



The Dallams in Brittany

Michel COCHERIL

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A significant aspect of Anglo-Breton relationships in the past centuries is illustrated by the history of a family of organ builders, the Dallams. Thomas Dallam (the Elder) was born c. 1575 in a Roman Catholic family in Lancashire and went to Turkey in 1599-1600 where an organ by him was presented to the Sultan on behalf of Queen Elizabeth I [2]. His most famous work in England is the organ of King's College, Cambridge, of which the beautiful case survives. He must have had several children but we only know of his son Robert [3], born in 1602 according to an inscription found on his tombstone in the cloister of New College, Oxford, where he died in 1665. Robert became a famous organ-builder in England until the Puritan Revolution and left his country for Brittany when he could no longer work in England – both on account of his religion and the fact that organs were banned from churches by the Puritan authorities. It was not unusual for an Englishman to take shelter in Brittany and sail straight to Morlaix. Morlaix was the biggest harbour on the north west coast of Brittany – just opposite Plymouth – and we find other examples of English Catholics fleeing England for Brittany or Spain at that time.

The last organ made in England by Robert Dallam before he left is probably the one for Gloucester Cathedral (1640-41). The earliest piece of evidence of Robert Dallam's presence in Brittany is found in the parish registry of St-Mathieu in Morlaix: 'Cécile, Robert Dallam's baby daughter, was buried on November 16th, 1642'. Probably she could not survive the crossing. Yet we know that Robert had five children left: a letter of recommendation of 1643 written by an exiled Catholic bishop, Richard Smith, living in Paris, informs us that Robert Dallam had to flee from England together with his wife, mother and six young children [6].

There is no evidence that Robert worked in Morlaix but we know that he went to Quimper in 1643 where he got the biggest contract of his whole life: the building of 3 organs for Quimper Cathedral at the cost of 5,300 livres [7]. They took him a few years to complete and in

1648 Robert and his eldest son were able to transfer the old organ of Quimper Cathedral to Brasparts. A most important question rises: how and when did Robert learn to build French-type organs? All the information available about the organs made by him in England shows that he made English organs in England – and everything suggests that he made French organs in France. He must have taken a sudden and keen interest for the Franco-Flemish organ esthetics now prevailing in Northern France.

Robert's first wife died in 1643 [9]. He must have married his second wife not long after for George Corentin was born in August 1646, the son of Robert and Isabella, née Turpin [10]. In 1649 Robert was called to Roscoff where the fabric committee wanted a new organ to be built in place of the 50-year-old one made by an Englishman, John Bournville or Bourne. His beautiful loft still survives [11]. Robert spent 3 days in Roscoff and a short time later his son-in-law Thomas Harris or Harrison signed the contract. Robert reappears a year later to approve Thomas' work. We have every reason to believe that Robert - who was probably too busy at the time - passed on the new work to Thomas Harrison. The latter we then find in Lannion, where in 1650 Joseph Harrison was born, the son of Thomas and Catherine Dallam, Robert's daughter. Thomas Harrison built a large organ in Lannion (Brelevenez) in 1654-56 for 1,800 livres then came to Morlaix where he was entrusted with the making of a 3-manual organ for Notre Dame du Mur (a Collegiate church) in Morlaix where he stayed until 1661 at least (three of his children were born during that period) [12].

In 1652 Robert built a one-manual organ for Saint-Jean-du-Doigt. The church accounts tell us that Thomas, Robert's eldest son, helped his father. The case was made in Morlaix and carted to Saint-Jean-du-Doigt, but at Roscoff the carpenter made the case on the spot. In 1653 Robert repeated the same operation in Plestin-les-Grèves where he built the same type of organ as in St Jean. One year later he was in Lesneven (back in the Léon diocese) where he was to stay until 1660. In August he signed the contract for a new one-manual organ of 17 stops [13]; apparently the parish had wanted to do things on such a grand scale that it had difficulties with the payment of the organ. It was not until January 1660 that the final payment was made to Robert [14], after which he delivered the keys to the organ he had completed a few years before.

