

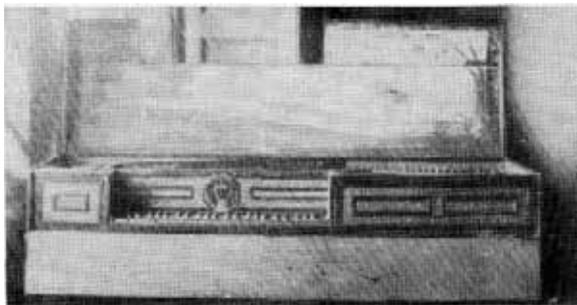
# A Harpsichord Odyssey (I)

by Edgar Hunt

This will be an account of one person's lifelong interest in the harpsichord and related instruments, how it began and how it continued up to the founding of this magazine. Through this account the reader may be able to trace some facets of the revival of the harpsichord in England.

As a child I was allowed, to turn the pages of a very large book as a Sunday-afternoon treat. This had to be on the drawing-room floor as the book was too big and heavy for any book rest on a table. The book in question was *Musical Instruments, Historic, Rare and Unique* by A. J. Hipkins and William Gibb and the coloured illustrations of so many beautiful instruments made a lasting impression. That was in the years 1913-16. but the story really goes back much further to the time when my father (Hubert Hunt) was a young violinist and organist in London and visited the musical instrument section of the Inventions Exhibition in 1885. The instruments, from museums and private collections, were assembled in the Albert Hall, and the book, illustrating a small selection from those displayed, was published in 1888. The pictures sowed the seed of interest in and love of such instruments for their fine craftsmanship : the music was to come later.

In due course (in 1901) my father moved to Bristol where he was Cathedral organist until his death in 1945. In 1915 he became conductor of the Bristol Madrigal Society which gave an annual concert of Ladies' Night - the Society was all male until after it was re-formed in 1945, the treble parts being sung by boys. To add another interest to the Ladies' Night in 1929, it was planned to include in the programme some virginal music of the Elizabethan period (and later), and for this purpose the following instruments were loaned by their owners: the Jacobus White virginal of 1656

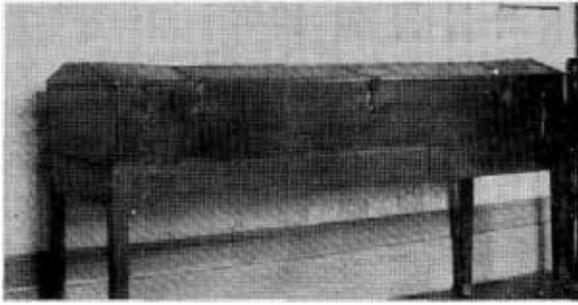


belonging to Dr Temple-Bourne (who lived in Clifton about a mile away) and a Longman and Broderip spinet which had belonged to Sir Walter



Parratt (whose pupil my father had been at Windsor) and was lent by Lady Parratt his widow. There was also a small *gebunden* clavichord which had been exhibited in 1885 by a Mr E. R. Hughes, and which had subsequently belonged to Dr (later Sir) Walford Davies, a life-long friend of father's. This clavichord was often at home on long periods of loan and was much played. It was given to father after Sir Walford's death in 1941 and is now in the Russell collection at Edinburgh.

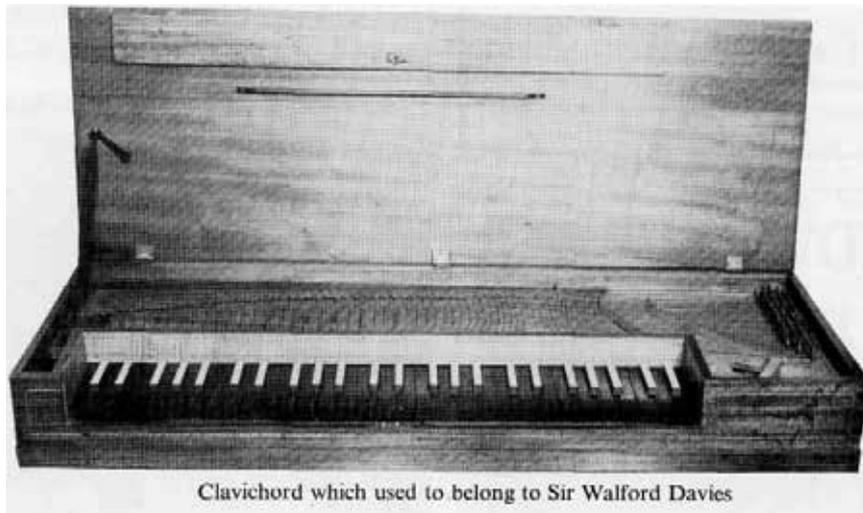
All three instruments were in quite good condition, but I was entrusted with the job of seeing that all the jacks worked reliably and evenly in the weeks before the Ladies' Night. This was a valuable experience and a first chance to become familiar with their tone and working. The spinet was a beautifully-made instrument in a mahogany case with, I suppose, bands of holly. The anonymous clavichord was of oak with similar bands, so much in the English style that Eric Halfpenny thought that it might in fact be English rather than German as stated in the 1885 catalogue. But it was the tone of the virginal that I most admired. It had a richness and the almost clarinet-like quality that one associates with a muselar - yet it was indeed a virginal, with its keyboard towards the left. According to a pencil inscription it had at some time been restored by Elgar Bros, of Worcester. It was of the usual coffin-like shape with a rather stiff painting,



