

Summer outing to Cambridge.

My hair hurts!

As I begin writing this two days after returning from Cambridge it still hurts, having stood on end so often and for so long!

There is so much to tell and I'm sorry that not many more were able to share our experiences. And the five of us comprised of David Walker (DW), Edward Scott (ES), Ian Baxter (IB), John Chapman and Peter Mann. Ian summarised the trip: *Well folks, let me tell you that this was no mere outing, it was 'a trip of a lifetime'.*

The sun was shining as 5 members of the association set off for Cambridge & after a good journey, arrived at our hotel for check in (IB). We would all recommend this hotel, called Rectory Farm, just a couple of miles north of Cambridge centre. It was in the countryside, was impeccably clean, had all the plumbing working, did a very good continental breakfast and was a good price for Cambridge, especially for two sharing a room. It was also very near a "park and ride" from which we took our first 10-minute bus ride into Cambridge to join the Wesley Methodist Church on Christ's Piece for lunch – an excellent, hot 3-course lunch at a downright cheap price.

There we met Jeff Batty, the organist there for many years, who provided much information about the wonderful organ that had come from Bradford's Eastbrook Hall. The original William Hill 1844 organ case has been re-assembled by splitting it either side of the east-type window, and the large space and good acoustic helped the 3-manual instrument to sound much as it would have done originally. The specification is complete, with 52 speaking stops, and includes rarities such as a "tenth 3 1/5" on the Great, as well as 5-rank and 3-rank mixtures.

Then, we met Anthony at St John's College, 4 manual Mander with an *en-chamade* reed that is extremely fierce. Anthony demonstrated the organ with an exciting piece of French music (ES). Anthony Gray and Henry Websdale, our two junior members who are organ scholars at Cambridge, went to much trouble to produce an 11-page itinerary with organ specifications for each of us. Every venue that we visited had been primed for our arrival and we were greeted accordingly.

St. John's College Chapel is a most fine and beautiful, cathedral class of building (see photos on separate sheet) with an amazing acoustic. The organ is a Hill/Hill, Norman & Beard rebuilt by Mander in 1994 with four manuals and 67 speaking stops, making a most wonderful sound.

A lovely stroll through Cambridge byways took us to *Robinson College, the newest Cambridge College with organ by Frobenius (ES).* This organ was almost a complete opposite to St. John's, being a 2-manual mechanical action 27 speaking stop instrument with very clear and promptly-speaking pipework. Needless to say, J.S. Bach was much played here by both Anthony and we visitors. An unusual feature is that the swell box shutters are made of a transparent material, probably perspex but may be glass. And an extremely unusual fact that Anthony told us is that the chapel was designed around the organ, rather than the more usual opposite. He also pointed out a feature of the large stained glass window which, at a certain time on a certain day, casts a coloured image on to the floor by the altar.

Winding our way next to Kings College Chapel we met Henry, who took us directly into the chapel, so bypassing the unexpectedly long queue of people awaiting entry, where we were captivated in the *unaccompanied Evensong at Kings, then the highlight of the trip - King's organ, the experience of a lifetime. Henry demonstrated this amazing instrument, it's many wonderful colours, and played Cesar Franck's 1st Chorale, then we each had a play (ES).* For myself (JC), I have now ticked off one of my very short bucket list! Although the console is on the screen beneath the organ with a heap of 32' pedal pipes beside it, the organ sounded fantastic and is almost certainly the best organ (in the large organ class) I have ever played.

By the time Henry saw us away from Kings a stage was being set up and an orchestra tuning up for Bach's b minor mass and it was almost time for the last bus back (no, not midnight! It was only 8-ish) and, although we'd planned on having dinner in Cambridge we had to get back to the hotel and got back for *late evening meal at a posh pub, never before have I had a bottle of cider which cost £4.20 - it was very nice (ES).* Interpret that as you will, but suffice it to say that we were all still reeling and inebriated from our experience at Kings College Chapel!

The next morning, following an excellent continental breakfast, we walked across Cambridge in the already warm and bright sunshine, past St. John's and Trinity Colleges to meet James Grimwood, the organ scholar at Trinity Hall. Trinity Hall is almost adjacent to Kings Chapel, and good views of it can be had from there.

James was a most friendly, amenable and enthusiastically helpful man, who explained the demands of the organ. It was built by the Danish firm Carsten Lund in 2006, the consultant being David Sanger. There is an excellent recording of Buxtehude played by the director of music, Andrew Arthur. The organ is demanding because not only is the speech so precise but the straight pedalboard is slightly offset, which made life difficult for most of us. The pipework and case are superb and the voicing is baroque, so it suits Bach as well as old English. It had the ability to be fierce but also soft and pliable.

Trinity College Chapel is very small but has beautiful woodwork, floor, and painting behind the altar, the organ being on a gallery at the opposite end. They, like the other college chapels we'd visited, have choral evensong most days of the year. I asked James how many evensongs would be conducted on any one weekday in Cambridge. He reckoned that it would be a staggering thirty-four – and all these would be putting on excellent quality of music and liturgy, and would be well attended!

The fact that we were, indeed, in a different world to the one we came from was shortly after borne out as we wandered around Cambridge in now very hot sunshine. We had seen several railings bedecked with posters but only now took time to study them. They were advertising string quartets, poetry readings, philosophy debates, and lots of other classical music recitals. Where I come from you only get posters stuck onto places they shouldn't be advertising head-banging acid-gigs with heavy rock "music". The culture of Cambridge very quickly gets to you and, guess what, it feels quite normal and right.

