

PipeUp students visit Normandy.

Richard Godfrey writes:

After frequently telling PipeUp students in Dorchester and Lyme Regis that French organ music only sounds really right on a French organ, I decided that we should give them a chance to hear the real thing. With great help from the Ven Paul Taylor, Archdeacon of Sherborne, the Rev Harold Stephens, Rector of St Mary's Dorchester, and Roland Brière in France, we were able to arrange a visit to four instruments during a rapid 2 day visit to Normandy. This was possible because of the close link between the Dioceses of Salisbury and Évreux.

Four students joined the visit, Alexander Henshaw (13), Alice Bell (15), Peter Dillistone (16) and Kieran Smith (17). Each was accompanied by one parent. The driving was expertly undertaken by Michael Dillistone and David Henshaw. We set off from Dorchester on July 30th at tea time in a hired 9-seater luxury new VW, arriving in Portsmouth with time to spare to climb the Spinnaker Tower. This unfortunately proved a non-event as the Tower closed at 6pm, but at least we saved £8 each and took some jolly photos of the party on the steps outside. The night ferry crossing brought us safely to Caen early the next morning, and in no time we were sipping coffee and chocolate outside the great cathedral of Évreux.

Alice Bell takes up the story

“We began our tour in France with the cathedral in Évreux. The organ was only built in 2006 and is very grandly designed: cylindrical, built out from the west wall, with colourful shutters of blue, red and gold as well as *en chamade* trumpet pipes sticking out from the case. Frilly wire netting has been added like a skirt to the base of the organ to soften its appearance. Some of us were not sure this was a very successful feature. To get to the organ we had to climb a very narrow circular staircase and then cross a bit of the roof before re-entering and walking across a high-level metal gang plank. We were all allowed to play several pieces on the organ including several loud pieces by Massenet, Frank and Demessieux which suited the organ. Halfway through the session, however, the organ turned off and no one could turn it back on. Eventually Évreux's organist came to our aid and pointed out the two stops that turned the organ on and off. Les anglais! We finished by recording a few pieces from each person. M. Brière and his wife then took us to a typical French restaurant where we enjoyed lunch, lasting nearly 2 hours.

The second organ was in La Collégiale de Vernon and was a typical classical instrument. It has a very distinct French sound and its case and some of its pipes date back to the 1610. New pipes were added in 1979, perfectly matched to the old, and producing a marvellous medium for music by Couperin and other composers of classical period. We each played pieces to an impromptu audience. Then we were allowed to go behind the organ to see the mechanisms. Some of us also climbed even higher to the parapet of the tower to get a splendid view of Vernon.

We explored Vernon in the evening and stayed in a nice rather old fashioned hotel right in the town centre”.

Peter Dillistone finishes the story

"The company well rested, and well breakfasted, we set off the next day for the Abbaye de Bec-Hellouin. This is a large abbey, rich in history, and much of it was told to us by an English monk, Brother Herluin. The short tour (not to be confused with the big 'tour'—French for tower—as there was a large one in the grounds), we were shown into the Abbey chapel: a beautiful long stone room with the altar in the centre, and the organ hidden behind a large screen at the far end. We were delighted to play this 19th century romantic organ in near perfect condition, it having been in private hands until it was acquired by the Abbey. Despite its relatively small dimensions, the sound of the instrument was rich, varied, and generally agreed upon to be one of the best on our trip.

The younger members of the group (myself included) were, after a short practice, pressed upon to play for the upcoming Mass. As any organist will tell you, such a short and straightforward process is practically unheard of in the world of organ-playing, and in just under half an hour the Mass was started. Apparently, our music was well choreographed with the liturgy during the Offertoire and Communion, and we were warmly thanked by the Abbot and Brothers for our contribution. After the Mass we were invited to eat a silent meal in the Abbey refectory. This was a not entirely successful venture, because all but one of us lapsed into conversation before lunch was finished. Perhaps the rather good wine served to our parents had something to do with these lapses.

Then it was into the van and on the road again, this time to Pont-Audemer, a large church with a classical organ. After the luxury of the Abbey organ, this was a slight disappointment, but this was made up for by the novelty of a French-style pedalboard and three large conical bellows which could be worked by hand without the need for an electric blower. Dr. Godfrey soon had us working on these while he and others occupied themselves with some French music, sitting rather comfortably (and smugly) on the organ bench! After that we spent a little while shopping for souvenirs, being drawn to a *chocolaterie* on the way.

Our final destination was back at Caen again, where we would catch the ferry, but we allowed ourselves a few hours to find food and drink. and even to have a swim in La Manche. Dr. Godfrey wanted oysters, but this was not a popular idea with many of us youngsters, and he was forced to settle for chips. The swim turned out to be a quick paddle. This minor setback was not enough to spoil our trip, which we all enjoyed immensely - educationally, of course."



Alice Bell, Kieran Smith, Peter Dillistone and Alexander Henshaw seated on the organ bench at Pont-Audemer. Richard Godfrey with French hosts standing by.