predominantly blue-green, inside the slightly domed lid; and the front was decorated with embossed and gilt paste board separated by strips of moulding. My impression was of an utility instrument - none of the fine marquetry and polish of the eighteenth century - somewhat rough woodwork, but functioning well as a musical instrument. The concert was in the Great Hall of Bristol University: the virginal and spinet sounded well and were much admired, but one could hear a pin

teacher for the latter was James Brown who lived in South Kensington over Morley's harp shop (6 Sussex Place). There I went once a week to join in string quartets with some of his pupils and often visited the Victoria and Albert Museum to look at the keyboards displayed in one of the larger rooms and at the strings and woodwind instruments in the adjacent corridor. There I first met Phillip James whose book on keyboard instruments was published in 1930 and was a further source of inspiration.

At this time there were not many books on keyboard instruments or even on musical instruments in general. There were: van den Borren's *Sources of Keyboard music in England*, Margaret Glyn's *Elizabethan Virginal Music* and a book on *An Elizabethan Virginal Book* by Dr Edward Naylor (of Emmanuel College, Cambridge - my father's cousin). Canon Galpin's *Old English Instruments of Music* had been published in 1910, and there



Clavichord which used to belong to Sir Walford Davies

drop when some Bach was played on the clavichord. One could indeed hear the little instrument at the back of the hall, and I thought of Browning's poem - did they really *listen* to much of the beautiful music that was being composed? Could they hear it above the conversation?

'Well, and it was graceful of them - they'd break talk off and afford, - She, to bite her mask's black velvet - he, to finger on his word, While you sat and played Toccatas, stately at the clavichord?

From the autumn of 1927 I was a student at Trinity College of Music and my horizons were widening. I was studying flute and viola and my

were some older books such as Rimbault's *History of the Pianoforte* and a symposium on *English Music* with a chapter on 'The evolution of the Panoforte' by T. Lea Southgate published in 1906 in connection with the Music Loan Exhibition at Fishmongers Hall in 1904.

Philip James read a paper to the Musical Association on Early Keyboard Instruments in 1930, and I well remember the discussion which followed.

As to good editions of keyboard music, I invested my small savings in *The Fitzwilliam Book* in two volumes (Fuller Maitland and Barclay Squire - published by Breitkopf and Hartel) and in *My Ladye Nevell's Booke* (Hilda Andrews - published by Curwen) and looked with scorn on the editions of Margaret Glyn in which all the

A Clavichord by Oskar Dawson ornament signs and varied repeats were omitted. There were editions of Cosyn's Book and of Purcell and his contemporaries (Chester), and some pianistic editions of Couperin and others (Pauer - published by Aug-ener). Scarlatti was firmly in the hands of Longo and the pianists.

The most common adjective applied to the harpsichord (and for that matter to any other old instrument) was 'quaint'. Players were obsessed with its lack of a sustaining pedal and with the slight noise made by the jack as it passed the string on its return journey. Anyone who thought he could devise a jack silent in that respect might win a fortune!

One afternoon about 1929 my father and I were taken to an old manor house (Westwood Manor) near Bradford-on-Avon to see a collection of harpsichords and spinets belonging to a Mr Edgar Lister. Mr Lister played the harp as an amateur and obtained the instruments for his collection (together with his harp strings) from the Morley mentioned above, who also dealt in 'antique instruments'. The passage of time has blurred any details of the instruments in Mr Lister's collection except that it ranged from Italian spinets to an English harpsichord by either Shudi or Kirkman.

