Simon Pulham

My name is Simon Pulham. I was born in Ipswich in 1956.

*We are meeting in Bishop and Son. Can you explain the location?*

Bishops came to this particular premises in 1950, we build and restore church organs. The firm actually came to Ipswich in 1897 and we had a large premises on the Norwich Road which was a converted flour mill and because of road widening in the Marylebone Road in London, the premises that we had there had to be demolished. The owner of the firm at the time found out about this building in Ipswich, apparently on his way to Norwich on the train, and saw it in the distance and stopped off and bought it. And so we moved to Ipswich in 1897 and we continued on the Norwich Road until 1946.

During the war years, many of the staff of course, were called up and when the owner, Edward Suggate died, his daughter took on the business. She was advised that organ building would never be the same again, because Bishops had employed at most 60 people in that factory on Norwich Road and they could make anything to do with an organ.

And so, sadly, she sold the factory and a lot of the equipment. By 1949 1950, as things were beginning to settle down, the war having been over, lots of old customers were getting back in touch. Such things that had been saved from the original works had been put into store here at 38 Bolton Lane, so there was space that would make a workshop and they had the telephone put in, temporarily in 1950 and here we are in 2017 and we are still temporarily, waiting for the move to new premises.

*What’s your own history, how did you come to be an organ builder?*

When I first started to be interested in the organ, I asked what qualifications you needed to be an organ builder and I was told at the time that you needed to be young and stupid and I qualified quite well on both counts and 44 years later I’m still here. The way in to an interest in the organ was that a lot of them were choir boys and became interested in how the organ worked, as they went from the front row trebles to the back row choir men. And a number of people were drawn in to an interest in the mechanics of what was accompanying them when they were singing.

My own particular route was sort of in that way but not quite.

The first time I remember being impressed by the sound of an organ was… I was a wolf cub. I wasn’t a cub scout, I was a wolf cub and every year in Ipswich we had a church parade for St George’s Day and I remember going to St John’s in Cauldwell Hall Road and hearing the organ and being surprised to know that it was the headmaster of my primary school who was playing the organ. He played Nimrod from the Enigma Variations and I can remember now the hairs on the back of my very young neck standing up, and that was for some reason that was the first moment of an instrument making an impact

It wasn’t to go any further until I was at secondary school when a teacher arrived who was interested in the organ. It wasn’t a traditional organ with pipes, it was a large harmonium really, and quite an impressive one, and my RE teacher, said to me ‘well, if you’re really interested, Simon, why don’t you write to Bishops and see if you can go there for a holiday job’. I came for a holiday job and the firm very kindly said, well, we could offer you an apprenticeship. And so that’s how it started.

*What is involved in training to be an organ builder?*

I stayed on at school until I was 16 and then in the trade we used to do what was called a craft training period which was 16 until 20, so there was a four year period.

Now, in previous generations, you could have been apprenticed at 14 and an old fashioned traditional apprenticeship was seven years, so you would have done 14 until 21. Now you have to be in full time education until you are 18 or be in a recognised training period, so I think one of the biggest differences is people come into the trade at an older age.

I started with Carl Leonard as the tuner’s boy because the way into the trade was that you started by going out with the tuner and pressing the notes while he was tuning the organ. And I spent the first 15 months of my career going out most days, pressing the notes of the tuner, so you learned the instruments that the firm looked after on the tuning round. You heard what tuning amounted to. You learned how to adjust actions and maintain instruments so it’s actually a very good way in. But, my goodness me, it gave you the chance to not only experience the life, what the firm’s business was and the instruments that we looked after, and how to tune and maintain them.

Carl Leonard, a Londoner by birth, and he was in the choir at Emmanuel Church, Harrow Road.

…time came for school leaving and he spoke to a friend who he’d been in the scouts with and he said ‘what you doing then?’ So he said ‘well, I’ve got a great job, I’m working for an organ builder.’ so she made contact with the firm and Carl was apprenticed to Bishop and Son at 16B Finchley Road. and that was a choir boy introduction.

And he started work with the firm in 1952. They used to send the London apprentices down to spend at least a year in Ipswich. Harry Looders the workshop foreman here was a specialist in woodwork and sound board manufacturer and that particular talent wasn’t available in London at that point. So the boys would come down here…away from home.

And Carl came down and, while he was here, met a local girl called Sheila who sang in the choir at St Helen’s and he met her because he was cleaning the organ at St Helen’s and they remain happily married after nearly 60 years. Carl actually finally retired in 2015. He was still working three days a week up until the time he retired. And that is another thing you find, particularly with the older generation of organ builders, there is something about this trade. I think most people you speak to would agree, it’s a lifetime’s interest and certainly has been for Carl.

*What were some of the memories he had of the early days?*

The thing I think these days that many of us, certainly my age born in the late 50s, don’t remember, is the hardships that six years’ war brought with rationing and unavailability of materials and things. And in those days, timber was under restriction, there were lots of churches that had been blitzed, and organs stood in ruins or had been partially destroyed. So, much of what the trade was doing in those days was secondhand because there wasn’t stuff about. Skills had been lost, with sadly people dying in the war. You know, the whole country was picking itself up and I think one of the stories Carl always used to tell was they found that if you could get a secondhand soldier’s coat in lovely red cloth that if you cut it up, the bushing, as we call it, around the stops, would last for years. So when you looked at the stops and you saw these lovely red circles round it, it could be a soldier’s coat.

