

English Organ and Choral Tour

In July 2009, twenty-six organ enthusiasts or adventurous music lovers joined tour leader Leslie Peart on his twenty-first annual tour to England. One participant was born in South Africa; another joined us from Australia. New York City, the Midwest, Texas and California were also represented. This year's trip was especially attractive since it included two days each in Oxford and Cambridge.

Our first stop was St. Peter's Eaton Square in London where one of their pastors had been killed on the church steps during a WWII Nazi night bombing raid. The 65-stop Kenneth Jones organ's glassed-in tracker mechanism is visible to all as they walk underneath it into the worship space. That evening we attended the celebrity organ recital by Gerre and Judith Hancock at Westminster Abbey. The next evening when the Abbey was closed to the public, our group had time to play that instrument under the guidance of Assistant Organist James McVinnie. Experts say that the conditions for awe are darkness, distance and either silence or great sounds. How true in this historic space!

Earlier on the second day, we caught a boat to Greenwich to play at the Old Naval Academy Chapel. Host James Grainger demonstrated stops remaining from 1789 Sam Green organ within the Hill, Norman and Beard instrument. There was time to explore the World Heritage Site with its observatory, prime meridian line and official world clock. Then we took the boat back to the Tower of London's Old Royal Chapel, for private time with the new LeTourneau.

We spent the next three days at the Southern Cathedrals Music Festival. This year it was held in Salisbury Cathedral with its 404-foot spire. The best preserved copy of the Magna Carta is on display here. Participants could attend rehearsals of the boy choirs, choral master classes, choral evensongs, and instrumental concerts by talented youth. There was even Candlelit Bach playing while we sipped refreshments under a festive tent. Two events stood out. First was an organ recital by James Lancelot of Durham Cathedral. Then at the final concert, with the opening strains of Handel's "Let Thy Hand Be Strengthened" suddenly there was no shuffling, no coughing, no ambient sound at all. We were in rapt attention.

On Sunday, we entered Winchester Cathedral to the tolling of change ringing bells. Here we worshipped at the Festival Eucharist. This was the final Sunday for both the high school girl chorus and for the boy singers whose voices will change. My wife and I got to see their "prizes ceremony" since a friend's friend is director of the school for these students.

Two days in both Oxford and Cambridge provided some rare privileges. In Oxford, there are no signs identifying a school. Along the street one sees the long stone wall and a big wooden "barn door" with a little door that is often closed. If one dares to open the door, there may be a sign with the name of the college. A porter / policeman is there to "shoo" most people away. Our group was ushered in to see the lovely lawns in the quadrangles and to play the unique organs and sing in the chapels, each with rare architectural features.

In Oxford, we were welcomed by American-born Katherine Pardee. She presented the historic Father Willis organ at Wadham College. The players who climbed the circular stairs had to close the trap door behind them in order to stand beside the organ bench. Those among us who were new to the organ, were surprised by the black keys on the four manual Reiger at Christ Church Cathedral. At Harris Manchester, we played a romantic Nicholson. Contrast that with the 33-rank French Aubertin in St. John's Chapel. Queen's College featured a 1965 Frobenius, the first non-British builder invited to provide an organ in either Oxford or Cambridge. All in all, we visited eleven instruments in Oxford, including the Cathedral and Town Hall.

Then it was on to Cambridge. How stunning is the first sighting of King's College Chapel from the fields. Stephen Cleobury welcomed us even though their choir had sung the previous evening at "The Proms" in London, celebrating the 800th anniversary of Cambridge University. The wonderful acoustic

enhances the 77-stop Harrison and Harrison. My wife, who in her teens played piano for Sunday School in a small church, startled me when she entered the loft. Her first time ever touching the ivories on an organ! Other organs we visited included Trinity, St. John's, St. Catharine's, Clare, and Selwyn colleges, plus the University Church and the Roman Catholic Church of Our Lady And The English Martyrs, On our final evening in Cambridge, the St. John's College Choir presented a marvelous concert starting with Handel's "Zadok the Priest."

Let me review a few highlights: The earliest instrument we played was a 1755 Snetzler on the floor below the Von Beckerath at Clare College, Cambridge. The most unusual organ was the Old St. Mary Magdalene Church organ in Oxford, which is enclosed in clear glass. While the Copley built console had what looked like elevator buttons to engage the stops, the sound in the medieval nave was quite pleasing. The strangest building was Douai Abbey where architects added a modern nave to a gothic choir. But the sound from the III/31 Kenneth Tickell is marvelous. What was the most astounding scene? In an austere rural setting, we discovered the splendor of the high gothic French Farnborough Abbey, where the last of Napoleon's "Royal Family" is buried. Neil Wright introduced us to its Cavallé-Coll, one of the last ones built by that master – small, but fantastic! The biggest surprise for me was going to Oxford's Town Hall for a recital by the young winner of the Oundle International Organ Competition. Adam Brakel had grown up in Pittsburgh and I have known him since he was a teenager! His playing was dazzling.

We visited other great spaces. Guildford Cathedral's organ has 24,000 miles of wire from the console to the pipes. At St. Albans the IV/72 Harrison and Harrison had just been rebuilt. At Ely, we climbed the circular stairs high into the organ chamber. Ely is one of the few places where we can actually go inside the organ. What an experience to stand near the 32' Open Diapason's long wooden pipes two feet square! What a treat for the non-organists in our group. Lest one thinks cathedrals are behind the times, we saw photo displays of the recent youth event "Rave in the Nave". This overnight event had a variety of music, interactive spiritual activities and a balloon drop.

Leslie Peart provided plenty of free time and options. Several ladies shopped at Harrods. Others rode the gigantic London Eye. My English teacher wife was happy to sit in places frequented by Dickens, Dr. Samuel Johnson, JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis. We also attended a play at the Shakespeare Globe Theatre. Afterward, the moonlight shining on the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral was glorious.

On Saturday evening David Titterington played an organ concert at Royal Albert hall. This was the first opportunity the group has had in Leslie's twenty-one tours where the organ could be heard by itself. The Proms Concert that same night proved spectacular. These two events were in observance of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the deaths of Elgar, Holst, and Delius. The major work in the symphonic program was Holst's *Planets*.

We concluded our tour with Sunday morning and evening services at St. Paul's Cathedral. Then they closed the doors and our group played the organ. At the end, I asked the assistant organist there to show off the festival trumpets, which he said the Queen "hates". He smiled and for the next five minutes blasted us with the most thrilling display I've ever encountered.

The 2010 tour is scheduled for July 13 – 26, and will begin with three days in Scotland, ending in London. For more information, contact Leslie Peart at stopknob@aol.com, or visit the website www.organtours.com.

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