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PIPE ORGANS

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Winter is the danger season for pipe organs!

Church heating during a dry, cold spell (and we seem to be getting a lot more of these in recent years) can seriously and often permanently damage the wooden pipes and other wooden parts of a pipe organ by drying them out. Heating systems which force hot air into the church are the worst offenders. There are some lovely pipe organs in our churches, and if you are lucky enough to play one, you will want to keep an eye on its welfare.

Some ways to do this:

- 1 Keep a hygrometer (a little instrument registering moisture in the atmosphere which can be bought cheaply in garden centres) at the organ and check how often and for how long it dips below normal humidity range. From this you should be able to tell how bad the danger is.
- 2 Have the organ tuned regularly (twice a year is usual) by a professional organ-builder, who will be able to spot internal signs of damage and hopefully deal with them before they become worse.
- 3 Call in the tuner if you have a cipher (a note won't stop playing – you would want to call him in for this anyway!) or a part of the organ goes badly out of tune when it shouldn't, especially the wooden pipes, such as the flutes.
- 4 Take advice from your tuner on ways to make the atmosphere in the organ area more humid. Sometimes a strategically-placed tray of water will help; keep it topped up and try to stop a skin of dust forming on it. An old blanket draped somewhere near the organ with one end in the water can be useful (steer clear of electrical fittings!).
- 5 See if the church heating can be adjusted a bit downwards. With the present cost of fuel the parish may well be prepared to take this on board.
- 6 Ask the parish to consider installing an organ humidifier, a mechanical device for moistening the air. Your tuner can tell you more about these, and whether one would be suitable for your instrument.
- 7 Make use of the free advice available from the Scottish Federation of Organists. An independent expert will assess the condition of the organ and make recommendations. For more details, go to www.scotsorgan.org.uk/sfo-01.htm and scroll down the page.