We took lunch in such a hub of social gatherings right beside the parish church of Great St. Mary, which we overlooked as we ate upmarket soup and sandwiches. To its left was the Senate House and around the corner and behind us was Kings College. But just now, we enjoyed this area of culture and civility.

We called into Great St. Mary's and saw the Father Smith organ on the west gallery and the recent Tickell organ in the choir. I just wondered what would happen if they'd let us play, because the church was jammed with visitors, all apparently seriously interested in the church.

And so we walked past the imposing and unusual main entrance to Kings to our next appointment in Queens College Chapel, the organ which Henry rated as one of the nicest in Cambridge. We also *observed punting on the river and then to Pembroke College. Organ scholar suffering from after effects of college ball was AWOL! but we did play a rather nice piano at the west end* (ES). The chapel provided a welcomingly cool haven from the hot sun and we just sat and awaited the arrival of our host. The organ is situated high on a gallery in this medium sized chapel and is a 3-manual Harrison & Harrison with 32 speaking stops, to which we couldn't gain access. But the piano sounded great down the chapel when Peter played some hymns on it.

We subsequently found ourselves passing Little St. Mary's Church, where they were serving cream teas. That was very welcome but it was also an occasion to take a look at the beautiful organ, also built by Tickell in 2007. Everything both here and at Great St. Mary's was of outstanding quality.

Our next appointment was back at Kings College Chapel for choir rehearsal with Henry at the organ and Stephen Cleobury directing. Stephen not only welcomed us personally but came to say goodbye after Choral Evensong. What I found remarkable was that Stephen only ever spoke quietly and yet we could hear every syllable clearly maybe thirty feet away. A little trick was that Stephen wore an invisible microphone relaying what he was saying/singing to a loudspeaker beside the organ console; and the organists have a well-sized colour monitor with switching so that they can observe whatever is necessary as they play.

These choristers are not only enthusiastic but talented, and they wanted to have Stephen coach them, which he could do by singing every register. Occasionally, a chorister would raise their hand and then put it down. Surely, they can't want the loo, I thought. (Note: there are no conveniences in Kings College Chapel.) Edward explained later that if a singer knows that they've made a mistake they raise their hand so that Stephen doesn't have to stop to correct them. And so *they spent 25 minutes on the psalm* (ES).

The entire east end of the chapel was full and Evensong began with Henry playing (I think) an amazing improvisation, starting loud and gradually becoming quiet. What amazed me here was that the procession of the choir was delayed until a certain point, but only a couple of seconds after the last clergyman had found his place, the organ music ended as if it had meant to end that way from the beginning. And so an emotionally high experience began: *Noble in b minor, Balfour Gardiner's Evening Hymn, Chorale No3 Franck - all played by Henry* (ES).

For me, tears welled up at least four times but *although this was an organist's outing, the highlight of the two days away for me had to be the time when we were treated to be present during choir rehearsal @ Kings. This, followed by evensong was one of those 'hairs on the back of your neck moments'* (IB).

Henry's playing of Franck's Chorale was superb but I was quite astonished, and disappointed, how many of the public that had filled the place now left during his playing. But, as if Evensong alone had not been enough, we remained there for a couple of minutes before a recital began by Henry and the second year

scholar, Richard Gowers, who had been the main organist at last year's television broadcast of "Carols from Kings". Rather than being a normal organ recital it was a *duet recital by the two organ scholars - not only did they play, the two pieces were orchestral pieces that they had arranged for organ!* (ES)

In fact, they played Debussy's "Prelude a l'apres-midi d'un Faune", arranged by Henry and Stravinsky's "The rite of Spring", arranged by Richard. On leaving the chapel Edward and I virtually exclaimed in great fervour together, "Wasn't that just extraordinary?!" It wasn't just extraordinary to play those things as a duet with both players reading the same score, and jointly operating the most complex specification changes, and sharing the pedalboard; but it was extraordinary because I just can't imagine arranging these pieces in the relatively short time they had. These were not short pieces and the two lasted 40 minutes. Edward and I agreed that, whilst we were not great fans of The Rite of Spring, the performance had been even more meaningful and significant on the organ, almost as if it had been written for organ by Stravinsky in the first place.

Henry and Richard came down to the chapel floor to great applause, they being dressed in their day-to-day casuals. Who would know what these two young men are if you see them on the streets of Cambridge? Yet, some day, they will both be famous organists, if not famous now.

Henry bade us goodbye outside on the chapel lawns (all cut immaculately during the night, I suspect) and invited us to visit again any time.

And so, after two days in such a wonderfully saturated cultural, respectful and peaceful town we had been to visit five college chapels and two churches. Like the old Mackeson advert: it looks good, feels good and, by golly, it does you good! We returned having spent two days in wonderland.

I'm sure, for the five of us, we could not thank Anthony and Henry enough. At a time when they were so busy, they provided for us a wonderful selection of venues to see and organs to play. The time and consideration they have taken to do this was not insignificant, and so we are most grateful for all they did for us. We wish them every success in what they do, and for their futures.

In all, it turned out to be a wonderful 2 days of organ playing / sight seeing & being in the presence of 'masters of their art' (IB) and it had been a most amazing experience (ES).

John Chapman.