

Fair Vintage Organ Rally Victoria Park, Widnes, England

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We missed the organ rallies at home in the US this year, so when I saw a notice of a Fair Vintage Organ Rally in Liverpool I decided to see if we could attend. We were planning to be about 40 miles south of Liverpool in Cheshire at the time. As it turned out, the rally wasn't in Liverpool, and it took several tourist office visits and a chat with a bus station information desk to get ourselves pointed in the right direction.

On the morning of 24 September we boarded the first of three Cheshire county busses, and managed to arrive at Victoria Park, Widnes just as the activities got under way. The park is a circa 1900 town green space with large trees, walks, statues, and play areas.

The rally included more than fairground organs, although there was a large organ component. Other features included vintage cars, steam tractors, an 1886 carousel, a "big wheel" (Ferris wheel), mini-train, swings, dogs pulling Swiss milk carts, an open air market, and good food.

Somehow I found my feet directed first to the row of homebuilt organs.



Figure 1. Bob Essex and his original MIDI driven organ "King Solomon."

I was immediately drawn to the top quality sound of "King Solomon," a MIDI driven band organ designed and built by Bob Essex of Napton-on-the-Hill (Figure 1). Bob, I discovered, is the man behind the MIDster roll punch. He sells an information package on how you can build a machine which will punch paper rolls from MIDI files. I had a good chat with Bob about band organ building.

Right next door I found "Pedrosa," another MIDI driven band organ designed and built by Peter Hood (Figure 2). He is developing a plans package for this design, and had a display of parts and construction information in front of the organ, including an innovative blower disk taken from a Flymo hovercraft lawn mower. Peter also runs Roll Cutter, overseas agent for John Smith's organ-building instruction packages, and a vendor of rolls and parts for Smith Organ builders. With so much to see, I looked and charged on.



Figure 2. Peter Hood's MIDI controlled "Pedrosa," soon to be described in a "build-it-yourself" package.

Further down the line I saw John Smith's own display, modestly nestled among the main group of organ grinder builders and operators.

The "heavy artillery" was parked in the middle of the open sports ground. I counted four huge Gaviolis (Figure 3) and two very large Marengi & Cie. organs. One was the White Brothers 1909 Royal Coliseum Gavioli (Figure 4) which Herb Brabandt photographed at



Figure 3. Dancing the Can-Can to music from a 98-key Gavioli.

The "Greatest Show on Earth - The Great Dorset Steam Fair" described in *Carousel Organ* Issue No. 20—July 2004, but otherwise there seemed to be little overlap between the two shows.

With over a thousand pipes in a single organ, these are huge. Most of these machines are mounted in semi-trailers, and have about a 40 KW generator mounted on the tow vehicle since British rally organizers don't provide electrical outlets.

My secret vote for "heaviest hitter" went to "The Rose" (Figure 5). This is a 110-key Marengi & Cie. organ, carrying the J. Verbeek name as well. In her most recent re-



Figure 4. Art nouveau figure, lights, and percussion on White's 1909 Royal Coliseum 112 key Gavioliphone.

build, a carillon with sixteen large new bronze bells was added. I'd guess the bells alone weighed over a ton, and they were mounted at the top of the trailer. The carillon, taken separately, is the equivalent of some of the circus bell wagons described in *Carousel Organ*. We were lucky to be there when they played the book for the 1812 Overture. That convinced Norma to buy their CD, which, incidentally, can be purchased from Verbeek over the internet as well.



Figure 5. Metallic flake paint dragon and large bell on “The Rose,” a 110-key Marenghi.

I was impressed by the variety of carving and decorating styles on the organ fronts (Figure 6). The figures included the classic conductors and bell ringers which I’ve seen on organs in America, interesting art nouveau females, some slightly more risqué females, and fanciful animals. Metal-flake paint and lights figured in many of the designs.



Figure 6. High quality carving and a English country scene on a small organ.

By American rally standards, the German and Dutch organ builders were under represented. I only identified one Raffin, one labeled Heesbeen, and one Wilhelm Bruder Söhne, although a couple more had Dutch flags. There were probably a few others among those without descriptive posters.

