There were twenty-four young men of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Tenterden who served their country in the Great War of 1914-1918 but sadly the church lost twelve of these courageous men in the conflict. Rather than the usual type of stone memorials, the church felt the most fitting memorial would be a new pipe organ dedicated to their memory and the firm of Griffin and Stroud of Bath was employed to build the organ which was subsequently registered with the Imperial War Museum. The Memorial Organ was dedicated in 1919 by the Chairman of the District at a service which followed a procession by the Mayor, civic dignitaries and clergy along the High Street from the Town Hall. Clearly the congregation would have found great comfort each time they heard the organ played and with its recent repair, conservation and rededication, the church can again feel one with those bereaved families.

It was in the centenary period of the First World War that my wife and I came to Tenterden to live near to our daughter and immediately on attending the Methodist Church it was clear that the organ was in desperate need of attention. I contacted the organist of the church we had moved from in North Yorkshire and he directed me to the National Pipe Organ Register where I was amazed to see that this recorded the organ as a war memorial. In the mists of time the local community appeared to have forgotten the memorial and furthermore I could trace only two other Methodist memorial organs of the period, both being in the north of England.

I had appreciated organ music from my schooldays in Nottinghamshire, the mighty Binns organ in the Nottingham Albert Hall there, and a school’s choirs’ concert in Southwell Minster with David Willcocks before his knighthood accompanying. My first decision therefore was to contact Dr. Alan Thurlow, the chairman of The British Institute of Organ Studies, to see if the organ could be granted an historic organ certificate as this could help with funding. Following his visit, he did confirm that with careful attention the organ in Tenterden could still survive to a bi-centenary! The organ was found amongst other problems to have dangerously leaning pipes and I promised the church I would not commit them to expense as finances were low after other urgent needs were met. However, day by day I seemed to face new problems, firstly obtaining three competitive quotes and then finding suitable grant making organisations. Most charities it seems specifically excluded grants for organs. Eventually I succeeded in obtaining grant offers from War Memorials Trust and The Pilgrim Trust which shared the entire cost of repair and conservation.

Further difficulties needed to be overcome as the church did not qualify for reclaiming VAT but I had ensured that all the organ builders I had approached were members of The Institute of British Organ Builders and our preferred choice, Alistair Curtis, also recommended by Dr. Thurlow, was not registered for VAT. He successfully completed the work for Easter 2019 and I felt the only way for both the normal congregation and the wider community to appreciate the restored memorial would be to arrange a Rededication Service.

This was by no means easy because I had been unable to find records of the service a century before, despite spending much time in Ashford and Maidstone looking through newspapers and other archived material over a twelve-month period. The Imperial War Museum had told me earlier that they had no records but then quite unexpectedly I received a small newspaper cutting they had found detailing the service and the Tenterden and District Local History Society had a postcard of the interior of the church clearly set out in readiness showing gifts for the twelve families who had lost their loved ones. The Rededication Service enabled us to involve so many from the local community including local schoolchildren to sing and present flowers in memory of the twelve fallen and the present Mayor as well as past and present people of the church attended including John Link, a former mayor of Tenterden, who is the only known relative of the twelve who died. The organist of Canterbury Cathedral, Dr. David Flood, agreed to play and my own daughter, a RCM qualified oboist, added poignancy with him in Purcell’s Dido’s Lament.

This is a prestigious award which has been celebrated locally and further afield. We hope that the War Memorial will continue to serve as a reminder to many of those who served and lost their lives on our behalf.

David Smith