

## How did you become interested in old keyboard instruments?

Pure chance, united with native instinct. For me as a child there was little music in the home, but by chance a neighbour owned two pianos. One was a magnificent mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Collard & Collard square with richly fretted inner string-covers (for which the owner had paid £1). The other in her dining-room was a neat and useful side-table which, as a five-year old, I was astonished to discover, possessed a keyboard – I later knew it to be a Broadwood square of about 1800. But it was the sound of the Collard that fascinated me. It was highly-coloured, gentle, sweet, melancholy, a sound so very different from the battered upright of my infant school on which Miss Weber every morning banged out Percy Grainger's *Country Gardens* as we marched into morning Assembly, something that established in me a life-long antipathy to both Grainger and especially, trite *Country Gardens*!

It seems I never mentioned to my parents that I wanted to learn to play the piano, so it was only at the age of 10 or 11 that a rather noisy upright piano was acquired and I first took lessons; I believe that's too late to become a seriously good professional keyboard player, though others have often proved me wrong. At school I was, of course, a member of the choir and the orchestra, and in my mid-teens was lucky enough to be taught and encouraged by Patrick Sheehy, a gifted pianist and pupil of James Ching, himself a pupil of the distinguished London teacher Tobias Matthay. The keyboard music of J. S. Bach was an essential key which unlocked my musical sensibility as a child: it was not just its beauty and imagination, but its fascinating intricacy and structure – and not least, the delicious sensation of the music under the fingers. I had absolutely no thought of making a career in music, but chance again played its part. During a Saturday morning piano lesson, Patrick Sheehy said casually '...oh, and if you ever wanted to do music professionally...' Astounded, I didn't let him finish what he was about to say. I had never imagined such a thing might be possible, but the consequence of a chance remark was that in 1956 I enrolled at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama on a newly revamped graduate course in school music. In many ways I was ill-prepared for such a step, but at my initial interview Edric Cundell, the then Principal, said, '...oh well, at least you're musical...' and with the greatest good fortune, I was placed with the distinguished anglo-French pianist Frank Laffitte. In 1920 at the age of 19 or 20 he had been deemed 'ready' and made his professional debut at the Queen's Hall under the baton of Sir Landon Ronald. His programme was the Schumann piano concerto, some Debussy preludes, and Rachmaninoff's 2<sup>nd</sup> concerto. Interesting to reflect on the fact that the Debussy and Rachmaninoff were then 'contemporary' music. Frank Laffitte had studied with Marmaduke Barton, a pupil of Bernhard Stavenhagen, a late, favourite pupil of Liszt's, and he also worked and corresponded with pupils of Clara Schumann. As part of the Guildhall course, and a great innovation in the 1950s, we attended classes in early music given by Celia Bizony. These classes involved much chamber music performance, and I also studied the harpsichord privately with her. She had been a pupil of the great Swiss Bach specialist, Edwin Fischer who, through his own teacher Martin Krause was also in the Liszt pianistic ancestral line. I was also an organ student of Southwark Cathedral's Harold Dexter who delivered our lectures in musical acoustics. His tuition was particularly relevant to my own interests, for he was sympathetic to the Organ Reform Movement and its influence on historical performance styles.

Though the sound and expressive potential of the struck string continued to fascinate, I was perhaps more strongly and instinctively drawn to the sound of a plucked string. At school my

French master had introduced me to his Alec Hodsdon spinet<sup>1</sup>, and I pounced on a copy of the 'Woodworker Magazine' containing instructions on building your own clavichord (I seem to remember that first you had to find a keyboard...). If one could make a clavichord, why not a harpsichord? Though this did not at the time inspire me to attempt the exercise, it sowed a seed in my mind that such a thing was possible under ordinary workshop conditions. Some years would pass before that seed germinated, but the ambition nagged at me constantly throughout my student years and beyond.

