

A Harpsichord Odyssey (II)

by Edgar Hunt

Major Benton Fletcher had acquired Old Devonshire House in 1934 when it was in a very poor state, cleaned it up, stripping off several coats of wall paper and plaster to reveal the original wood panelling, and made it a fit home for his collections. Built in the seventeenth century, it had been the town house of the Cavendish family, one of whom once rode his horse up the broad staircase for a wager. Now it was to provide the perfect setting for the Major's collection of early keyboard instruments and antique furniture.

The Major himself, besides having been a soldier (he served in the Boer War and World War I), an egyptologist who had worked with Flinders Petrie and an artist (among other things he illustrated Braybrook's *Pepys' Diary* for Dent), had built up a collection of harpsichords and other early keyboard instruments as he feared lest their tone quality might otherwise be lost to future generations. He strongly disapproved of the way the modern harpsichord was going, with its metal frame, row of pedals and lack of sonority, and wanted his



The Entrance Hall and Staircase,
Old Devonshire House.

(Photo: Apollo)



The first floor 'Great Chamber'.

Old Devonshire House.

(Photo: Country Life)

instruments to be available for concerts (one was regularly used for Bach performances at Westminster Abbey) and for students to practice on at 6d (=2ip) an hour. A Mr Irwin Hinchcliffe ARCM, who helped with the restoration and maintenance of his harpsichords, was available to teach, and Mrs Frances Jackson, his housekeeper, acted as curator. But the Major also wanted Old Devonshire House to become a centre for early music where anyone interested could also study the viola da gamba or recorder and join in ensembles with harpsichord continue. I first met Major Fletcher in 1936. At that time I was teaching flute at Trinity College of Music and had just started a recorder class there. The Major invited me to join in his efforts to start a conservatoire for early music. I had studied the viola da gamba with Edmund van der Straeten and was ready to teach any viol players as well as recorder, while Mr Hinchcliffe looked after the harpsichordists and madrigal singers.

Thus the artistic side was ready, but the all-important 'office' was lacking - to take care of advertising, collect fees and see to the allocation of rooms. I thought that an ideal solution might be found if Old Devonshire House could somehow become a Department of Trinity College of Music. After some discussion a committee was formed to carry out such a plan. Mr Hinchcliffe started a madrigal group and had a few harpsichord pupils,

while my recorder pupils were transferred from Trinity College to Old Devonshire House. Interest was increasing when the outbreak of World War II called a halt and the committee had to think how to ensure the safety of the instruments should London be bombed. The Major had given his collection and Old Devonshire House to the National Trust and while the committee was deliberating he took action. There were restrictions on all forms of transport, but he managed to get hold of a lorry onto which he loaded all the harpsichords and spinets (although there was room for only one of the stands). This valuable cargo was driven to a barn at Bourton-on-the-Hill in the Cotswolds, to remain there for the duration of the war. This was a fortunate move on the part of Major Fletcher as he thereby saved the bulk of his collection. Not long afterwards Old Devonshire House was burnt down together with most of the harpsichord stands and other items which had had to be left behind.



The Shudi-Broadwood 1770
at 3 Cheyne Walk

(Photo: Chelsea Society)



No. 3 Cheyne Walk

(Photo: Chelsea Society)

The Major continued to plan for the future and together with the National Trust, he purchased 3 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea in 1943 as a home for his collection after the war. However, he did not live to see the success of his ideas as he died in 1944. After the war the National Trust, which at that time was unaccustomed to musical enterprises, did not know what to do about the harpsichords and the provisions in the Major's will that they should be available for teaching purposes and for students to practice on; but looking through the Major's papers they came across my name and traced me to an address in Amersham where my wife was living - our London flat had been bombed in 1941. On my return from service in India I put them in touch again with Trinity College of Music. Dr Greenhouse Allt was the new Principal of the College, and he looked favourably on the idea of making a fresh start.

First the harpsichords had to be brought back to London and installed at 3 Cheyne Walk. They were badly in need of repair and restoration as the years

of storage had taken their toll. This task was undertaken in the first instance by Irwin Hinchcliffe. It was a difficult task as funds were limited, materials were restricted and permits had to be obtained for the necessary wood for new stands. Mr Hinchcliffe did as much as he could, but, by the time (in 1947) some harpsichords were ready for use, he decided to resign, and when teaching restarted in 1948 the professors for harpsichord were Joseph Saxby and Christopher Wood BA, MusB.

The work of restoration was continued by Morley of South Kensington who undertook the work on some instruments: others were sent to Dolmetsch at Haslemere. Interest in the harpsichord and other early instruments was growing among the students in the Department of 16th and 17th-century Music (as it was then known). Among those who studied the harpsichord were John Paynter (pupil of Joseph Saxby - now Professor in the University of York) and Ian Spink (now Professor at Royal Holloway College, University of London). Frank Hubbard studied the treble viol, but also made good use of the opportunity to study the instruments in the Benton Fletcher Collection.

