

Chairman's Report AGM 2020

It has been quite a year! Little did we know in the closing days of 2019 just how our lives would change and how the work of the Association would be affected by events that were yet to unfold. However, despite everything to which the virus and the lockdowns have subjected us, we have managed to achieve a lot.

Following the last AGM we were fortunate to have Stephen Alliss, Head Tuner with Harrison & Harrison, to speak to us of the work he does and the extent of his tuning round. Unfortunately, it was not possible to connect Stephen's Apple laptop to my projector which saw us crowding around the screen in a way that simply would not be possible this year. We saw some of the stunning photographs Stephen had taken during his travels and were treated to glimpses not only of the inside of the organ cases at Kings and Coventry, but to entertaining anecdotes and insights into the relationship between tuner and organist, being on stand-by for the King's Nine Lessons and Carols and for the St Alban's International Organ Competition. Since then, many of us have heard for ourselves what fine work Stephen does since he took over the tuning of the organs in Derby Cathedral.

Our programme of events, so carefully prepared in 2019, was severely curtailed; lockdown and an increasing degree of concern began to impose a rather oppressive influence on our daily lives. However, we were able to manage two events before the lockdown was imposed.

Any association would have been proud of the preparation and presentation that provided the solid foundation of the very successful Vierne Day: Stephen John's analysis of Vierne's Second Organ Symphony; Tom Corfield's account of the teaching at the Paris Conservatoire, the influence of Cavallé-Coll on organ composition, and life in the Parisian organ loft; David Cowan's session on how to perform Vierne - our thanks to those who volunteered to play for that - and finally, superb performances of Vierne works by Alex Binns and Ed Turner on the Compton organ in Derby Cathedral.

And we should not forget those who had less public roles - sandwiches, teas and coffees, door-keeping duties, printing, finance . . . the list could go on. The day was a triumph and was roundly praised by those visiting from other associations and with good reason; it was a splendid occasion that reflected very well on the willingness of members to give freely of their time and expertise. Our thanks go to everyone who helped to make the day such a success.

As uncertainty was beginning to settle into our consciousness and the dangers of Covid became clearer, our planned trip to Lincoln, arranged by Margaret Eades, Richard Brice's talk on the music of René Becker, and a visit to the organs here at St Edmund's all had to be postponed.

However, we did just manage the visit arranged by Terry Bennett to three local organs. Starting at Repton with the 1998 Peter Collins organ we sampled one of the few organs in the county built within the last 30 years, after which we ate a bring-and-share lunch under the tower, with beverages supplied by the ladies of the Church. Moving to Newton Solney we played the Bevington organ restored by Mike Thompson and Simon Tipping; it is now an excellent example of what a small, reliable, well-voiced pipe organ can do to support good music-making. The third venue, St Mark's Church, Winshill, is large with a good acoustic and a good-sized three-manual Walker organ. Still largely in its original condition - and quite probably the last organ constructed under the supervision of Joseph Walker - it spoke well in the building and proved to be a fine example of the Walker sound. Each of the instruments had its charms and, of course, difficulties - ever the lot of the peripatetic organist! Our thanks to Terry Bennett for organising a most enjoyable day.

More recently, after restrictions were relaxed, we were very fortunate to be able to hear Tom Corfield's presentation on practising. The event was well attended, despite people's lasting and very sensible concerns about the virus. St Matthew's, Darley Abbey proved to be a most suitable venue as the console

was moved into position ready for Tom to demonstrate various points. It was a most enjoyable and rewarding evening with some new ideas for everyone, especially for those of us of more mature years for whom practising has, perhaps, become a chore rather than a means of fulfilment through understanding. Tom's ability to crystallise all of those ideas that have hovered around our collective consciousness for so many years was complemented by his understated dry humour and apposite quotes. So many members have spoken to me about how useful and challenging Tom's suggestions were . . . though I confess, Tom, that I have yet to successfully swap hands for the manual parts in a Bach Trio Sonata!

