

Memories of George Cushing and The Thursford Collection

Herb Brabant

My first visit to Thursford was in the late 70s or very early 80s. Numerous photos in the Fair Organ Preservation Society bulletins, as well as accolades from others who had visited, spurred my curiosity and indicated this was a “must-see” for any organ enthusiast traveling in England. Our usual routine is to spend 2-3 days at the Great Dorset Steam Fair event and then head for Thursford. Located approximately 125 miles north-northeast of London, the village of Thursford is in Norfolk county about 8-10 miles from the coast. We usually plan to arrive in the area around noon and have lunch at one of several roadside pubs prior to the short drive to the museum which opens at 2:00 p.m. There are no billboards or fancy advertisements on the roadside, in fact, the only sign to be seen in this rural farmland is a small board on a post which says “To the Organs.” About a quarter to a half-mile from the main highway sits Laurel Farm, the home of the Thursford Collection. The huge parking lot hints this is no small attraction as we approach a large complex and parking area containing numerous tour buses. (We later learned the collection is visited by 250,000 people annually.)

My primary interest is in the big organs, but it is impossible to be around so many restored steam engines of an era gone by without developing an interest and sense of appreciation—not just of the effort involved to restore, but also what was accomplished with these magnificent machines. There are steam-driven rollers, traction engines, lorries, and a small switch engine, but the most impressive are the showmen’s engines accentuated with their highly polished brass trim.



Figure 1. The author (left) with George Cushing, circa 1980.

The complex is a group of buildings clustered around a rambling courtyard and includes gift shops, an ice cream parlor, a tea room and a huge main building which seats hundreds of visitors and houses the collection of organs, steam engines, and related paraphernalia. As we entered the building, recorded music was playing and in one corner we spotted George

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Cushing whom I recognized from photos. Approaching him to say ‘Hello,’ we found him most amiable and a delightful conversationalist. He said he loved to talk with Americans and our ‘Hello’ ran into a 30-minute conversation covering numerous topics. He really enjoyed talking politics, steam equipment, and organs.



Figure 2. The Dutch street organ, *De Leeuwin* (“The Lion”).

Basically, the museum “tour” consists of two “shows” which involve the playing of each organ followed by a program with Robert Wolfe performing on the Wurlitzer Theater Organ accompanied at times with projected movies and various puppets or marionettes.



Figure 3. An 84-key Hooghuis converted to play 101 key music.

Before and between shows there is an opportunity to ride the Venetian Gondola Switchback accompanied by a beautiful Gavioli Organ. On our first visit, Mr. Cushing operated the Switchback and it was very obvious he enjoyed his self-appointed role as the operator as much as the people who were riding (Figure 1). On one occasion, we observed a small group of latecomers arriving at the Switchback to find the ride was ending for the day. Not to disappoint them, George welcomed them aboard and started the ride up again for only four people, a testimony to the kind of person he was.



Figure 4. A beautifully decorated 101-key Hooghuis organ.

The organs in the Thursford Collection range in size from a medium size street organ to very large fair and dance organs originating from various countries. The smallest (and incidentally the oldest) organ in the collection is a street organ named DeLeeuw or the Lion (Figure 2). It was made in Roosendaal in the Netherlands in 1898, and it had a very bright and unmistakable street organ sound. There were several large Hooghuis organs—the first was an 84-key instrument which was reworked to play 101-key music (Figure 3). The second Hooghuis was originally a 101-key instrument (Figure 4). Both these instruments were acquired from a Belgian showman,

Albert Becquart, and restored by Henk Mohlmann, a well-known expert from the Netherlands. The facades of these two organs are extremely ornate and colorful. They not only are enjoyable listening, but also are easy on the eyes with their pastel colors and generous carvings.



Figure 5. The 100-key DeCap dance organ which was expanded to play 121-key music.

The very large DeCap dance organ, which was originally a 100-key instrument, has been expanded to play 121-key music (Figure 5). This organ built in Belgium during the late 1930s found its way to a dance hall in the Netherlands. It is loaded with instrumentation including several accordions and saxophones, as well as a full drum and percussion section. In addition, it is fitted with registers for changing light colors in cadence with the music.

The 112-key Mortier is a massive instrument made in Belgium in the late 1930s or early 1940's (Figure 6). It, too, is loaded with many percussion instruments and is capable of producing an array of different sounding music through the use of its large number of registers.