I did not encounter antique plucked keyboard instruments until a first visit to Fenton House in 1954 in a school party led by the same French teacher. This was shortly after the Benton Fletcher collection had been installed there, and was a thrilling, life-changing experience. I immediately learned that a single 8-foot register on a good instrument could offer infinite musical potential. Intriguingly, in an upper room, in poor condition, there was a huge Swedish clavichord of 1796 by Georg Christoffer Rackwitz which then belonged to the Galpin Society. On it the rather intimidating curator Mrs Frances Jackson had put a notice: 'Only play this if you must!' I had to. I played a tentative note or two... with both clavichord and harpsichord, I was intrigued by the sensation of a finger in direct contact with a string through the medium of a key, and the vital importance of the quality of touch. As on the piano, this is intimately linked to the creation of tone quality. The tradition of Tobias Matthay paid special attention to this, though his disciples were said to be encouraged to 'roll around the keyboard like whales and knead the keys'. From a different tradition, Frank Laffitte would never allow any unnecessary extraneous movement, teaching a very economical technical method, but he too always insisted on perfect control of the means of tone production: across the room he would call out 'listen to your tone! ... Your tone!!' The balance of voices and tones within a single chord or succession of harmonies was a preoccupation: 'orchestrate your chords!' was another of his vivid comments – which sometimes could be sharp, perhaps an echo of the manner employed by his own teacher, Marmaduke Barton. During his career he was particularly admired for his performances of Schumann, Brahms, and Debussy, and was a great champion of 20<sup>th</sup> century British piano music, giving many premiers.

And the first old keyboard instrument I acquired? At the age of 19, through a friendly bookseller who knew of my interests, an 1854 Collard & Collard square piano of exhibition quality and in excellent, original condition. It is identical to the one I first encountered age five, though mine cost £20, not £1; Frank Laffitte said I had paid too much. I have it still, believing it to be a good-luck talisman. And the first old keyboard instrument I restored? In the mid-'60s, a fine square by Longman Clementi of about 1800. I had been helping to set up and finish new harpsichords at John Feldberg's workshop, his wife having bravely continued the business, with Peter Whale as its manager, after John's early death. The owner of the piano had approached Ann Feldberg with a view to restoration; she persuaded me to attempt the work in my own workshop. It turned out to be a beautiful instrument. Its tone was clear and fluting, its dynamic range wide, the Geib-style escapement action sensitive and responsive. In 1966, Christa Landon's Vienna urtext edition of Haydn's piano sonatas appeared. These works, with two or three exceptions, were then neglected and ignored by pianists who generally still thought of the composer as 'Papa Haydn, the merry peasant', hardly worthy of their attention. Through the medium of the Longman Clementi piano I found the edition to be a revelation, and my belief in these superb works remains with me today. This piano played a major part in revealing the

---

<sup>1</sup> Alec Hodsdon, 1900 – 1986, was married to harpsichordist Margaret Fletcher, a niece of Major Benton Fletcher whose collection is at Fenton House. Hodsdon built large numbers of harpsichords, virginals, spinets and clavichords, but his reputation as a maker has not survived the passage of time any better than many of his instruments.

quality of Haydn's keyboard writing – and convinced me of the value of a good fortepiano as a musical instrument.

