

In the EDOA Newsletter of September 2001 Eric Kirton reminisced about a meeting he had with Percy Whitlock in 1941. This is reprinted below to mark Eric Kirton's 100th birthday which was on April 25th this year.

A memorable meeting with Percy Whitlock

The life and music of Percy Whitlock (1903-46) have been painstakingly researched over 20 years, and brilliantly presented with illustrations and music examples in Malcolm Riley's book "Percy Whitlock, Organist and Composer: a biographical study" (2nd Edition 2003 ISBN 9781850722960). Anyone seeking information about Whitlock as a person, as a composer, or as a performer is strongly recommended to obtain this very readable book, which includes many quotations (some amusing) from Whitlock's personal diaries, concerning musical and other personalities he met in the course of his work.

My relationship with Percy Whitlock was brief, but memorable. It happened during a week's visit to Bournemouth in September 1941, when I was recuperating from overwork in the Second World War. Imagine my surprise and pleasure when I received a letter dated 27th August 1941 saying: "*I am in receipt of a letter from Mr H A Chambers who commends you to my tender care in the matter of making an arrangement for you to see the Pavilion organ during your visit to Bournemouth. I think the best thing would be for you to call at the Food Control office which is also situated in the Pavilion building, and where I shall normally be from 9am to 1pm, and from 2.15pm to 6pm – any day except Saturday and Sunday. We can then consider ways and means, and make a definite arrangement for you to see the organ*". This letter was typed on 'County Borough of Bournemouth' notepaper and bore the flowing signature now familiar to readers of the Whitlock Trust Newsletter. The Diary entry for this was "*Letter from Chambers of Novello's commending a Mr Kirton to my care. Wrote to both of them (Pvln. File)*".

Our mutual friend H A Chambers was himself the composer of many anthems and settings and a few short organ pieces. He also arranged others and was the author of a handbook on music manuscript. More importantly, perhaps, he had the final say on what Novello's published in the field of church music, and was a joint compiler of *The Anglican Chant Book* (Novello & Co Ltd., 1955). But Percy Whitlock's first words to me took me by surprise. "*How is Harvey Grace?*". He probably assumed that I, too, worked for Novello's where Harvey Grace of Chichester Cathedral edited the *Musical Times*, but the organ was, and is my hobby. (My association with H A Chambers stemmed from his spare time activity as an organist and choirmaster in West Harrow, where I learned a great deal from him, and eventually succeeded to that position from 1951 to 1955, as my first musical appointment.)

My meeting with Percy Whitlock took place in two stages, as it was obviously inconvenient during office hours, other than establishing that there had been alterations to the organ. So he gave me a date and time one evening when he would be free to take me to the organ itself. The Concert Hall was closed to the public when we passed through the door under the stage to the console, and I found myself seated at the 'monster' of 213 stopkeys, which I had seen in so many photographs, and heard in BBC radio broadcasts. He allowed me to play first, but

quickly said that I wasn't using the double touch in the right way. He moved me along the bench so that he could sit in the middle, and played to me for the rest of the time. Following that, we retired to his dressing-room under the stage where he wrote, from memory, full details of his wiring alterations to the organ, in red ink on a Compton specification leaflet. This included the composition of a 13-rank Plein Jeu (reproduced on pp. 192-4 of the biography with italics representing the red ink, and copied in the *Organists' Review* for February 1999).

As far as I know I am the only person to whom he gave these details, but it was not a case of being singled out. I happened to turn up at a time when it was fresh in his mind. Outside the Pavilion afterwards, he told me of a forthcoming broadcast of one of his orchestral works. It would be in about six weeks time and he was keen for me to hear it. As we parted, he said "*Write and tell me what you think of it!*".

I had hoped to round off an excellent week with a visit to his next Sunday evening concert, because posters showed that the programme would include Elgar's Imperial March, in which I was interested. Unfortunately, I 'missed the boat', because the hotel dinner overlapped the time of the concert. I hurried from the table as decently as I could and headed for the Pavilion, cautiously parting the blackout curtains in the doorway. A voice whispered to me that the house was full, and the curtains were closed in my face. In a split second I heard 2 or 3 notes from the organ, and saw the console light in the distance with the rows of heads silhouetted against it. Yes, the Sunday evening concerts were indeed popular.

I cannot remember clearly whether I heard the orchestral broadcast or not, but if I did, the quality of the reception was too poor to form any opinion of it. My impression was that the work referred to was the Symphony in G minor, but Malcolm Riley, who keeps a record of these things says it was impossible. Malcolm kindly sent me a photocopy of Whitlock's diary for three months to the end of October 1941, and I did not see any reference to the broadcast.

Percy Whitlock was a delightful person, a man of many parts, and a patriot who closely followed the progress of the war on the radio. His health was not robust, but his mental agility was never in doubt: his lively "*March for the Phoebe*" was written for brass band in the year after I met him. And what other organist could change nearly 20 stops in an organ by altering the wiring, without telling the builders? Eric Pask of Harpenden, ever a Whitlock fan, wonders what superlative works he might have written in a normal lifespan. That we shall never know, but we can be grateful for those which do exist, and that many manuscripts were recovered after being missing for a long time.

When Percy Whitlock died on 1st May 1946 at the early age of 42 years and 11 months, I was disappointed that the press gave less coverage to the event than to Sir Edward Bairstow, who sadly died on the same day (Harvey Grace had already died in 1944). When I put this to Dr Francis Jackson, he explained that Bairstow was better known than Whitlock. So there you have it from an expert with a foot in both camps.

Eric Kirton

Note from Robin Coxon: According to John Henderson's *A Directory of Composers for Organ*, it was H A Chambers who married the words *Dear Lord and Father of mankind* to a tune from Parry's oratorio *Judith*.

Note from editor: I thought it was Dr. Stocks who taught music at Repton School who did this; hence the name of the tune.