Figure 6. The 112-key Mortier dance organ from Belgium.

Representing the fair organs is a very colorful 84-key Wellershaus (Figure 7). This German organ, built in the early 1900's, belonged to an old Dutch showman near Amsterdam who traveled the fairground circuit years before Mr. Cushing acquired it.

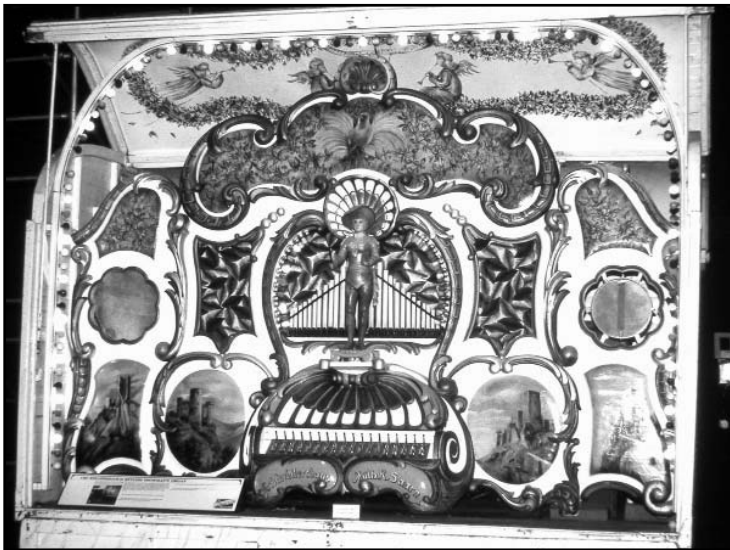


Figure 7. A 84-key Wellershaus fair organ, built in Germany.

Of particular personal interest is the 112-key Carl Frei fair organ (Figure 8). Numerous “so-called” Carl Frei organs were not actually built by Carl Frei in entirety and this is one fine example. The basic organ was originally a 100-key organ built by the Mortier firm. George Cushing, working in collaboration with Carl Frei, had the organ rebuilt and expanded to his specifications. The organ has a bright, rich sound and the facade is enhanced with thirteen figures plus two almost life-size articulated drummers, one on each side.



Figure 8. The “Carl Frei” 112-key fair organ.

The *piece de resistance* of the self-playing organs is the 98-key Marengi with its magnificent facade (Figure 9). This is the organ that started the collection and I believe one of George’s favorites. It is always played last on the program and every time we’ve visited Thursford they manage to play *Stars and Stripes Forever*. (I’ve always thought George had a secret signal to the *Gaviman*, but never figured it out.) The life of the organ and how it found its way to Thursford is a story unto itself. It was originally built for and installed in a Parisian dance hall where it played in its early years. Finally making its way to Ireland, it was acquired by George in 1959 and brought

to Thursford for rebuilding and decorating. The wonderful paintings and exquisite carvings of the façade are overshadowed by a three-dimensional chariot that appears to be bursting through the top of the facade. Rearing horses pulling a chariot containing a scantily clad female driver appear ready to pounce on the crowd below (Figure 10).

Not to be forgotten is the 98-key Gavioli which plays on the Gondola Switchback (Figure 11). Of all the hundreds of organs I’ve heard over many years, this is among the top three—in my opinion. We understand this organ was originally 110 keys and was probably cut down to 98 keys when it was rebuilt in 1926. The organ, which traveled the fairground circuit all over the countryside, was completely restored for Thursford in 1979 and now sits in the center of the Switchback.



Figure 9. The magnificent 98-key Marengi that played in a Parisian dance hall.

It is difficult to describe the originally steam-operated Gondola Switchback in a few words (Figure 12). It really must

be seen and experienced to be fully appreciated. Basically, it is a series of eight magnificently carved and finely decorated Venetian Gondolas which run over a hill-and-valley platform while moving in a clockwise circular direction. Each Gondola has four seats which easily hold two adult-



Figure 10. The Marengi’s three-dimensional chariot.

size people. The ride appeared as a regular attraction in the early days of Stourpaine, now known as the Great Dorset Steam Fair. It is believed to be the only one of its kind remaining and it is very comforting to know it is now “under roof” and protected from the elements.

