

*“The Haarlem Phoenix” The 2004 UK Mechanical Organ Owners Society Tour**

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The Mechanical Organ Owners Society’s (MOOS) annual tour for 2004 commenced the 11th of November from various points across Southern England. Fully loaded at Calais we set off on the afternoon drive across Belgium and into Holland where dusk was falling as we took our first tour stop at the “Zaal Koch” Café. This location comprises a café/bar with rooms for playing pool and bridge, while at the back is a large ballroom where the main attraction is the 105- key semi-electronic Decap Antwerp organ which is playing continuously as the party ate, drank, examined the instrument and for a few, an opportunity to dance. Soon, the journey continued to the oldest city in Holland, Dordrecht.

Friday was busy and after a short trip to Tilburg we met Maarten van der Vlugt, well known in Dutch organ circles, who had arranged for us to visit the collection of dance instruments, mainly by Decap Antwerp, which are owned by Wies Schwagten (**Figure 1**). All the instruments were played, including a recently restored Arburo and a 72-key Mortier street organ, which had begun life as a dance organ. The star of the collection is the 121-key Decap “De Splendid” built in the late 1930s. Two restored American cars were also on display in the music room.



Figure 1. A closeup view of the figures on “De Scala,” an 80-key Mortier in the collection of Weis Schwagten.

The tour continued north for lunch and a walk in the picturesque pottery town of Delft. Before making a short journey to Rijswijk, where a detached house concealed the large workshop building in which two street organs and two dance organs were housed. The family and friends of Zweris de Ruyter greeted us and made us welcome, while the 52-key Elbert Pluer street organ and 1930s Carl Frei 72-key organ “Grote Radiokast” played. The casing and pipework of an 86-key Mortier “Roger,” rebuilt by Decap and once owned by Arthur Mason of Norfolk, England, were spread across another side of the room and is currently being restored by Adrie Vergeer.

These parts concealed a vast amount of cardboard music stored at the back for the final organ being played, a 92-key Jazz Decap built in 1952 and named “Elza Jose.”

The journey from there crossed the same river twice at Haarlem, NW of Amsterdam. Arriving on the industrial estate where Het Kunkelsorgel Draaiorgelmuseum have their new premises, we were greeted by a large Union Jack being waved by our hosts for the evening, upon our arrival. The instruments inside looked wonderful in their new surroundings. As a special guest, the 57-key Van Steenput Street Organ “De Pansfluit,” a circa 1900 model owned by Adrie and Riet Vergeer, took pride of place across the top of the hall. A huge buffet dinner had been prepared by the museum volunteers and was enjoyed by all. Seating was provided at decorated trestle tables down the center of the room, where the sound of the instruments being played in turn could also be enjoyed.

A wide selection of music was played on the other nine organs which included “Het Kunkels Orgel” a 1909 Marengi with 112 keys rebuilt by Carl Frei in 1930; “De Grote Mortier” a 84-key organ built in 1913; and “De Zwarle Madonna” Orchestrion (The Black Madonna) built for a café on the Dutch border in 1927. Also viewed was a 70-key Marengi Dance Organ from 1912, used in its early days for rental; “De Carillon” a brightly colored 56-key street organ (**Figure 2**); “De Jupiter” a traditional street organ perceived to look (actually built by Gavioli in 1900) as a dance organ and later rebuilt in its present form; and “De Rosita” another street organ reconstituted from parts of an old Decap dance organ by Anton Pluer of Bussum in 1974 and based on a 90-key Carl Frei instrument.



Figure 2. The distinctive sound of bells and a bright color make this 56-key Bursens stand out.



Figure 3. The newly restored Model 38 Ruth, guest organ at the Ulvenhout open weekend.

On Saturday, after an hour's travel and two diversions later, we arrived at Ulvenhout on the Dutch / Belgium border, where the open weekend had commenced at the premises of the de Voer family. This private collection of German Fairground Organs is supplemented by several local visiting organs on one weekend each year. An invited guest organ took the form of a Ruth model 38 (96-keyless) owned by Ruud Vader, the restoration of which had only just been completed (Figure 3). Some of the party took time out for an alternative trip to the local Belgian enclave village of Baarle Nassau. Apparently there are two of everything, one Dutch and one Belgian, of the town hall, post office, etc. The remainder of the group stayed for four hours to listen to the 10 instruments which played in rotation. These included examples of several different models by each of Gebruder Wellerhaus (Figure 4), Fr. Wrede, A Ruth & Sohn and Wilhelm Bruder. The shed was warmed by space heaters and the provision of refreshments and a souvenir stall for those wanting a CD, was an ideal winter setting for our group, as well as the dozens of other European enthusiasts who were expected over the two days.



Figure 4. Pastal shades decorate the front of this Gebr. Wellershaus instrument in Ulvenhout.

Our next stop was Belgium, to see and hear dance organs in the rental premises of Guy Koehoekx at Perk, previously run by Teugel Brothers. There are seven Decap instruments here, from one of the first 1953 semi-electrics, through different styles like those with early Hammond attachment, to modern times. All but one were played, which presented another opportunity for some of the visitors to let fly with a quick dance.

Moving back towards the Dutch border, dusk was falling as we approached the outskirts of Herentals. We arrived at the factory premises of Brothers Decap Herentals, where we were welcomed into the building by both Tony and Frank together with their families.