Another person whom I visited at this time was Herbert Lambert who also lived on one of the hills which surround Bath. He was a leading photographer in Bath and also had a studio in London; but it was as a maker of harpsichords and clavichords that I was drawn to him, and it was at his house that I first met Tom Goff. Herbert Lambert's name is immortalized in the delightful set of pieces composed by Herbert Howells under the title *Lambert's Clavichord*.

My first visit to the Haslemere Festival was in 1931 when Arnold Dolmetsch invited me to play the baroque flute in Bach's *Peasant's Cantata*. At



that time the Dolmetsch family did not have other flute players in their immediate circle of players. For the next few years the Festival became a part of my summer holiday where, besides getting to know the Dolmetsch family and the instruments they made and played, I also met Oskar Dawson who had worked for them, but had left and was making recorders and clavichords in his own workshop, and Robert Goble who was later to follow the same course. Herr Emil Brauer from Dusseldorf regularly attended the Festival and I was invited by him to visit Germany in 1934 for the *Kasseler Musiktage* and through him I became an agent for the harpsichords and spinets of Ammer Bros, of Isenberg in Thuringia. At that time few



Spinnet by Gebr Ammer of Eisenburg i. Thur.

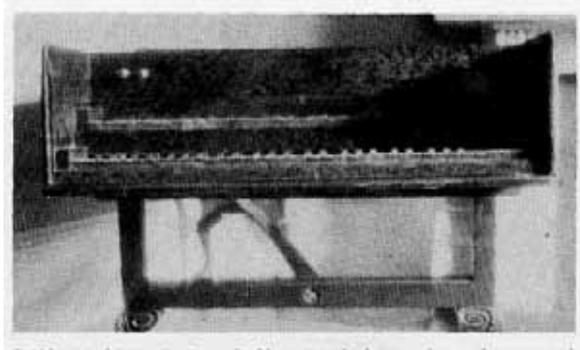
were sufficiently interested in such instruments from abroad, and I had no orders!

Prior to World War II the form of Pleyel had a shop in Baker Street at the junction with George Street. In the window there was a lavishly gilded grand piano, a chromatic harp and a harpsichord. It happened that through a chance meeting on a train I met the managing director, Miss Olwen Pugh-Jones and was invited to see their harpsichords, and, what was more interesting for me, to hear some of the visiting players practising. There was a large show-room on the first floor with row upon row of pianos and a harpsichord in the corner. I was given a duster and unobtrusively dusted the pianos while Alice Ehlers or some other player was practising. I did not in this way hear Landowska, but there were many others whose names I forget. There was an article on the harpsichord in *The Dominant*, a magazine published by the Oxford University Press at that time, written by Wanda Landowska and I had her book on *The Music of the Past*. The Pleyel harpsichord always seemed to be a wonderous machine, but it appeared to lack a soul, and its action sounded rather like a handful of nuts being shaken in a small tin.

My professor for Harmony was Dr George Oldroyd, an outstanding musician, and one who encouraged my love for early music and instruments. I well remember his buying a very fine Kirkman



(1760) at one of Sotheby's auctions in 1931. It was a double manual with the usual 2x8' and 4', with lute and harp stops, and was particularly ornamental, being of a light wood, with fine marquetry over the keyboard and a stand with cabriole legs and claw and ball feet - the price paid was £110. He asked me to help him to get into it playing order for a performance of his *Spiritual Rhapsody* which he was then composing and which was to have its



first performance at the next Croydon Triennial Festival. From that instrument I learnt the importance of the box-like construction of a harpsichord, and its superiority over the modern instruments which were being built like pianos, without a base.

The name of the founder of Trinity College of Music was Bonavia Hunt (no relation!) and I had won the Bonavia Hunt Prize in 1930 with an essay on French Opera. The next subject was *Keyboard Music* and I put all I knew into my essay, but was disqualified from a second prize when it was found that the regulations excluded previous winners -I was however given some kind of consolation prize for my efforts.

The next events were for me an important landmark. In 1935 a new quarterly appeared, *The Amateur Musician*, edited by Eliabeth Voss, and the first number carried an article on the Benton Fletcher Collection of harpsichords which had been transferred from Leighton House in Holland Park to Old Devonshire House in Bloomsbury. This led to my meeting my future wife and to an association with Major Benton Fletcher in the start of a school for early music and the eventual foundation of the Department of Renaissance and Baroque Music at Trinity College of Music.

(to be continued)