Felt was in short supply so, in the days when ladies wore felt hats…even in my time here when the scouts next door at St Margaret’s had their big annual jumble sale, they would always save all the felt hats for us so that we could punch valves out of them– it was lovely quality felt.

*What have you learned through Carl?*

Carl was the principle tuner here so it was a jolly good way to learn the trade, being in with a very experienced person; to know how to tune, how to maintain, all those aspects of the trade and he was a very good woodworker and very proud. I’m 61, but if Carl comes in I still think I’m the boy, you know, so there’s that very old fashioned sort of aspect to it.

*What area geographically did you cover?*

And at the time the firm moved to Ipswich in 1897, they maintained an office and a small workshop in London because not all the staff wanted to move to sleepy Suffolk. And so between the two offices we probably looked after 500 or 600 instruments. But principally in those days our work, if you drew a line from the Wash down to Bournemouth and anything south and east of that was where we had work scattered in various places. So quite a big area.

*What skills are necessary to be an organ builder?*

It has to be in part an ability to work with your hands because the skills are many and various but it can be woodwork, metalwork, leatherwork, electrical work. One of the advantages has been that people who have been brought up here, in my time, always had the chance to do something of everything.

What tends to happen over the years is people focus in – they have an area that absorbs them more perhaps than others, but a good organ builder you need to know every part of the trade, or have a working knowledge of it.

Essentially every one of the 250 instruments we look after here is different. You press a note and a pipe sounds. And it can be as simply as a system of wooden rods and levers. and things that look like bell cranks. So the organist presses a note and a set of rods and levers work, opens a valve or a pallet as we call it, and a pipe sounds.

Or when you press a key, from the key goes a length of lead tubing and you send a puff of air down the tubing and it arrives at the pipe, and there is a pneumatic action. A little primary bellows is made to inflate, that works the valve and that makes the pipe sound.

Then, a telephone engineer called Robert Hope Jones, and others, in the 19th century were interested in electricity and the application of it, and he effectively designed a system whereby you didn’t have a tube and you didn’t have a wooden stick, you had an electric contact. When the organist pressed the note, contact was made, the signal was sent down the wire and that worked an electromagnet at the other end, and that moved the valve, which made the pipe sound.

And then in more recent years, we have a computer in the back of the organ scanning what the organ is playing and everything is sent down a six core digital cable and decoded in the organ and that tells the valves what to do.

*Your work today, is it mainly renovation rather than building new?*

Within Bishop and Son largely since the Second World War, we have been noted for restoration work. It depends, someone could ring up and say could you make us an instrument for so and so. Another one will say we need the organ cleaning, we need the organ moving, could we enlarge the organ, could we make the organ smaller, could we put it on a gallery, …there are so many aspects of it.

*How big is this sector – how many other companies are there like Bishops and how many organs are there out there?*

I reckon there are about 500 individuals who are organ builders and those are divided into companies. We now have about 12 people, between Ipswich and London. There are firms - our colleagues up in Durham, Harrison and Harrison, still maintain a staff of 25. And so those 500 people could be one man businesses, which largely do tunings and small work, to people like Harrisons who do cathedral organs. In fact, they rebuilt the organ at Bury St Edmunds in the Cathedral.

It’s the big firm and the one man band and everything in between. And sometimes, these days, people collaborating with one another which we have done with our former colleagues on a number of occasions.

*How did Bishops get involved with the organ at St Margaret’s?*

In the vestry at St Margaret’s there is an engraving of the church looking westward and there is a gallery as there often was for the singers and an organ. Bell ringers hate organs at the west end because when they are ringing and the organ is playing, they can’t hear what they’re doing.

This is going back to the early 19th century, and it emerged when we were looking one day that that little organ had been moved at some point, possibly around 1870, to Dennington Church, also up the road near Framlingham. And St Margaret’s were having a new more modern organ. And that was built by the famous London firm of William Hill. And, in point of fact, if you look at the north-east corner at St Margaret’s, the bottom of the case of the Hill organ is still there dividing off the choir vestry. So that was 1877, or thereabouts.

By 1909, 1911, the organ was up for renewal again, and the Hill organ was rebuilt by the famous Leeds firm of James Binns and, had the system of rods and levers. And it was incorporated and modernised by the Binns firm who introduced the lead tubes that blow the air down the tubes. So it had three manuals and pedals and it was in the space, as you look at the altar at St Margaret’s, to the right on the south side, and it took up all of the chapel and that lovely window, which allows so much sunlight in, was boarded up internally so it made the chancel very dark. And there was this large organ which really by the late 1970s, was beginning to show its age.

We should record that, although I never saw it work, it had a wonderful example of a mechanical blowing apparatus with a huge DC motor and rear stat, and levers and chains which once drove it. And it had been taken out of commission when the town went over to alternating current, because it worked on DC as a lot of electricity suppliers did, and had a simple centrifugal fan to blow it, as most organs do now.