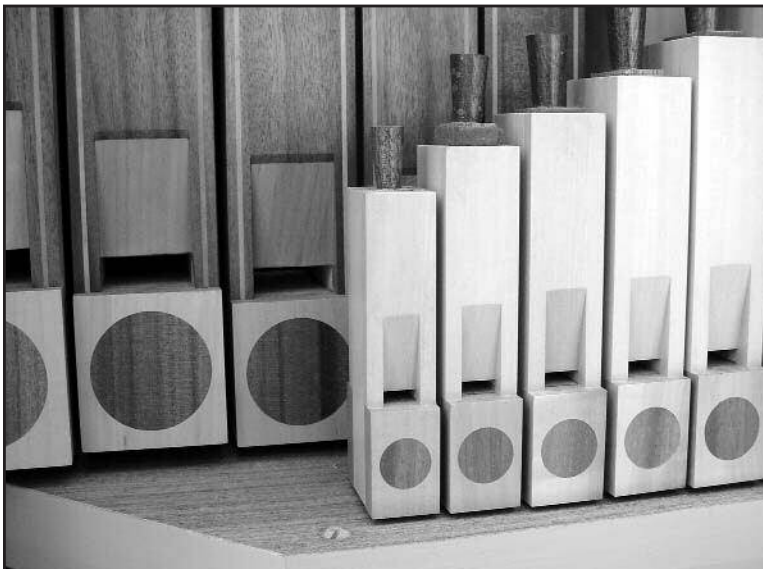


Figure 7. Inlaid woodwork on the pipes of a David Leach.

I didn’t do a precision count of the various marques of organs on the grounds, but it appeared that Alan Pell’s instruments were the most common. These were in an impressive variety of high quality finishes, particularly with regard to painted panels. One owner explained, “You just send your pictures to him, and he has a painter who copies them.”

I was very impressed with the variety of David Leach organs (Figure 7). Each was a unique work of art and craftsmanship. One came from a factory canteen, another was in Limonaire style, a small organ on display had beautiful modern inlay work on the visible pipes. One of his fans said “he never builds the same organ twice.” Leach isn’t “just a fairground organ man,” I am impressed by a picture of one of his chamber organs on MMD (Mechanical Music Digest) on the Internet.

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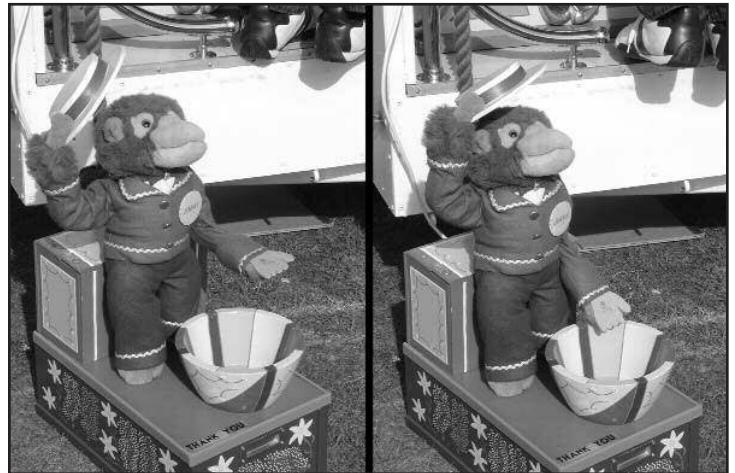


Figure 8. A begging monkey. A coin placed on the hand when in the position on the left will slide into the bucket when it rotates to the right hand orientation.

A good many of the mid-sized organs had animated figures to collect donations. These are motor driven so that a coin placed on the out-stretched hand slides into the collection bucket when the hand rotates to an inclined position (Figure 8). Although most were “monkeys,” other figures are used as well. Some owners had designated a charity as the beneficiary, others asked for support for their personal habit.

The Widnes Rally seems to be a well established feature of the Fair Organ Preservation Society calendar, but the publicity for the event is poor. The Halton web site (Widnes is an old community within the new Halton governmental district) had a good report on the 2004 event, but no information on the 2005 one other than the dates. Most road maps show the park as an unlabeled green spot. If you are in England in late September, it’s worth searching for this rally.

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