The Children and the Organ project (CATO) has been one of the many victims of the virus during the last year, and for the foreseeable future it is not likely to be safe for the CATO team to mix with school pupils in close quarters. As there will also be considerable pressure on teaching time to help pupils catch up with their lost learning, it may well be some months before the team can spring into action once more. We must hope that a means of combating the virus can be found so that Stephen and the team can resume their excellent work.

Planning for next year has been severely compromised - who amongst us has a clear vision of what 2021 will look like? However, we hope to be able to visit Lincoln, hear Richard's talk, and visit St Edmund's to look at the Wood organ and the Compton Miniatura in the church hall. Other events may be possible as the course of the pandemic becomes clearer - only time, the virus and the arrival of an effective vaccine will allow us to make firm commitments.

Turning to the Committee, I have been most grateful for the contributions they have made to the running of the Association this year. I feel that special mention should be made of the work of Gillian Chatto, the Honorary Treasurer, and Laurence Rogers our Newsletter Editor. Gillian achieved a banking coup early in 2020, which resulted in a fine sum coming into the Association account, and has also done much work evaluating new accounts and establishing the most profitable way to bank the Stow legacy. Laurence, as ever, has worked throughout the year to provide us with one of the best Association Newsletters in the country. Please support his work by continuing to provide articles and photographs - he is always pleased to receive them.

Running constantly in the background during the last year has been the work attached to the Ed Stow legacy. It became clear in the final days of 2019 that a substantial sum from Ed's estate might come to the Association in recognition of Ed's long membership of the DDOA. Ed was a highly respected musician and organ builder who restored over thirty instruments in the county. His well-earned retirement was sadly cut short by cancer - a tragedy for Ed and his family and a great loss for those of us who knew him and had worked with him.

After lengthy correspondence with Ed's sisters Helen and Ros, Ed's executors, it became clear that they wanted ideas to help them disburse Ed's estate. An Extraordinary Committee Meeting was held in January to come up with ideas that would support those things of which Ed might have approved. A list was duly submitted to Helen and Ros with some rough costings, and finally, a lunch at Westerman Towers for twenty people, with Helen and Ros as honoured guests, helped them to decide what course of action to follow.

Not only was the list of suggestions approved, but a further £30,000 was added to the sum for the restoration of organs in the Derby area, bringing the total funding to £100,000. Superficially, a simply wonderful opportunity to honour Ed's work in the area and his commitment to the Association; in practice, one requiring extensive critical thinking and work by the Committee.

Terry Bennett and I spent a day in Cambridge to look at the Robin Jennings box organ in Trinity College Chapel. The staff at Trinity were very pleased with the instrument, which had clearly been built by a master craftsman. Robin has also built instruments for the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, St Edmundsbury Cathedral and St Martin-in-the-Fields; other instruments made by Robin have found their

way to prestigious musical institutions around the world. Terry and I had no hesitation in recommending a Jennings instrument to Helen and Ros and to the Committee. I am pleased to report that an order has been placed for a four stop box organ that will live in Derby Cathedral, but will remain the property of this Association. Alex Binns and I have considered how best to celebrate the arrival of the new instrument, though no firm decisions have been made. As with so many other things, we are dependent upon the course of the pandemic and the timescale for the building of the organ - Robin has suggested a 12 month lead-in period.

Extensive discussions with Daniel Moulton of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire have taken place to help formulate our ideas on how we might most effectively employ funds awarded as a bursary. At a recent Committee meeting it was agreed that there would be a vote each year on the allocation of funds to the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, and that there would be provision for local grants where appropriate. The Committee has also begun to look at the criteria we might apply when allocating funds for teaching new pupils how to play the organ.

During the Zoom meeting we shall ask you to vote on changes to the Constitution. The changes will allow us to put into effect the ideas that Helen and Ros have approved and funded so generously.

