

The Greatest Show on Earth—The Great Dorset Steam Fair

Herb Brabandt

Over the years it has been my pleasure to give numerous slide and video presentations on the subject of the Great Dorset Steam Fair (England). In my early years of attendance, 35mm slides were the only documentation source I used, but when the slides were complemented with recordings of the organs, the presentations were acceptable. Later, with the use of many hours of edited videos, another dimension was added to liven up the presentations—but still it was not like being there. I personally believe the Great Dorset Steam Fair may be considered the “Greatest Show on Earth,” and to attempt to describe in a few written pages with photos, one can only begin to convey the atmosphere and experience of actually attending. Notwithstanding, there seems to be enough interest and curiosity in the U.S. pertaining to “Dorset” to merit an article on the subject. Having attended numerous times over the years, I hope that sharing a few of my experiences may provide some helpful information, stimulate interest, and perhaps even generate enough enthusiasm to encourage more U.S. attendance.

I distinctly remember reading about the “Stourpaine Rally” in early editions of the Fair Organ Preservation Society’s *Keyframe*. I never really thought much about attending until my old friend, Carvel “Cobb” Stotts, attended and upon returning was extremely “wound up” about how the event was so exciting and magnificent. His enthusiasm was infectious and it wasn’t long before I was planning a trip for a first-hand experience.



Figure 1. An aerial view (daringly taken by the author) details the immensity of the Great Dorset Steam Fair.

The show site is approximately 80 miles WSW of London, not all that far from Stonehenge in the Salisbury plain. The original location was a short distance from the village of Blandford Forum on farmland at a place called Stourpaine Bushes. Over the years the site has moved several times with



Figure 2. A 72-key Bursens dance organ plays lively tunes at the fair.

in the same general area of the country and has for many years been on over 500 acres of farmland at Southdown/Tarrant Hinton (**Figure 1**). The event is in Dorset county, hence the current name, but the “old timers” often refer to it as “Stourpaine.”

The most practical means of transportation is by car as the location is essentially remote. Driving on the opposite side of the highways requires some adjusting, but in time one gets accustomed to it.

The towns of Shaftsbury and Blandford Forum are approximately five miles from the site, but each has only a few small hotels that fill quickly, so we find it convenient to stay in the town of Salisbury which offers a larger choice of lodging accommodations. The drive from Salisbury to the show site takes about 30 to 45 minutes (in traffic) with a nice countryside drive. The parking area is a huge 50 or more acre field and with as many as 30,000 or more cars it is best to remember precisely where you park. I can remember one time we stayed late into the night and there was no lighting in the parking area. If not for my wife’s built-in radar, we would have been there much longer—so it is always good to carry a flashlight—and remember where you park!

It has been known to rain hard for hours which tends to generate some really muddy conditions, so we never go without boots or “Wellies” as they are called over there (**Figure 3**). Rain gear and umbrellas are also standard carry-alongs. Today, there are huge food and beer tents for shelter, but I can remember scrambling for cover in earlier years when an afternoon shower blew in.



Figure 3. A view of the author’s “Wellies” details conditions of at least one wet show.

The show is well organized by show manager, Michael Oliver, and his team; but it is best to purchase a show catalogue which lists exhibits and gives pertinent details including a location map. Today, the show is laid out on a grid plan which is very helpful in locating the various attractions.



Figure 4. A view of some of the many restored steam engines lined up for inspection by the Dorset Steam Fair attendees.

The primary theme of the show centers around how things were done in the old days by our predecessors. Exhibits include thatching demonstrations, blacksmithing, glass blowing, wood turning on a foot-operated lathe, clothes making, quilting, cider making, making of corn doilies, and numerous other rural crafts. There are demonstrations of horse pulled binders and plows, harvesting and flailing of wheat, and also the working of the famous Shire horses. Exhibits of vintage motorcycles, vintage cars, and military vehicles all come to life as they parade in “show rings.”



Figure 5. Saunders 98-key Gavioli fair organ surrounded by flowers and a waterfall on the left. This display included a showman's engine and a stage for dancing girls.

There are old toys, model exhibits, and many other items including steam traction engines and fair organs. All sorts of vintage tractors, miniature live steam engines, and old stationary “hit-and-miss” gasoline engines are numerous and all operating at various times. There are Gypsy wagons and showmen's living quarters and there is always a large flea market area where you can find anything from produce to a variety of almost anything imaginable.

There are saw mills set up to demonstrate the conversion of logs to timber and you may also see how huge logs are loaded onto trailers using winches and cables powered by steam engines.