Immediately inside the factory, there is a massive 105-key size instrument (as these instruments don't actually have a key frame it would be interesting to know whether some new "measure" of size is appropriate for a machine which mixes computer electronics and mechanical devices far reaching from the usual fairground or band organ). That turned out to be the almost completed order for a Frenchman called Mr. Godfroid, who also came to the factory to meet us (Figure 5). The organ is apparently continuing to be modified as the owner keeps requesting additional features as quickly as the Decap firm design them. The façade contains the usual appearance of pipe ranks, large percussion section, trumpet and saxophone. There are the hidden features of fully computerized play selections with sound sampling, multi-colored lighting effect of 10,000 light diodes which can provide complete mood changes and color sweeps almost pipe by pipe.



Figure 5. The 105-keyless (? see text) Decap Herentals comes to life.

After an initial selection of music the party was welcomed to look around at will while several areas of the complex were explained. The most striking thing is that the works are fully staffed and the current projects are in full swing. Late night shifts are not unusual. The firm still makes advances in mechanical music technology and examples of this were shown to us. These included the fully computerized CAD system of designing all the organ parts and then instructing the program to

“build” the instrument in 3D. This ensures that all the features are both correctly sized and also able to be put together without conflict with other components. This was demonstrated on a PC by the firms design technician while being explained by Tony Decap.



Figure 6. Decap Herentals' automated accordion on display at the factory.

Work has also been carried out to discover a way of creating percussion volume control through accurate impact of the drumstick on the drum skin. There followed a demonstration of the latest product, which is about to be marketed by the firm, an electro-mechanical accordion (**Figure 6**). This looks like any other accordion seen on the front of many Belgian organs, but only requires an 18" square plinth to stand on, a set of additional speakers and a programmable palm top computer. The accordion keys and buttons physically move, as do the bellows, in the normal mechanical process. The additional speakers supply output for any accompaniment effects required with a given tune, and there will be facility to “plug” a drum or rank of organ pipes if the owned wishes to expand the instrument. Various styles of programmed music as well as a re-creation of the playing of a local celebrity (today's version of the old player piano concept) were demonstrated. A rendition of *Happy Birthday* joined in vocally by all those present to celebrate the design technician's special day.

Peter Craig, a past Society Chairman and principle researcher for the tour, had to call the group back to the final assembly room in order to make a presentation. This was received by Tony Decap on behalf of all the family members who had so kindly allowed us to witness first hand how mechanical music is still moving forward in the 21st century.

A cultural diversion on Sunday morning took us to a Dutch Heritage Site called Kinderdijk where 16 windmills and their successor, a 1970s three-screw Archimedes water lifting station were viewed briefly on a cold damp morning. This site, now granted heritage status, demonstrates the problems and solutions that the Dutch encountered and overcame with their land being below sea level. The coach then continued out of Holland, across Belgium and into France where in the village of Herzeele, some 30 minutes from Calais, there is a bar called Café Des Orgues. As its name implies this is the centre of social activity on a Sunday evening. At that time whole generations of families come out to socialize and dance to live mechanical music. There are three working Mortier organs around the large dance floor in the ballroom, which filled up rapidly after we arrived and the organs were played continuously.

A 1912 81-key instrument fills the whole wall at one end faced at the other by a similar dimensioned 1926 instrument with 90 keys (**Figure 7**). Across the lower wall running between them and having had its upper façade panels mounted on a wall in the overflow room behind, is a 1939 instrument of 101-key design which recently had some work done on it, including a new accordion. This instrument was most at home with modern dance tunes. The rear of the other organs were loaded with vast numbers of music books of ballroom style music all prepared in sets for those wishing to fox trot or waltz the evening away.

Time was up and the ferry awaited. Four days of continental organ music was over and as we headed back to Calais a glorious French sunset bade us farewell. Another success for the professional organization of Linda and Boz at History in Harmony and another opportunity to pass a winter weekend in the company of friends old and new.

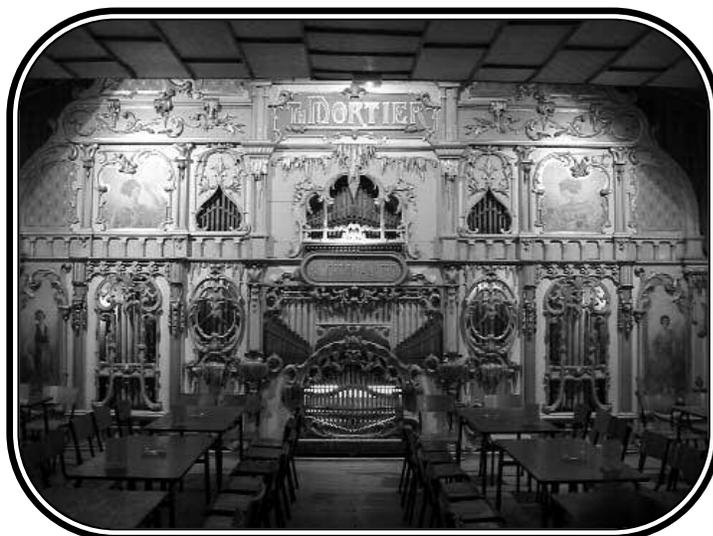


Figure 7. The 90-key Mortier built in 1926 awaits the Sunday evening dances in France.

Michael Clark, from Leeds in northeast England, had the benefit of several business trips to Toledo, Ohio, in the mid-1990s. He was most fortunate to have made contact with several members of the band organ world in the midwest and enjoyed the wonderful hospitality at their homes, as well as at band organ rallies at Crossroads Village, Sandusky and Angola.