

BEDS AND HERTS ORGANISTS' ASSOCIATION

SPRING BANK HOLIDAY VISIT TO LIVERPOOL

Four members signed up for this repeat visit to Liverpool for four days at the end of May, leaving on a Sunday afternoon, having fulfilled organist duties at church in the morning. After a leisurely journey and time to settle in to the Feathers Hotel (now Hallmark), we all met up at a fine eatery a stone's throw from the Anglican Cathedral. We welcomed Rosemary Knight from the EDOA, who was on familiar ground back in Lancashire, and also Joe Wakefield who is the youngest ever President of the Liverpool Organists' Assn, and who had helped our own President David Warner in organising this event. We didn't take long to understand his Liverpudlian brogue, and he proved a delightful and informative companion throughout our stay.

Bank Holiday Monday was a day of three treats: the first, a traditional Holiday recital at the Anglican Cathedral, given this year by David Poulter, Director of Music, who is shortly to move on from Liverpool into a free-lance role. His programme, from the lofty console, made us fully aware of all the component sections of the organ, from those cased in the chancel to the Central Organ in the nave and an occasional climax from the reeds in the Corona Gallery; it included Howells' Sarabande for the Morning of Easter, Parry's Fantasia and Fugue in G, Reger's Toccata and Fugue in D minor/major, and Messiaen's Dieu Parmi Nous - La Nativite de Seigneur. These tours de force were interspersed with JS Bach Chorale Preludes and his Trio Sonata No.1. What a feast, illuminated by Joe Riley's expert programme notes. (Google 'Liverpool Cathedral organ' for full details of this massive instrument.)

Lunch followed in the cathedral refectory, and then free time, when Rosemary fearlessly climbed the Cathedral Tower. The rest of us rested until the afternoon recital at the Metropolitan Catholic Cathedral, (known familiarly as Paddy's Wigwam) now celebrating its 50th Anniversary Year. This cathedral has a Walker organ, which, though huge, is built into a more compact space, with the circular architecture and the stained glass of the building providing additional attractions. For this recital, James Luxton, Assistant Director of Music, entertained us with a familiar Purcell Trumpet Tune, JS Bach's Pièce a 5, three French works by Alain, Langlais and Lefebure-Wely; then part of Philip Glass's Satyagraha Act 3 (no, not familiar to us either, and needing more hearings to achieve appreciation!), and William Walton's Pieces for the film Richard III, and a rousing Crown Imperial to finish. I was particularly drawn to James' skilful use of the cathedral acoustics to create dramatic diminuendos and pauses in his playing.

We spent the early evening at St.Anne's, Aigburth, where Joe Wakefield is the regular organist. This has a sturdy three-manual Willis organ, built in 1913 and replacing an earlier Bevington. We all took pleasure in playing it in turn, and were also introduced to the "quarter cheese" device which controls the effect of hand and pedal pistons. This visit was

followed by a journey through a heavy storm to a 'superior' Chinese Restaurant, favoured by the great and the good in the Liverpool church organ scene. As often occurs with Chinese menus, it was difficult to do justice to the quantity of excellent food provided.

On Tuesday morning we ventured into the Wirral through one of the Mersey Tunnels, and visited Port Sunlight, and specifically the very large URC church there, Christ Church, originally planned as an Anglican church with a cruciform shape. Port Sunlight was created by Lever Brothers to house workers in the original soap factory – along similar principles as, say, Letchworth and Welwyn Garden City in Hertfordshire. Here we were met by Jonathan Bowden, organist and choir director, who gave us an introduction to the church and (another!) Willis organ. Apart from enjoying its power in playing, we were led into the interior of the organ by Jonathan, which was roomy enough to explore its intricacies face to face. This was followed by lunch in the pub restaurant next door, which was originally a 'dry' pub, until local wives pleaded with the local magistrates to allow the sale of alcohol, so that they could know where their menfolk were.

Back under the Mersey, for a fascinating visit to the Willis Organ Works, guided by Jonathan Bowden who for his day job holds the responsible position of Finance Director of the firm. He was a model guide and raconteur, and showed us several of the very small and very large physical operations entailed in the construction of organs. Some of the photos on our website will give an impression of a workshop like any other, but the specific needs of organ builders, like casting benches for creating the metal pipes, the tongue curling machine for ease of making reeds, the creation of huge wind chests and miniature valves for individual pipes, all crafted individually by hand. As Jonathan remarked, it is only when potential or actual customers visit the works that they realise why their pet organ project is costing so much – a highly labour intensive business.

Our last evening meal was at Ego Restaurant, next to the (Liverpool) Philharmonic Hall, and we then 'retired' to a quaint pub, with historic artifacts suspended from the ceiling, and home-grown music for local entertainment.

On our last morning, Nathan Hood, a New Zealander who also works at the Willis works, took time off to welcome us to the organ he plays regularly at St. John's, Tuebrook. This is a Hill organ, originally built in 1867, and is now described as "an outstanding survival of a late 19th century Hill parish-church organ at its very best". Not only was the organ a powerful beast to play (two Open Diapasons on the Great and reeds on all three manuals and pedals), but I found some lovely quieter voices for a Howells Psalm Prelude. The brief history of the church provided a fascinating insight into church politics in the late Victorian era; St. John's is a highly decorated church building, and early vicars supported the rituals encouraged by the Oxford Movement, resulting in imprisonment for some. We are fortunate to live in rather more eirenic times.

We expressed our thanks to Joe and David for putting such an interesting and stimulating programme together, and particularly Joe's taxi service to enable us to move around the

city. I hope this report is illuminating to you, and may whet your appetite for any similar visit we may plan in future. Liverpool is a great city.

Stephen Turner.

*Some photographs of the visit may shortly be seen on our website:
bedsandhertsorganists.org*