The organ of St-Pol-de-Léon Cathedral was built between 1658 and 1660. Only the name of Thomas appears in the church accounts and we do know that he received the payments for the organ, although it is clear that his father Robert had a hand in the design of the case. In fact the St Pol organ is very much in the tradition of King's College, Cambridge, and Windsor before or after the Puritan Revolution.

Robert Dallam returned to England in the middle of 1660. He started work at Windsor in October [16] and in 1661 tried to get a contract for the New College Organ in Oxford. He declared himself ready to leave his two sons (probably George and Ralph) to carry on with work at Windsor.

From 1660 to 1670 Thomas took his family to Lannion, in the Tréguier diocese. He found work there apparently, for several of his children were born in Lannion. We know only of some repair work to the organ of Tréguier cathedral in 1663, 1668 and 1670 [18] but it is likely that he undertook more important business while residing in the Lannion area. In 1667 he signed the contract for the organ of Daoulas Abbey [19] (some 50 miles west of Lannion) but returned to Lannion immediately to attend the christening of yet another baby. He seemed to be in two places at the same time for he received payments for the Daoulas organ in 1668, 1669 and 1670 as it was being completed, while he worked in Tréguier in 1668 and 1670 and in Lannion in 1670 and was involved in the purchase of an estate at Buhulien near Lannion in 1664 and 1668 [20]. It is clear that he was at the head of a thriving business, employing several fellow organ-builders and going from place to place to supervise work in progress [21] (without mentioning the children: he had more than 20 of them!).

He apparently settled in Daoulas and Plougastel-Daoulas for the last period of his life. Ploujean and Ergué-Gabéric were built c.1680 [25]. It is reasonable to assume that Thomas Dallam did not stay long in either parish, for there is every indication that he was still residing in Daoulas. In 1683 he moved to Sizun for at least two years when he got the contract for the large organ to be built. Two children were born there. Janne Pinney, Thomas' second wife, had died in Daoulas in 1681; Dallam had married Marie-Guillemette Vigot, his third wife, shortly after.

Thomas built a new organ in Pleyben, which was to be designed after the Daoulas organ. In 1689 he went to Locronan to supervise Toussaint's work. Toussaint then became an organ-builder in his own right and did extensive repair work in the 1690s at least. His presence in England, strange as it seems, is recorded in 1685 at Dulwich College [26], which confirms that the Dallam family had preserved some links across the channel. Later Toussaint moved eastwards to the Mayenne area.

In March 1694, Thomas signed the contract for a new organ in Brest (St-Sauveur) together with Michel Madé. Thomas must have stayed in Brest for some time but no christenings have been recorded in the Brest archives. In 1697 he lived in Plougastel-Daoulas, near Brest, where 3 children were born.

In 1699 he went to Rumengol for repair work, when a son, Marc-Antoine, was the organist there. Marc-Antoine, taking the name of Mark Anthony, then went to England where he lived and worked as an organ builder. He died at York in 1730.

Thomas Dallam died at Guimiliau on July 14th, 1705, probably in the course of repairwork there. He was attended on his deathbed by his fourth wife, Jeanne de l'Estang, and some of his daughters.

List of organs in Brittany

(Bold type indicates case surviving)

New organs

Robert:

- **Quimper Cathedral**, 3 organs 1643-48
- St-Jean-du-Doigt 1652
- **Plestin-Les-Grèves** 1653 (now in Lanvellec)
- Lesneven, Notre Dame 1654

Robert & Thomas:

- **St Pol-de-Léon, Cathedral** 1658-60

Thomas:

- Daoulas 1667-69
- Locronan 1671-72
- **Ergué-Gabéric** 1680
- **Sizun** 1683-84
- **Pleyben** 1688-92
- Brest, St Sauveur 1694-96
- Landerneau, St Houardon 1690-94

Undated:

- **Rumengol**
- **Morlaix, St Melaine**
- **Ploujean**
- **Guimiliau**
- Guipavas

Thomas Harrison:

- **Roscoff** 1649-50
- Brelévenez 1654-56
- Morlaix, Notre-Dame du Mûr 1656-61

Repairs only

- Vannes Cathedral

- Lannion, St Jean
- Tréguier Cathedral
- Audierne
- Pont-Croix
- La Martyre

Notes

All information regarding births, marriages, and deaths is taken from the original parish registers, now preserved in the relevant Archives départementales.