In 1952 the National Trust acquired Fenton House in Hampstead under a bequest, and decided to sell 3 Cheyne Walk and move the Benton Fletcher Collection to Hampstead.

In listing the instruments in the collection I will include wherever possible references to Boalch* and some information from the major's original, Old Devonshire House, guide and his annotations to it. There were four Virginals:

1. Marcus Siculus MDXXXX (1540) - a beautiful pentagonal instrument of cypress, with boxwood keys with carved fronts and a fine metal rose.
2. Venetian, 16th century ascribed to Antonio Baffo (Boalch doubts this attribution).
3. Robertus Hatley Londini fecit 1664.
4. An unusual Italian double-strung virginal which Major Fletcher found in a cellar in Florence, where it was used as a carpenter's bench.

In 1938 there were two English spinets to which a third was added later:

1. A beautiful little early 18th-century instrument with ivory keys with carved fronts and black sharps with ivory inlay.
2. A larger instrument which was found in a shed.
3. The later addition was a spinet made by Johann Hancock in London.

There were seven harpsichords, four singles and three doubles:

Singles:

1. An early seventeenth-century single-strung harpsichord acquired by the Major in 1939. He described it as 'Dutch' but it is now thought to



Virginals by Robertus Hatley
London 1664.

(Photo: Country Life)

be Venetian, with its fine parchment rose and elaborate painting. There were carved and gilded putti at each side of the keyboard.

2. Jacobus Kirckman Fecit Londini 1752 (Boalch 2).
3. Burkat Schudi No. 423 Fecit Londini 1761: this formerly belonged to Fanny Davies. (Boalch)
4. Longman & Broderip 1784 (20 Cheapside & 13 Hay Market). This is the instrument I used to accompany my pupils when teaching at Fenton House. The Major found it under a stack of chairs in a country pawn shop. (Boalch 9)

Doubles:

1. Jacobus Kirckman Londini Fecit 1762. (Boalch 18).
2. Jacobus Kirckman Londini Fecit 1777 (with lid swell - Boalch 63). These two Kirckman harpsichords were well matched. The lid-swell mechanism was removed from No. 2 at one one time; but there was so much public protest at this vandalism that it was put back.
3. Burkat Shudi et Johannes Broadwood No. 625 Londini Facerunt 1770. This, the most elaborate instrument in the collection with its 5 stops machine, three pedals and Venetian swell (the third pedal operates the swell), was made for the Dr David Hartley after whom Hartley Coleridge was named. (Boalch) There were also two grand pianofortes (Matthoeus et Gulielmus Stodart Londini Fecerunt 1791 and Joseph Kirckman 1803) to which a Ganer square piano was later added, and two pipe organs. Of the two clavichords, one was lost, the other, a small German fretted instrument, cypress with boxwood keys, was one of the last instruments to be restored after the war, and for a number of years I lent my own instrument (the one which is now at Edinburgh) to the collection at Cheyne Walk.

While it was wonderful to have contact with so many fine harpsichords and be able to use them for teaching purposes, there were some disadvantages in working with the National Trust. The use of the harpsichords during the times the house was open to the public (until 5 or 5.50) was liable to be interrupted by visitors viewing the collections; so we teachers particularly valued the hours after that and until 8 p.m. when teaching finally had to stop. The Trust eventually decided to close everything together and the evening teaching had to end. It was then that most of the work of the Department moved to Trinity College and the

association with Benton Fletcher ended. Among the last students to have their lessons on the Benton Fletcher harpsichords were pupils of Christopher Wood: Christopher Farr who afterwards continued his studies with Gustav Leonhardt in Holland and now lives at The Hague, and Maria Boxall who is now professor of harpsichord in the Department of Renaissance and Baroque Music, as it is now called.

In assessing the relative merits of different types of harpsichord, I admired most the eighteenth-century English instruments - in particular those of Kirckman which offered a warmth of tone to which one could add the piquancy of the lute stop. I admired the fine marquetry and excellent cabinet making and approved of the method of construction from a solid base. Modern instruments failed in my eyes through a lack of sonority and though being constructed on a strong frame but lacking a base - like a tambourine as compared with a tenor drum, or a violin without a back. Modern damping was so mechanical that it killed any resonance - and so much eighteenth-century music needs resonance - they were just plucked pianos. I knew little of earlier harpsichords. The Queen's Joannes Ruckers 1612 (Boalch 16) had been on loan latterly at Fenton House, but somehow it did not attract me. Not until I got to know Michael Thomas and the collection of harpsichords which he was building up, did I realize what I had missed. Three of his harpsichords stand out in my humble estimation: The 1623 anonymous English double, the Sebastien Gamier of 1747 and the 1636 Andreas Ruckers. They cover over a hundred years, but they share qualities of lightness and resonance, and respond to a player who understands and uses the technique of that golden age of the harpsichord.

*Donald H. Boalch: *Makers of the Harpsichord and Clavichord 1440-1840*, 2nd Ed. Oxford 1974.

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