A customer of ours over at St Neots, rang up and said, ‘do you want a three manual Walker organ from Holy Trinity Bedford because the school are taking over the church for a dining hall and it will go in the skip. They need it out.’

So, we said, ok. All right. And my colleague here, Carl Leonard, , who was very actively involved at St Margaret’s, said, well, we’re looking for an organ.

So he went over with John Parry who was then the organist, and they saw the organ at Bedford and they said ‘we’ll have it!’ And so there was this hurried removal. A large instrument would fill a furniture lorry so I think it was probably Wyards went over and everything was loaded up and it came back here and, for some time, was stored I think at St Clements which by then was redundant

It was decided that the organ from Bedford would be installed at St Margaret’s on the north side which, once the Binns organ was dismantled and sold and removed, allowed the window to be opened as we see it today. And that glorious south facing window was revealed, with the sunlight pouring in. So that’s how the present St Margaret’s organ came to be here. So it was built by the famous firm of Walker in London and for All Holy Trinity at Bedford, and now St Margaret’s Ipswich.

*But they had to pay for it?*

I believe I’m right in saying that Bedford said ‘we’ll give it to you’. Because they needed it out of the way but obviously it then cost to dismantle it and move it. But it’s amazing sometimes in the organ world, because instruments which would cost thousands and thousands of pounds if you were going to set out and make one like it today, will change hands for a few hundred pounds or be given away. But you see then there was the cost of moving it and re-erecting it, and giving it a major overhaul.

*You’ve mentioned Carl – can you tell us something about him?*

*Once you start organ building, you said, it hooks you in– what is the fascination and fulfillment for you?*

I was always interested in history and was brought up with a father, like his father before him, that always looked at churches. Both my father and grandfather were avid readers and they both enjoyed reading memorials. My father and grandfather were both choristers. Going into a church was no surprise to me.

We have the privilege in Bishops of having customers who have been on our books for over 100 years. And I can take you to an organ in north Suffolk where on the organ console, a card would be left everywhere the tuner went saying ‘I came on this day and…’ . There is a church in north Suffolk where there are a set of those cards that are complete and go back to about 1934, and all from Bishop and Son.

But it is a sense of continuity that is fulfilling. One of the people who taught Carl who he greatly admired was a wonderful old gentleman, called Harry Lugers. Now Harry, was a Londoner and he had come down to Ipswich in the early 1920s to do his apprenticeship, married a local girl. Now he taught Carl an enormous amount, and by the time I met him, in the early 70s he was still doing three days a week. People like Harry, they were in their own way very, very fine tradesman. He was a very good woodworker and what you’d call in those days, soundboard handy – he specialised in making soundboards. He started as a boy in north London in the late 1918, 1919.

There was another organ builder in Ipswich called Sidney Bishop who would also have been a Londoner and came into work into Westbourne Mills when the firm first came here. I remember Sid as an old man and he’d started with the firm in 1903. So, even in my working lifetime, I knew people that had started with the firm at the early part of the 20th century. And they were still interested in organs.

*What do you know about the organists at St Margaret’s?*

The first one I’ve really known anything about was a man who was sort of legendary called Jonathan Job, and he was organist at St Margaret’s. He was one of those sort of legendary people that even when I was young, people used to say as they do in Ipswich, ‘oh boy he was a rare man, you ought to have heard old Job play’. So he did do a lot –he conducted the Ipswich Male Voice Choir which, before the war, was a big choir, they broadcast. He was no mean musician.

When I first started work, the lady who had taken the St Margaret’s organ through the war was a lady called Miss Pretty and she was a very loyal member of St Margaret’s and probably played her last service in the late 70s.

John Parry who had been an organ scholar at Cambridge and was then teaching at Northgate School for Boys, came to the town and spent a short time as the organist at St Augustine’s but then came to St Margaret’s and was really involved until his very sad illness a few years ago, for over 40 years and John was a fine player. Sadly he had a stroke which meant he couldn’t play any longer. So they have a long line of good organists at St Margaret’s.

*How do you see the future?*

The demise of church choirs, has reduced the choir boys who became organ builders. It was a route in. And it saddens me that so much of that has gone because it was a wonderful tradition.

The focus of where the clergy have taken the church and the style of worship has sidelined the organ in some places, in some places it’s got rid of it completely. But, on the other hand, there are places like St Margaret’s, St Mary the Tower and other towns where that great choral tradition is maintained

There is a future, but it will be different as every generation has found. It certainly won’t, as I look towards the end of my full time career, be the same job for anyone who’s starting now.

*Your workforce. Most of you are more mature. How did the younger worker come in to the business?*

He came to us through work experience. He came and did a fortnight here one summer because he was interested in woodwork and then he went to the local college and did a woodworking course three days a week and came here two days a week. And then, he decided he would come and be an organ builder.

*What publicity has the firm had?*

I would say that, most of our business, in my experience over the years, has been word of mouth. It’s a small world in some ways but there are grapevines and there are other organ builders, but it’s friendly rivalry. Yes, we are all in business and we all need work to do, but there is work about.

End

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