

### **A visit to Eaton Bray**

This visit, which could be described as a one-stop organ crawl, came about because of a conversation at the AGM dinner at Ponsbourne in February in which we had discussed both Peter Collins organs and the position of organs in churches. It was suggested that it was, to put it mildly, less than sensible to have an organ up on the west wall of the church, away from the action, as it were. The Collins organ at Eaton Bray was mentioned in this context and I immediately pricked up my ears as it was a local one of which I hadn't heard. There and then we decided to go on a visit and since Ted Sharp knew the Vicar, the Revd. Coralie McCluskey, he agreed to arrange the trip. The following week Ted and Ruth took Michael Coffey and me in their car and we received a warm welcome from Coralie.

I had in my mind three criticisms made of this type of organ. Firstly is the idea that the west end position is not appropriate to an Anglican church because of the distance to the choir. The second notion is that these organs, which are at their best in earlier music, are too limited in their scope. Thirdly is a feeling that such instruments are simply too far removed from the native tradition.



The Peter Collins organ at Eaton Bray  
Photo:Dr Peter St John Stokes

As we walked into the churchyard it struck me that this was the archetypal English parish church and the interior sustained this impression. The organ however, since 1991, takes pride of place on the west wall standing out from the tower arch - a somewhat continental position and in a fine oak case which has a strong suggestion of the early Dutch and North German organ cases with their three flat-fronted towers, each emphasised by the rather mediaeval looking carvings above, and two pipe flats. Access to the organ is from the ringing chamber and as soon as you sit down and play at the comfortable console you realise that this is at once both far removed from and closely related to the sort of organ you might expect in a British parish church. It is far removed on account of its position and the amazingly complete specification for what is in effect a 15 stop organ with three being borrowed from the Great to

the Pedal. Its Swell organ, complete with chorus, an 8 foot reed and a Gamba, suggests that the English tradition has not been totally lost.

This is a truly exciting instrument to play - an organ surely designed for Bach but capable of coping with a wider repertoire and the Anglican tradition. The principal chorus is both beautiful and brilliant and Peter Collins seems to know exactly how to cap a chorus with a rich and glittering mixture using only three or four ranks. Add the Trumpet, together with the firm yet exciting pedal reed, and you have a chorus worthy of a great church. Coupling the Swell, with its harmonically rich but civilised Cremona, produces a genuinely exciting sound which is far beyond that which can be expected from the average parish church organ.

What finally sold this organ and its west end position to me was listening from the far end of the nave to Ted playing a piece on the Great Stopped Diapason alone. The sound was so incredibly alive - gentle yet of a perfectly satisfying fullness even in this not particularly favourable acoustic. I do have two regrets about this organ. The first is that the Swell Gamba stops at Tenor C. The presence of the short compass swell string was regarded as a token nod towards the native tradition: I think it is only recently that we have come to fully appreciate the importance of string colour to eighteenth century German music. The other regret is the absence of a tremulant.

As I expected, I concluded that the first objection about the position of the instrument was answered in several ways. From this position it fills the building with both gentle sounds and an exciting pleno with a natural voicing on low wind pressures. Here we have none of the harsh sounds associated with attempts to make an organ audible from a concealed position away from the main body of the church. I realise that it is not necessarily the easiest thing to accompany a choir at the other end of the church. The choir could of course be moved and this is successfully done in many churches with west end organs. Alternatively, as was usual in the cathedrals and large churches before consoles were equipped with televisions and loudspeakers, the organist has simply to learn to play ahead of the choir - although difficult at first this soon becomes quite natural. I remember in my own experience at St. Giles-in-the-Fields, which is really rather a large church and had the musical repertoire available to a church with professional singers, soon becoming so used to being ahead of the choir that it just seemed natural.

Doubts about the scope of such 'neo-classical' instruments tend to disappear in practice. There is an undeniable tendency of making traditional English organs as diminished versions of the great 'English cathedral' organs. Of course what really happened is that many churches have still to make do with a pale reflection of this most satisfying type of organ. Lacking in the characteristic voices, from the Vox Humana to the Tuba, and no sign of an exciting pleno with its mixtures, trombas and grand pedal reeds, these instruments often seem unsatisfactorily incomplete. I think Eaton Bray is much better off with an organ with a truly satisfying pleno and capable of doing real justice to the most significant parts of the repertoire while still able to accompany choir and congregation. I think that also answers quite neatly the third objection about the departure from the native tradition. An instrument as well voiced as this is in any case not too far removed from the clean bright choruses of Hill and other nineteenth century English builders inspired by the German tradition.

This is a lovely organ and we must commend the foresight and wisdom of the parishioners of Eaton Bray in their bold choice. In the past the appearance of musical instruments was as important as their sound and a large part of my enjoyment of this instrument is derived from

the case, boldly dominating the west end and which is both visually, like the organs of the past, acoustically integral to the quality of the sound. If you have a chance to hear it, do so!

<b>Great</b>	
Open Diapason	8
Stopped Diapason	8
Principal	4
Twelfth	2 2/3
Fifteenth	2
Tierce	1 3/5
Mixture	III
Trumpet	8
<b>Swell</b>	
Chimney Flute	8
Gamba	8
Open Flute	4
Fifteenth	2
Cremona	8
<b>Pedal</b>	
Sub Bass	16
Octave	8 (Great)
Flute	8 (Great)
Octave	4 (Great)
Fagott	16

*Dr Peter St John Stokes*