- [1] See HOPKINS and RIMBAULT, *The Organ*, 3rd edition, 1877. W. L. SUMNER, *The Organ*, 4th edition, 1973. CLUTTON and NILAND, *The British Organ*, 1963.
- [2] Stanley MAYES, *An Organ for the Sultan*, 1956.
- [3] We contradict here all family trees reconstructed before, and appearing in CLUTTON and NILAND, SUMNER, and STINKENS *Calendar* for 1980.
- [4] *BIOS Journal* no. 3, article by B. B. EDMONDS p.137.
- [5] *The Organ* no. 13, article by FREEMAN. See also STINKENS *Calendar* for 1980.
- [6] *The Organ* no. 167, articles by H. STUBINGTON.
- [7] *The Organ* no. 74, 1939.
- [8] See specification below.
- [9] According to a letter written by him to the Chapter of Quimper Cathedral. Original in Latin (and not French as Stubington stated, concluding that Robert Dallam had learnt French before).
- [10] All details given about births, christenings, marriages, deaths were found in the original church records kept in Quimper.
- [11] See details in DUFOURCQ, *Le livre de l'orgue Français*, tome 1, les Sources, 1971.
- [12] LE MEN, *Monographie de la Cathédrale de Quimper*, 1877.
- [13] See specification in SUMNER, STUBINGTON'S articles etc. The same mistakes have been repeated in transcribing original contract: the 1st stop is the "parement" meaning the "montre" and is an 8 foot stop, not an 18 one. "Bigearre" is not a reed, but a kind of "piffaro" of 2 ranks, also found in Daoulas and Morlaix (Notre Dame du Mur).
- [14] He did not sell his business then, as misinterpreted by STUBINGTON, MARZIOU and the writers who took their information from them.
- [15] Repairwork only, not construction, according to original contract I was fortunate to lay hands on.
- [16] SUMNER p.126.
- [17] CLUTTON and NILAND p.62.
- [18] CORBES, *Les Orgues de Côtes du Nord*, 1964.
- [19] Arch. dep. Finistère, série G, Daoulas.
- [20] Arch. dep. Côtes du Nord, 3 E 149.
- [21] In 1673, at Audierne, expenses are allocated for the boarding of the "organ-builder and his assistants".
- [22] According to documents kept in the vicarage of Locronan.
- [23] Michel Madé worked at St-Thégonnec in the early 1680s. Many details about his work and Mascard's in 1675 appear in the church accounts. (AD Fin 255 G 6).
- [24] Information kindly provided by the Revd. N. Thistlethwaite who has looked into the archives at York.
- [25] The date "1680" is painted on the case at Ergué-Gabéric.
- [26] See *BIOS Journal* no 4 p.144, letter by Lady Jeans.
- [27] Thomas' signature appears below a christening act in Lesneven in January 1654, together with Robert's.
- [28] By Pierre Tuau, a disciple of Paul Maillard, a leading French organ-builder. The organ of Bégard Abbey was moved to the Tréguier Cathedral in 1830 and can be seen there.
- [29] According to the minutes of a judgement about the Notre-Dame du Mur organ in 1682.

[30] The other organ builders of the time seem to have been involved with his activities at one time or another: Jacques Boyvaux du Mesnil, Toussaint Brunel, Jacques Mascard. Jacques Lebrun worked on several Dallam organs in the early 18th C.

[31] e.g. At Buhulien near Lannion, at Kerizit in Daoulas, at St-Jean in Plougastel.

[32] He also repaired an organ at La Martyre. The word "organist" often meant organ-builder at the time.

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