

Why Pipe Organ Building - by Ivor Norridge

This is the most common question I ever get asked by all sorts of people. It seems quite simple to understand why a person becomes a Bank Manager, a Doctor, an Estate Agent, a School Teacher, a Bus Driver or even a Parish Minister, but an Organ Builder – it's such a strange occupation for a fifteen year old boy just leaving school. Was I pushed or did I jump away from something else that was looming up ahead, did my parents have some sort of secret profession lined up for me that I dreaded, such as a steeplejack or deep sea diver, I never did find that one out.

It was 1949 when I left Townfield Boys School Hayes Middlesex, the Second World War had just ended, but we still had rationing to contend with. However my job as an organ builder had been planned a whole year before in 1948.

Let me go back to what may have been a starting point of sorts. Its 22nd February 1943, the place is an Oxfordshire village called Wheatley where we lived for most of the war years. Our Auntie Frances had a village shop called Walde, which she couldn't manage on her own because Uncle Peter was somewhere down South flying a spitfire aeroplane trying to shoot down the enemy. So we, or I should say my Mother helped run the place, which had the only wet battery charger in the district, and most radios in those days ran off wet batteries or accumulators. I was eight years old and along with all the other children in the village we had to amuse ourselves as best we could. Of course we were limited as to what we could do, we didn't have a play park or swimming pool, but we did have a railway station and a river. The railway was a single track line from Oxford to Princes Risborough and the station also had sidings where trucks were shunted daily delivering all sorts of goods - it was a very busy yard where lorries kept coming and going. It was an ideal sort of place for children to play, logs to climb up and over, a crane with its chain hanging down that was a smashing swing and the buffers at the end of the line, these were metal and sloping down to the ground at the back, which made a super slide, pull yourself up, turn around and slide back down - keep doing it over and over again, or that is until the trucks came running down very quietly along the track and just happened to hit the wooden buffer as you had reached over with your hand to pull yourself up — and Wham! My right hand got trapped between the buffer and truck, fingers crushed, blood everywhere and a bit of screaming. Lots of railwaymen running around shouting, some of them had long poles with funny angled metal ends which they put under the wheels and levered the truck into motion, it was hard work, eventually they managed to move the truck enough to free my right hand - whereupon I ran away back home and ended up with the local nurse/midwife. She was wonderful; she carefully sorted my fingers out, cleaned them up, splinted them and bandaged them. Had it not been for her good work I would have had my fingers and possibly my whole hand amputated. The local doctor was Dr Orchard, he also played his part, but it was the efforts of the nurse over many months that really saved my fingers and I shall always be grateful for her kindness. Incidentally Dr Orchard had a son just a couple of years older than me, his name was Julian and he eventually became a film actor, appearing in many early comedies.

After many months, probably about a year, although I cannot remember exactly, all the bandages were finally removed and I was given finger exercises to do on a regular basis. It was mostly drumming individual fingers on a table, over and over again, it was difficult and painful at first, but they wouldn't let me stop. Eventually the suggestion was made that piano lessons would help. I'm not sure whose idea it was, but I was taken along to see Ms Tame the local piano teacher who kindly agreed to help. At first all I did was

continue to drum my fingers, but instead of a table, it was a keyboard and different keys made different sounds, it was wonderful. I stayed with Ms Tame until we moved back to Hayes in 1945.

So started my introduction to music — it really came about by accident, courtesy of the railway. Part two was my introduction to sacred music at St Mary's Parish Church Hayes Middlesex. After returning to Hayes from Wheatley I was advised-to continue the finger exercises, so another piano teacher was found, Mrs Rixon in Hayes. She was good and started putting me through the RSM examinations. So I continued with the piano and at the junior school I sometimes played the old instrument in the hall - it just so happened that one day the Rev Albert Hill the local vicar heard me playing and said I should attend the Sunday school next Sunday afternoon at 3pm, not, would I like to, or is it possible if nothing else was happening, but that I would do so. So I did and accompanied the hymns on the piano - easy ones were chosen and I was allowed to play them over a couple of times first. It's strange but sight-reading was never too difficult for me. I continued to play for Sunday School Service for many years and Rev Hill was really a very nice generous man, it's just that when he wanted something he went out and got it.