One of the main attractions at Thursford is the huge Wurlitzer Theater Organ. This instrument was made in the USA around 1931 or 1932 for a movie theater in Leeds. At the time it was acquired by Mr. Cushing, it was the fourth largest organ in Europe. A young, enthusiastic and very talented Robert Wolfe is the resident organist who orchestrates a very lively program several times a day to the satisfaction of many happy and excited visitors. His program alone is worth the visit.



Figure 11. The Gavioli organ on the switchback playing 98-key music.

truly a magnificent spectacle with the decorations, colored lights, and choir—all concentrated around the Wurlitzer organ.

Looking back on my visits, I probably looked forward to seeing George and a bit of conversation as much as the attractions at the museum. He was bright and witty and said he really liked the Americans who visited Thursford. He had a zest for life and was the personification of “a little kid” in an older man’s body. It was apparent he wanted all visitors to enjoy their visits to the museum. On my first visit with Ted Waflart, we stayed until closing and had spent every British Pound in our wallets purchasing recordings and other gift shop items. As we were departing, George asked me if I had a copy of his book *Steam at Thursford*. When I told him we were low on cash, he

Thursford is known countrywide for its famous Christmas program. The tradition started 25 years ago with family and friends and has now grown to over forty performances, each playing to 1,200 people. It is so popular that tickets are sold out in February for the performances eleven months later. The Christmas presentation is

said he wanted to show us something on his little switch engine, “Cackler,” and to meet him out in the yard. When he showed up, he removed a copy of his book hidden under his jacket, autographed it, and presented it to me. I will always treasure that book and the memory of this kind gesture.

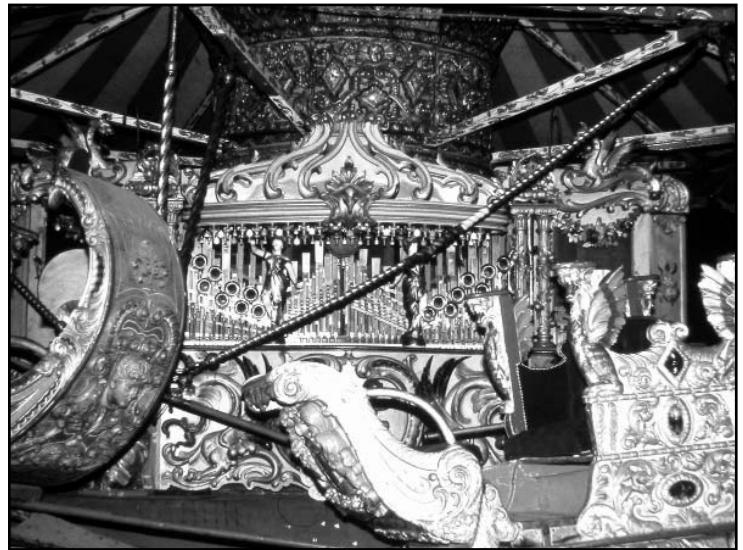


Figure 12. The Venetian gondolas and the 98-key Gavioli organ.

As the years went by we would see Mr. Cushing at the Dorset event occasionally where I thought he was really “in his element” with all the steam engines and many organs. Routinely, after the Dorset event, we would journey up to Thursford for a great afternoon visit and entertainment. We heard stories about the early days of steam engines which were so familiar to George. He loved and worked with steam since he was a young lad, eventually becoming a road contractor and used the steam engines in his work, so they almost became a part of him. As Diesel and gasoline engines came on the scene and finally dominated as a source of power, the old steam engines became obsolete. That’s when he began buying them, even seeking out and rescuing some with which he was familiar. Many of these old engines, now in the museum, were saved and restored thanks to Mr. Cushing and his foresight.

The museum is the culmination of the life of a very special man who was born into the world of steam in 1904. The last time we visited Thursford, George was in his late ‘90s and was not as spry as we were accustomed to seeing. But when we approached to say “hello,” he rapidly perked up and became his “old self,” much to our delight. Sadly, that was our last visit with him as we learned of his passing in February, 2003. The museum is in a trust, thereby insuring its future and is managed today by John Cushing, one of George’s sons. For me, future visits will not be quite the same, but there will always be the thrill of sights and sounds of the Thursford collection and the spirit of George Cushing will live on.

Herb Brabandt is a retired technical manager who has been collecting music boxes and organs for over 40 years. His primary interest is large fair and band organs. He lives with his wife, Jo Ann, in Louisville, KY. Herb is also the COAA advertising manager.