

The IAO Congress 2014

It was the thought of revisiting St Chad's College in Durham which attracted me to the IAO Congress in July this year. I had stayed at Chad's while doing some research in the Cathedral Library as a postgraduate student (i.e. last year), and I knew its splendid location just yards from the cathedral and in the loop of the river.

The first event of the congress was evensong at the cathedral, and although the cathedral choir was on holiday, the trebles together with the school choir were there to sing the service. *Bist Du bei mir* is a piece I frequently play for weddings, and it was good to hear this sung as the introit. Evensong was followed by the opportunity to meet other congress delegates in the cloisters for a small glass of wine.

The first full day was taken up by a coach outing to three organ recitals. At Brancepeth, the church had been gutted by fire in 1998 but when the rebuilding was complete a Father Willis organ was acquired, restored by Harrison & Harrison; this was originally a house organ but had spent some years at a mental hospital. David Ratnanayagam gave a recital here. We then proceeded to St George's Gateshead where Francesca Massey gave a recital on the Father Willis organ, preserved in its original condition due to poverty. The acoustic of the church was such that words were difficult to follow, but Francesca's playing was superbly clear and a bonus was the clear view of the console and her sinuous playing style. The third recital was given by Magnus Williamson at St Mary's R C Cathedral in Newcastle. Here we were saddened to learn of the death of Kenneth Tickell, who had built the organ in 2013.

The next day was spent in Durham itself, with a masterclass given by Francesca Massey in the morning, and then the chance to play the organs at various churches, colleges and the castle in the afternoon. There was an entertaining talk by Neil Collier from Priory Records, and in the evening a recital by James Lancelot in the cathedral. During the recital Mark Venning of Harrison & Harrison spoke about the various stops of the organ, and this I think added to one's appreciation of the registration in the Reubke *Sonata on the 94th Psalm* which followed.

Thursday was another day out, with a visit to the Bowes Museum at Barnard Castle en route to a masterclass given by Dame Gillian Weir on the Phelps organ at Hexham Abbey. The students performed excellently but nonetheless Dame Gillian Weir had plenty of advice about phrasing, accentuation and articulation - or to put it another way 'consonants and vowels'. In the evening the Annual Dinner of the IAO took place, at which the speaker was RCO President Catherine Ennis.

The final full day began with a most interesting talk on the history of the organ as an instrument of accompaniment by the Revd Canon Dr Nicholas Thistlethwaite. This was followed by a visit to the workshop of organ builders Harrison & Harrison on the edge of Durham. Unfortunately we were not able to see the Exeter Cathedral organ which was packaged up ready to go, but we were able to see some soundboards, and a voicer at work. The congress ended as it had begun with an evensong in the cathedral, this time sung by the Congress Choir. Those of us who had volunteered for the choir had been practising Locus

Iste, Walmisley in D Minor and the Ayleward Responses all week under the direction of James Lancelot.



1 The Phelps organ at Hexham Abbey

All in all it was a week packed with interesting and varied events. All the arrangements ran smoothly. IAO President James Lancelot played a full part in the week, not only giving the Wednesday recital but also demonstrating an historic instrument at the Bowes Museum, introducing speakers, and even inviting the Congress Choir to his house in the Cathedral Close for wine after the final evensong.

Delegates stayed either in the Radisson Blu Hotel or at St Chad's College and there was the opportunity to chat to fellow organists over meals. Next year the congress will be in Norwich but the plan is for delegates to arrange their own accommodation. Will it thereby lose some sense of community, one wonders.

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