

REVIEW OF LESLIE PEART'S 20th ENGLAND ORGAN AND CHORAL TOUR

For two weeks in July, a busload of organ enthusiasts – mostly American, but including a Canadian and two Australians – embarked on a whirlwind playing tour of London and the Southwest. They were not to be disappointed: this was the 20th year of Leslie Peart's legendary annual invasion of British organ lofts and this was going to be a big one!

As the weary participants sat dazed in the traditional de-briefing location – the Albert Pub in Westminster – their thoughts were as one: did we really manage to visit the organs at Winchester, Salisbury, Exeter, Truro and Wells Cathedrals, Bath, Buckfast and Sherborne Abbeys, Marlborough College and all three organs at Eton College, churches in Tiverton, Plymouth and Penzance, and 6 London churches including Southwark Cathedral and St Paul's – all in 14 days?

There was one other: St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, but although we were able to go up to the console after hearing an excellent selection played by Timothy Byron-Wigfield, we weren't allowed to play – or even photograph - that one.

As if this wasn't enough, we were able to attend all three days of the Southern Cathedrals Festival (this year at Winchester) – and what a treat that was – and attend a Proms night at Royal Albert Hall.

There was also an unexpected treat – an invitation to a private residence in Exeter housing a rare Estey house organ and rooms full of early phonographs and other equally fascinating paraphernalia from bygone years. I understand the Estey is a former resident of a New York apartment, complete with player-roll in a separate cabinet.

Our first few days, however, were spent in London starting with a visit to St Clement Danes, the official church of the Royal Air Force. The organ was provided by the US Air Force following World War II, during which the church suffered severe bomb damage. The consultant was Ralph Downes, and some of the influences which later found their full expression at the Royal Festival Hall, can be clearly seen in this instrument.

Next morning we were treated to two four-manual organs: the Willis/Rushworth at the beautiful St Paul's Knightsbridge, and the Norman and Beard at All Saints Margaret Street. This organ was fully restored by Harrison and Harrison in 2002 and its effect in this relatively small church is electrifying. In the afternoon and evening, we visited two more four-manuals, All Souls Langham Place, and then the highlight of the day – Southwark Cathedral. The four-manual T C Lewis here is a perfect foil to the fallacy that “bigger is better”, and the taste and restraint of its specification is no barrier to its ability to bring tears to the eyes with its spectacular full-organ sound. I was particularly pleased to play some extemporisations by the legendary A E Floyd, Organist and Choirmaster at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne from 1915 – 1947, which houses Southwark's sister, and equally magnificent, T C Lewis.

Next day it was off to St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, and then to Winchester for Evensong followed by a recital by John Scott.

For the next two days we enjoyed the marvellous Southern Cathedrals Festival at the ancient cathedral of Winchester, a feast of choral and instrumental music in one of the most breathtaking settings imaginable.

Up early on Sunday to leave for Sung Eucharist at Salisbury. It was a special event as it was the graduation day for the older boy choristers. What a week they had, as they had just returned the previous night from Winchester after having participated in the Southern Cathedrals Festival for the past three days. We were to return to Salisbury in a few days to play the great Willis organ there.

The next two nights were spent at Exeter, from where we took day trips to Truro, Penzance, Buckfast Abbey and Plymouth. The lingering impressions of those visits were the stunning organ case at Exeter (the oldest in England), and the extraordinary instrument at Truro, described by some as the finest in England. This modestly proportioned instrument, without even a 32 foot reed, is surely one of the most magnificent sounds to be heard anywhere in the land. Exeter was of particular interest, as we were able to hear and play this instrument which has just had a half-length 32 foot reed added, and has also recently installed a floating division in a musicians' gallery halfway along the northern wall of the nave. We were able to hear how much more effective the organ is in the accompanying of the singing of large congregations.

The highlights of the last few days of the tour were the magnificent Klais at Bath Abbey, the beautiful Wells Cathedral, all three organs at Eton College, including the renowned Hill, the Gray & Davison at Sherborne Abbey (rebuilt by Kenneth Tickell with a new Nave division in 2005) and finally – the coup de grace – an opportunity to play on the new mobile five manual console at St Paul's London. Les had been keeping quite tight-lipped about this one, and I had the feeling that the visit was not a certainty until the last minute, but he delivered! We were hosted very warmly by James McVinnie, who had just played his last service at St Paul's before moving to become Assistant Organist of Westminster Abbey. The experience of playing on this magnificent instrument can surely be compared with none other – the seemingly impossible reverberation, and the Royal Trumpets at the West End! And that afternoon, the majority of the group climbed seventy-three steps to witness Change Ringing in the bell room of St. Paul's.

Thank you to Leslie Peart for allowing us to experience such a wonderful insight into the world of the British Cathedral Organ. One wonders how he is going to better this in 2009. (I believe Cambridge was mentioned!)

This year, the Twenty-First Annual England Organ and Choral tour will be July 14 – 27, and will concentrate on the great organs of Oxford and Cambridge, in addition to the Southern Cathedrals Festival at Salisbury Cathedral. For further information, contact Leslie Peart, 2129 Fairway Drive, Springfield, Il 62704, phone 217-546-2562. Email: stopknob@aol.com, or visit the website www.organtours.com.

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