The third and final part of this story involves St Mary's Church Hayes and its new organ. The John Compton Organ Co. Ltd. were in the process of building a new four unit pipe organ in the west gallery with a detached two manual stop key console at the head of the nave, north side. It was 1948 now and I was still playing the piano for Sunday school. The organist was Ernest Runnicles, a very nice man and a good musician. He persuaded me to have a go at the organ, which I did and with his help managed to get a tune out of it. He explained the various stops and how to develop different tone colours. He never actually gave me an organ lesson as such, but just a few hints and some old easy organ music. Gradually over the next couple of months I began to understand it better, I went into Church on a Tuesday evening to practice, even during the winter months when it was cold and dark. It was a 12th century Church surrounded by a cemetery, with a gas lamp in one corner that never gave out much light. That same year I was asked to play for Sunday services when Mr Runnicles went on holiday - the usual Sung Eucharist at 1 lam and Evensong at 6.30. Had to put in lots of practice, but they made it easy for me, we had a very good all male choir, the boys came from Dr Triplett's school where Mr Runnicles was headmaster. After that I- started doing weddings as well and-got half a guinea for each one - our Church was popular for weddings because it had a nice old lych gate which looked good in the photographs. I did not know until sometime later that Mr Runnicles was a very good friend of one of Compton's directors Mr James Taylor - later became affectionately known as JT, and still known as such many years later. I was introduced to JT during one of his visits to St Mary's - he often gave an impromptu recital after evensong. We got on very well and because I liked the organ so much I asked him for a job at his North Acton factory - he asked me to write a letter to the company, which I did and their reply was that I should write another letter the following year just before I left school. So in 1949 I wrote again and was told to start work on .Monday 23rd August 1949.

After a probation period of one year, I was indentured to a five-year apprenticeship in the voicing shop under John .Degans. in flue work and Frank .Hancock in reeds. Also in the voicing shop were Doug Lichfield, Saxon Aldred, Gerald Carrington and Michael Mason. The post war period was extremely busy including new instruments and many rebuilds.

So there we are - it all started by accident, that led to the piano and music, which in turn led to Church and sacred music and the final icing, on the cake was a spanking, brand new

Compton pipe organ - how could one possibly refuse to acknowledge the direction of employment. After spending fifty years in the one job you often look back at things and wonder - what if - but I never regret becoming an organ builder/tuner, the rewards are not financial, but the pleasure of producing an instrument in a beautiful building with a fine acoustic is enough satisfaction in itself.

I should, perhaps, explain a few more, facts, relating to. piano/organ tuition, although I said Mr Runnicles did not give me organ lessons, I was lucky enough to have won a three year Musicianship Course to Trinity College of Music, in September 1945 and in the final year one of my teachers was Charles Spinks, a very fine organist At 11 years old I was really, too young to have gained much benefit from Trinity, but the experience I had in general has no doubt helped me over the years. There was an old small two manual organ in room 7 which I managed to play occasionally, but I had to spend a bit of time round the back making a few running repairs to the 'action, that was before I joined Comptons.

It may be of interest that having completed all examinations for The Royal School of Music, I also began LTCL studies with John Brydson of Loughborough, but my real problem was being short of time to carry out studies - many weeks were spent organ building away from home, so I had to terminate my LTCL studies. I then, began to concentrate on various local music competitions around London, including Ealing Broadway, Balham & Streatham; the adjudicators included Sidney Harrison and Felix Swinstead. At St Mary's Parish Church Hayes I started a Youth Club Choir, which also entered competitions around London, we also toured Germany down the Rhine valley, giving concerts in halls and cafes, which gave us free meals. I also became involved with Geoffrey Oldnall who was conductor of Harlesden Choral Society, Handels Messiah included the organ and many Christmas concerts included the organ and piano solos or duets. My position as organist of St Olaves Church,-Hart Street, London was a fairly short period, due to petrol rationing in 1957, because of the Suez crisis -I had taken over the position after Mr E C Porter had left to become assistant to John Churchill at St Martins in the Fields London. I had helped to build the new Compton organ in St Olaves Church and turned pages for the opening recital by Dr Osborne Peasgood from Westminster Abbey.

My career in the organ building business started in 1949 and lasted through until 1999 - it is a fascinating story of hard work, a lot of pleasure, much travelling, access to private establishments and meeting all sorts of people from all walks of life, but above all being able to listen to talented organists playing the instrument that you had had a part of in its construction, or tuning of. Which is why I enjoy living in Edinburgh, we are so lucky to have so many fine organs to choose from and a wealth of excellent organists to demonstrate them to us.

Late 1958 became one of the special periods of my life, when I became involved in a ballroom dancing class being held by Victor Sylvester at the Majestic Cinema Wembley. I had a discussion with Geoffrey Oldnall a member of the Compton Electronic Organ section and we decided to take a chance, visit the Wembley cinema and try to learn how to dance properly, such as a Foxtrot, Waltz or Quickstep, at that point in time neither of us were able to dance correctly. So on we went together one evening and joined forces with lots of nice people. This is when I met Joy Leonard, we became very involved with dancing and Joy also danced with Victor Sylvester personally. Eventually we became engaged and married in St Mary's Church Keaton at 2.30pm on Saturday 3rd March 1962. I did know that Dr Osborne Peasgood lived in Kenton quite near the church, so I had

planned to ask him to play for the service, but unfortunately he died a few months before the wedding, so we asked the regular organist to play for the service. Our first home was 37b High Street, Harrow-on-the-Hill, Middlesex. Two years later we moved to 50 Roman Way, Market Harborough, Leicestershire, where we set up the eastern section of the Midlands Branch of R&D Ltd. Ten years later we moved to Scotland and I became the Scottish Branch Manager based in Edinburgh. Our home was at 59 Moat View, Roslin. Midlothian.