

England Organ, Choral, and Castle Tour 2005

The 17th annual England Organ, Choral, and Castle tour was hosted by Leslie Peart and ran from July 12-25, 2005. The group of 32 organists and friends of the organ followed an itinerary, beginning in London and going through Windsor, Hereford and Liverpool, around the coast of Wales, to Bath, and on to the Southern Cathedrals Festival in Winchester. After three days in Winchester, the tour visited Salisbury, and returned to London. Though the tour began shortly after the London bombings, there were no cancellations of tour participants, and Mr. Peart's calm and capable leadership made the group feel quite comfortable in their travels.

The first official day of the tour began with a lunch at our hotel, where we were joined by Malcolm Archer, organist of St. Paul's Cathedral. Following lunch, a short trip on the underground took us to St. Columba's Church, to see and play the 70-stop Walker organ. There we were met by the pastor of the church, who gave us a history of the Scottish Presbyterian church in London. From St. Columba's, we made our first trip to St. Paul's to attend Evensong, and were privileged to hear the last Evensong of the season by the complete choir. Following Evensong, we went to Westminster Abbey, where we heard Robert Quinney give his Celebrity Organ Recital.

Wednesday, July 13, began with a visit to the Palace of Westminster, to the Chapel of St. Mary Undercroft. There, we were privileged to hear and play the 1999 organ by William Drake, built in Renaissance style. Ann Elise Smoot joined us next at the Church of St. Matthew, where she played a brilliant recital on the Mander organ, following which the group had an opportunity to play the organ ourselves. The final organ of the day was the Compton organ of St. Bride's Fleet Street, the magnificent building by Christopher Wren.

One of the highlights of the tour, for this writer, was that evening's performance of the Verdi Requiem, at St. Paul's Cathedral. The London Symphony Orchestra and chorus were in top form. Coming just one week following the London bombings, the performance had extra pathos and urgency, which were not lost on any members of the group.

The following morning, we met our bus driver David Attfield. An organist himself, David proved to be a more than capable driver for the tour, as well as a wealth of information about all that we passed during the coming weeks. David was instrumental in the smooth running success of the tour, and greeted us on upon our return to the bus with appropriate music. During most of our sojourn in Wales, a return to the bus meant being treated to glorious Welsh men's choir recordings.

Our first stop was St. George's Chapel of Windsor Castle, where we were met by Timothy Byram-Wigfield. In addition to being a charming host, Timothy gave one of the finest recitals of the tour on the Chapel's Harrison & Harrison organ. His program included a wide variety of music by British and continental composers, including both standard organ repertoire and transcriptions. An afternoon drive through the Cotswolds took us to Tewkesbury Abbey. One of the oldest abbeys in England, Tewkesbury contains three organs. We were able to play the largest of these. Originally built by Robert Dallam in 1631, and rebuilt by several builders over the years, its final form was determined by the rebuild done by J. W. Walker & Sons in 1948.

The evening found us in Hereford, where we heard a recital by Sophie-Véronique Cauchefer-Choplin, co-titulaire at St. Sulpice in Paris. For whatever reason, many of the group found the Cathedral organ rather underwhelming during this recital. The next morning, we got a much better idea of the instrument hearing our own tour members play it. In particular, David Hurd treated the group to a stirring improvisation on the hymn-tune, Hereford.

Proceeding on to Liverpool, we were welcomed at the Willis Organ Company factory. There we were given a fascinating tour by principals David Wyld and

Jonathan Bowden. In the evening, we visited the stunningly modern Metropolitan Cathedral of Liverpool. There, the group had a chance to play than 90-rank Walker organ. Cathedral organist Richard Lea also gave a fascinating tour of the building and outlined its history for interested members of the group.

Our first foray into Wales took us to the town of Ruthin, where we visited the Willis organ at the Collegiate Church of St. Peter. At this stop, we were treated to fine views of the Welsh hills, our first remnant of a Welsh castle, a beautiful church, and a fine organ. Returning to Liverpool, we attended Evensong in the Anglican Cathedral that afternoon. Following Evensong, Ian Tracey proved himself one of the most delightful hosts on the tour, by giving a detailed history of the organ before demonstrating it himself. Members of the tour were then given a chance to play this largest church organ in England, assisted in navigating the massive console by Tracey and his sub-organist.

