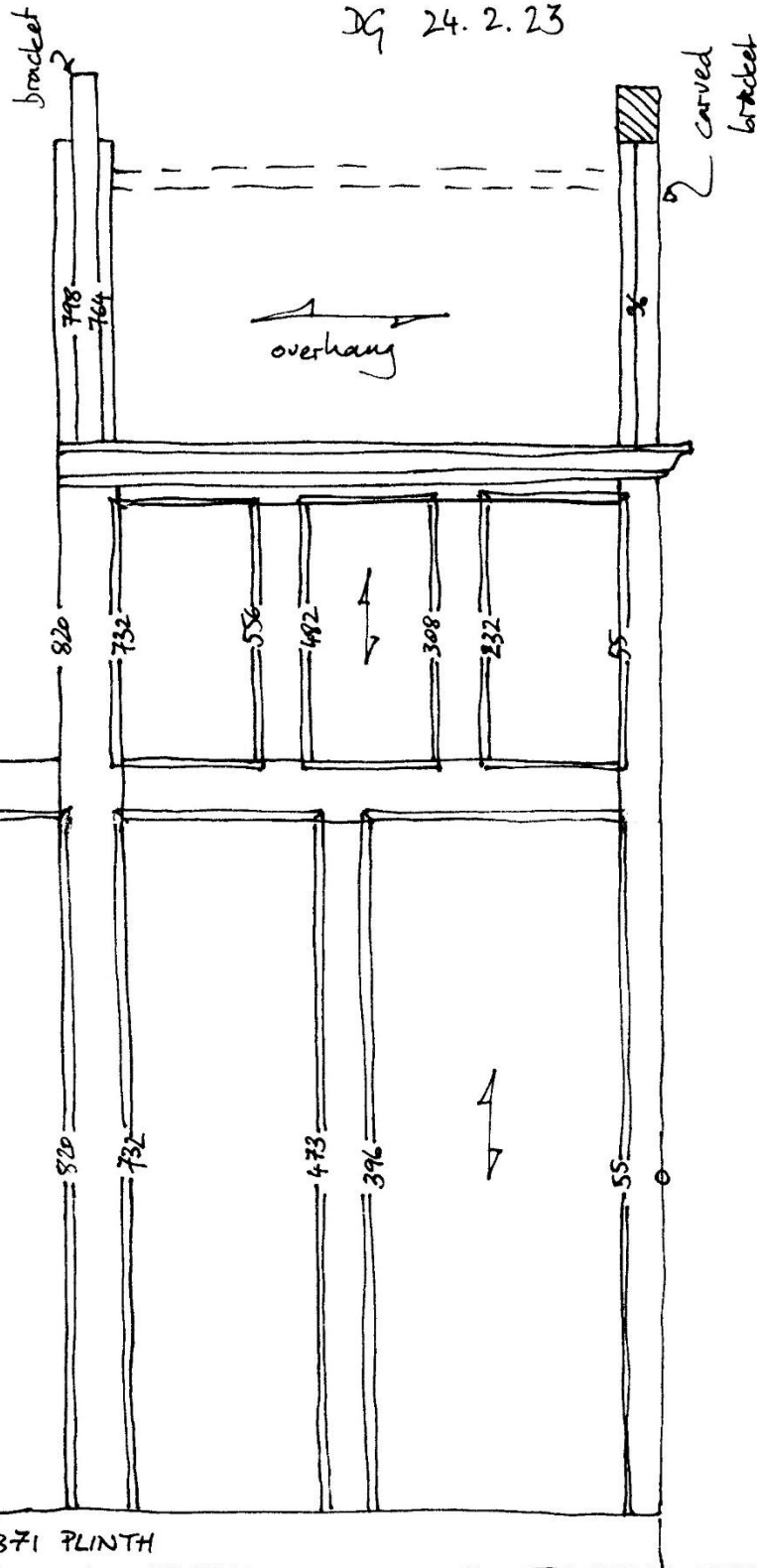
The conjectural extension in the drawing echoes the reconstruction in the 1866 publication 'Some account...'

The plinth is 1871, about 80mm tall. There may originally have been a 'jaisted' frame into which the posts were tenoned





OLD RADNOR  
side panel tower case  
scale 1:10  
and rail mouldings  
DG 24.2.23





The Old Radnor, Wetheringsett and Wingfield organs, to scale.

