

Oundle for Organists

Michael Stephens-Jones

For 3 days over the weekend after Easter, I was fortunate to attend the Oundle for Organists "Pulling out the Stops" course based at the historic Oundle School near Peterborough. There were 20 young organists there aged 12-15 from all over the country.



We were all a little nervous at first, but soon enjoyed working together on a team exercise in the school chapel building a basic organ with pump, wind reservoir & plastic pipes to connect notes. We even managed to play some tunes on it. Later an organ builder from Harrison's in Durham came to show us how they repair organs & tune pipes, which was fascinating.

However, we were mainly there to play ourselves & soon started work with our excellent tutors, moving around 4 organs in Oundle & nearby villages. We had general sessions on preparing scores, practise, sight reading & exam tips. I particularly enjoyed the pedalling & hymn playing classes, although I was scarily presented with lots of sight reading in many parts. We each had time with the tutors to play & improve pieces we had prepared & it was fascinating to listen to comments on other students' playing & see how they could also apply to us.

Saturday afternoon was a highlight of the course as we were taken to Cambridge & allowed to play the organs at Trinity Hall, St Catherine's & Clare Colleges. I particularly liked the sound of the St Catherine's organ which is an English/ Dutch mixture & very distinctive. Then it was on to King's College Chapel, where Ashley Grote, one of our

tutors, gave us a magnificent private recital covering many different styles. I thought his playing of a transcription of Mozart's *Clarinet Quintet* was amazing. Ashley, who is now Director of Music at Norwich Cathedral, used to be an organ scholar there so really knew the organ well & invited us into the organ loft afterwards.

After this inspiring recital we each had time with tutors to play through pieces & select one for the Sunday afternoon recital in the school chapel which has a fine 3 manual Danish organ. I was asked to play a French piece *Rorate Caeli* by Demessieux, as it provided a contrast to the large quantity of Bach & other traditional pieces. It is a piece I played at All Saints last Advent & I was glad I had chosen a piece I knew well when confronted by a strange organ with the tutors, everyone's parents & Martin & Mary listening & watching on a screen!



At the end of the weekend, I would really have liked to stay & do it all again but was too exhausted. The chance to play 7 different organs with such excellent tutors was a fantastic experience & has really inspired me to work hard on my technique now I am back home on our lovely 'Father' Willis organ.

Oundle for Organists was founded in 1985 by James Parsons to encourage young players to learn how to make music on the organ. At the time he was Director of Music of Oundle School, having previously been Senior Organ Scholar at Exeter College when I became a Choral Exhibitioner (and later Organ Scholar) there.

Most of today's emerging players have attended at least one Oundle course – including Sam Hudson, Ben Wilson and Ryan Hepburn (the new DoM at Haileybury).

We hope Michael's great progress will continue and we look forward to sending him on the full week Summer course soon. – Ed.