Sunday morning took us to the market town of Chester and its Cathedral. Attending the main Eucharist of the morning, we heard the Cathedral girls choir, and a fine sermon by the Dean. That afternoon, we left music-making behind and became simple tourists, visiting Penrhyn Castle on the Welsh coast.

Heading west on the following morning, we stopped first at St. Asaph's Cathedral, burial place of William Mathias. Following this visit, our longest and most beautiful journey of the tour took us through fog-shrouded forests and mountains along the Welsh coast to the Cathedral of St. David. Situated on the westernmost point of Wales, St. David's is one of its oldest and most historic buildings. Though the Willis organ was not the most distinguished organ on the tour, the visit to St. David's Cathedral was well worth it for the sights themselves.

On the following morning, the trip south took us to Llandaff Cathedral, near the town of Cardiff. One of the surprising features of the Hill Norman & Beard organ of 1958 is a freestanding Positive division, suspended over the congregation by two massive arching piers. Though visually stunning, this creates problems with the ensemble, and considerable tuning difficulties. Continuing on into Cardiff itself, we were treated to an organ duo program at St. David's Hall, played by husband and wife Robin Jackson and Maureen McAllister. The organ, built by Peter Collins in 1982, is a brilliant instrument in neo-baroque style. Following the recital, tour member Bob MacDonald regaled us with brilliant readings of Bach and Widor. Throughout the tour, Bob was one of those who could be counted on to play wonderfully on each of the instruments we encountered.

The next day, we traveled to Bristol to visit the beautiful Church of St. Mary Redcliffe, and play the large Harrison and Harrison organ there. We were also able to visit Bristol Cathedral, with its large Harris/Mander organ. Our afternoon was spent in a lovely town of Bath, where our driver David gave us a brief tour of the historic points. We were then able to wander the beautiful town ourselves for a bit. Continuing on to Winchester, we arrived in time to settle into our hotel, and enjoyed dinner and then attend our first event of the Southern Cathedrals Festival: the hilarious Fringe entertainment, presented by the Winchester Cathedral Dean, Canon Precentor, and the men of the Choir.

On Friday and Saturday, July 22 and 23rd, we attended the events of the Southern Cathedrals Festival. The standard of music making by the choirs of Winchester, Salisbury and Chichester was extremely high, and all of their concerts were thrilling experiences. Of particular note was the concert by the combined girls' choirs of Winchester and Salisbury. While all the music making of the Festival was a very high caliber, there was one thing which this writer noted with a bit of dismay: most of the organists chose preludes and postludes from the larger Preludes & Fugues of Johann Sebastian Bach. In the vast space of Winchester Cathedral, the impression was that these pieces were coming from a great distance, and their length coupled with this feeling of distance encouraged the gathered audience to talk all through the organ music. This is not to criticize the playing, but to comment on an ongoing problem between organists and their audiences.

At the end of the Festival, we continued on to Salisbury Cathedral for the Sunday Eucharist. This service was not only the last appearance of the choir for that season, but the last service for Simon Lole before leaving Salisbury. We returned to London where, following our closing dinner, most of the group attended the BBC proms concerts at Royal Albert Hall. The Halle orchestra, along with a truly monstrous choir (in true British tradition!), presented Edward Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*. The performance was truly inspired, and was a fitting capstone to a quite wonderful tour.

For any tour of this type to be truly enjoyable, there are two requirements. The first was filled by the fact that we had a congenial group of people who truly enjoyed each other's company. The second was amply provided by Leslie Peart's talent for organizing and making arrangements. His knowledge of venues, hosts and instruments was invaluable. The relationships he has developed with the organists of England, and no less importantly the tour's bus driver, made the tour more fully enjoyable than it might otherwise have been. At each stop, his attention to time ensured that each person who desired to play that particular organ was able to do so. Along the way, just when the trip might have been getting boring, bits of paper were passed through the bus with pieces of humor, sure to cheer up even the weariest tour-goer. It is indeed no wonder the tour included several people who have made numerous trips with Mr. Peart, and keep returning because of the ease of his arrangements, and the interest of his itineraries. It is without reservation that this writer can recommend his future tours to any interested in England and its landmark organs.

This year's tour will journey north to Peterborough and Norwich, then along the south coast, continuing at the Southern Cathedrals Festival at Salisbury Cathedral, before returning to London. For more information, contact Leslie Peart, 2129 Fairway Drive, Springfield, IL 62704, phone 217-546-2562, email lporg2000@yahoo.com.

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