Developing and implementing these ideas has created a lot of work for the Committee and resulted in a veritable flood of emails asking for yet more decisions and opinions. My thanks to them for their patience and all of their work during such an extraordinary year. I have counted myself fortunate that I have been able to draw on experience, good counsel, good ideas and good humour. During the coming year the Committee will have to decide upon criteria to be applied to:

- the funding of organ restorations
- how we might most effectively support recitals
- the management of the teaching scheme and, Covid permitting,
- the organisation of a lecture by a national or international organ builder.

It would be interesting, for example, to have an illustrated presentation on the progress of work at Notre Dame, or perhaps hear from Mark Venning how the Harrison & Harrison building philosophy has evolved over the last hundred years . . . there are so many possibilities, but we might have to wait until 2022 for any plans to come to fruition. This last element of the forward planning, the lecture, is likely to be done in conjunction with the IAO as part of a national or regional event or possibly with other associations.

Ed's legacy has provided exciting opportunities for the Association, but we must not lose sight of the importance of the local events that draw us together. These events provide the opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the social interaction essential to the support of a group of people who generally work in isolation. The Committee is always open to suggestions of new discussion topics, new venues, and new ideas that will bring organs, organ music and organ playing to a wider audience, so please do pass on any ideas to the new Committee.

After that very up-beat appraisal of the last year, we move on to the reality with which we are faced.

The number of organs and the number of people playing the organ is dwindling - there really is no getting away from that: congregations age; places of worship close; funding becomes ever tighter, and the number of people willing to commit to regular practice and playing falls as life becomes ever more complex and the number of alternative interests, particularly for young people, increases. I have noted with interest over the last few years that quite a number of churches rely upon a rota of organists to ease the burden of service playing - committing to an occasional service is far less onerous than playing for eight or ten - something for us to bear in mind when dealing with clergy and potential organists as part of the scheme.

As an association I believe we feel a sense of purpose, supported and motivated by the intelligent application of experience, vision, and commitment to the idea that there *is* a role for organs and organists in the future. As teachers, amateurs and performers I believe we all have a sense that that which has given *us* so much fulfilment and pleasure *is* worth passing on to a new generation of players.

We know from experience that this will not be easy. We shall have to be innovative, exploring new ways in which we can encourage musicians of all ages to examine the marvellous opportunities for music-making and intellectual development that we know playing the organ can bring. We shall also have to be innovative in devising ways to market the expertise and experience that the Association is able to offer to draw new people in.

Ed's legacy has provided us with a renewed incentive to find new members - and just pausing for a moment to reflect on that, there is, I think, a rich irony that Ed will be the focus of far more attention now than he would ever have been comfortable with in life . . . can anyone else hear a distant harrumphing and muttering?

Let us look to the future and do what we can to bring new people to the organ and to the Association. We need younger members to keep us on our toes and to absorb the values and aims of the Association before they take our place, organising what I hope they will come to see as the future of 'their' Association. It may appear that I am about to launch into John of Gaunt's speech from Richard II - 'This Royal Throne of Kings, this sceptre'd Isle,' but, I shall restrain myself. It would, however, be surprisingly apt: Gaunt had endured the first wave of the Black Death in the 1340s and Shakespeare was writing the play in the 1590s, also a time of plague. Gaunt is presenting his idealised image of England - and if I appear to be casting myself as Gaunt, who gives the speech from his deathbed, I should tell you that I'm not ready to 'shuffle off this mortal coil' just yet - neither am I casting anyone in the role of the indecisive Richard II, despite the undoubted opportunities that that affords . . .

The future of our Association *is* out there; we, and I would like to include *all* of the members in this, need to draw in new enthusiasts and musicians, our new generation of organists, to secure the future that I believe we all hope for.

Let me close with something from the Roman writer Lucretius:

Inque brevi spatio mutantur saecula animantum
Et quasi cursores vitae lampada tradunt
(*De Rerum Natura*)

In a short while the generations of living creatures are changed,
and like runners, pass on the torch of life.

We need to pass on our torch.

Tony Westerman
Chairman