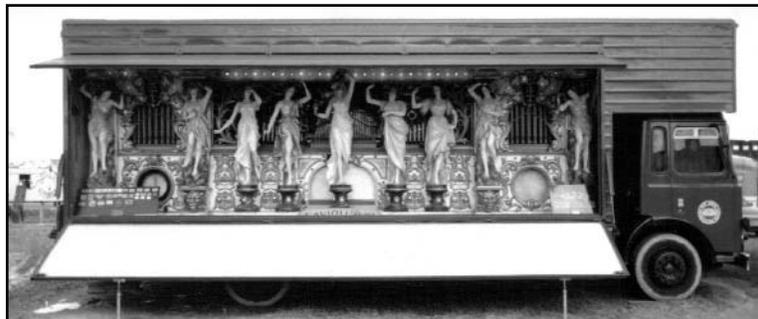


Figure 7. Malcolm Jonas' 110-key Gavioli with life-size Figures.

The main attraction, however, is the magnificent array of 150 steam engines that include tractors, steam rollers, cranes, and the beautiful showmen's engines with their brass all polished to perfection. The smell of the smoke and oil and the



Figure 6. A 90-keyless Dean fair organ is a centerpiece of a recreated bioscope. The stage in front accommodates dancers.

sounds of the chugging engines and whistles blowing as 200 tons of quarried stone blocks pass by with several engines pulling and one pushing is a sight to behold. You might even observe 20 steamrollers in motion simultaneously going through a sort of dance ritual.

There are amusement rides—old and new, bungee jumping, helicopter rides, and colossal food and beer tents with live entertainment. The vintage rides may include the Steam Yachts, Venetian Gondolas, Rodeo Switchback and the magnificent James Noyce roundabout, a magnificent carousel.

But for me, the best part by far, is the group of over 100 organs including all the big and well known ones—and the dancing girls re-creating the old days in front of the bioscopes with their routines to the accompaniment of the fairground organs. Some of the organ owners go “all out” to provide seating for the gathering audiences who take in the shows and listen to

the organs for hours and some of the organs are surrounded with flowers and garden themes including an occasional waterfall to make the presentations even more spectacular (Figures 2, 5 - 9).

On Sunday morning it has become a tradition to hold an open-air religious service. People gather around and hymns are sung to the accompaniment of a large fairground organ. After the brief service is over, the crowd disperses and the show continues.

My favorite time of the event is in the evening when it is getting dark and the entire grounds are lit up turning the show into a fairyland. The fair comes to life and the colors of



Figure 8. A show regular is the 98-key Gavioli scenic organ built in Paris in 1909 for the White Bros. Electric Coliseum Bioscope Show.

everything seem to be more vivid—people milling around—the big showmen’s engines driving generators which provide electricity for thousands of lights—a puff of smoke—the shriek of a whistle—it’s a wonderful experience! I remember Michael Oliver saying it is not uncommon on a Saturday evening for 35,000 people to enter the show after 6 PM. This is where people want to be. The show goes on well into the night and everything is in full swing—sometimes past midnight. On one late

Saturday night, I remember Ted Wafart and myself watching a crew disassembling a huge carousel and carefully placing it into large trailer vans for a trip to its next location. We thought it somewhat unusual, but the next day when we arrived in the early morning, we found another carousel had been set up over night in the very same spot and the ride was in full operation with its organ playing. It was explained that the original carousel had been committed for another fair the next day so a replacement was brought in.

The fair is always held the last week of August to the first of September and this year marks the 35th anniversary for the Dorset event. One year the fair was held for eight days, but it has generally now been standardized to run about five days—always ending on Sunday.

We always plan to arrive on Thursday, primarily to allow for a rainy day. Should Thursday be an especially bad day, it leaves three days for better weather. This event is nothing like our organ rallies in the U.S. where the venue is usually a nice park or restored village with great facilities and electrical power just a few feet away, but the rural environment is quite tolerable and the trip is always worth it. Should you decide to attend for a first hand experience, I think you will understand why one may call the Great Dorset Steam Fair the “Greatest Show On Earth.”

All photographs by the author.



Figure 9. Another well-traveled instrument usually seen at Dorset is this 98-key Marengi fairground organ.

Herb Brabandt is a retired technical manager who has been collecting musical instruments for over 40 years. His primary interest is large fair and band organs. He and his wife, JoAnn live in Louisville, Ky. This is Herb’s fourth article for the COAA journal.