In my younger days, harpsichords encountered in concert halls and conservatories were invariably heavily built 'dreadnoughts' usually with 16-foot registers and lots of pedals, some with metal frames; all drew on certain aspects of modern piano technology. The firms of Érard, and Pleyel, Wolff, Lyon & Cie first exhibited new harpsichords based loosely on 18<sup>th</sup> century French instruments at the Paris exhibition of 1889, so pre-dating Arnold Dolmetsch's first 'Green Harpsichord' of 1896 built at the instigation of William Morris<sup>2</sup>. These instruments perhaps reached their zenith (or nadir, according to your point of view) with Pleyel's *Grande Modèle de Concert* developed for Wanda Landowska in 1912. Of course, musical masterworks like Poulenc's *Fête Champêtre* and the Manuel de Falla Harpsichord Concerto were written with these instruments in mind, certainly justifying their existence. They have, however, little or no connection with historical harpsichord building of any earlier period. It's salutary to recall that at the Guildhall or elsewhere at the time, very few professional keyboard players would have considered performing on a genuine, old instrument. There was profound suspicion of historic keyboards: they were inaudible, mechanically unreliable, always out of tune and insufficiently robust for public performance.... We should remember that Frank Hubbard and William Dowd had made a clavichord in 'classical' manner as graduate students, and in 1949 abandoned their intended careers as teachers of English to establish their Boston workshop instead, their first harpsichords based on the work of Pascal Taskin. Independently, the flautist and recorder player Martin Skowronek in Bremen made his first harpsichord in 1953 – he was already a maker of recorders. Revelatory though their work was, the resulting revelations were initially restricted to a small circle of admirers and did not yet have a wide influence.

Things were to change following the first Bruges Harpsichord Competition of 1965, part of the summer Flanders Festival. I was there as a competitor and we were all required to play on heavy series instruments of the Neupert/Sassmann/Wittmayer/Sperrhake variety – on which most of the young players had of course been trained. But an exhibition of instruments had been added as an afterthought to the players' competition. Though conceived as a mere appendix, it swiftly became clear that the exhibition was generating more interest, attention and comment than the competition. The majority of instrument makers were seen to represent an establishment tradition that might well have a weight of authority behind it, and certainly the weight of numbers, but clearly this was a tradition based on little more than a 20<sup>th</sup> century concept of design – and one with little to commend it aesthetically. Above all, it was a tradition drawing neither from instruments of the past, nor from a primary source of information which should have led makers in their work – the music. Simply stated, these instruments were irrelevant to the historic repertoires for which they had been made. Asked to comment on their approach to instrument making, the reply was '*we have our own ideas*' – there was a fear of being seen as mere copyists.

Even so, in that first Bruges exhibition there were auguries of future change. Kurt Wittmayer, a maker of series instruments, included in his display a two manual instrument based on a

---

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to received wisdom, William Morris was musical, though his musical tastes were narrowly focussed. George Bernard Shaw (who as a music critic wrote brilliantly as *Corno di Bassetto*) commented 'as a matter of fact he had a perfect ear, a most musical singing voice, and so fine a sense of beauty in sound... he could not endure the clatter of the piano forte or the squalling and shouting of the average singer. When I told him that the Amsterdam choir, brought over here by M.de Lange, had discovered the secret of the beauty of Medieval music... he was full of regret for having missed it; and the viol concerts of M. Dolmetsch pleased him greatly...'

Ruckers harpsichord<sup>3</sup>. A second historic instrument was a very fine copy of the 1734 double manual H. A. Hass harpsichord in the Brussels Conservatoire Museum from Knut Kaufmann's Brussels workshop<sup>4</sup>. Possessing a 16-foot register, this instrument conformed to the specification expected of a modern concert harpsichord. Ironically, alongside this instrument, Kaufmann also exhibited a replica of a metal-framed Pleyel harpsichord with an action more intractable than the heaviest of modern concert grand pianos.

Three years later, at the second Bruges harpsichord competition and instrument exhibition, it was clear that a revolution had occurred. The exhibition had become central to the whole event. Young instrument makers were now leading the field with historically inspired instruments. They were persuading performers to match repertoire to instrument, demonstrating how players' musical insights should be guided by the technical and musical potential of historically legitimate harpsichords. The Bruges competition's greatest contribution to the early music movement was the essential bridge created between makers and players. It led to profound and important changes in the arts of performance.

### How did you come to the Colt Collection?

Once again, just as with my entry to the Guildhall School, pure chance played its part. I saw a piece in 'House and Garden' magazine, then a leading journal for interior decoration. The article described C. F. Colt's house in Portugal, which incorporated a converted windmill. A photograph showed a room furnished with a nice square piano, described as a specimen from his large collection of keyboard instruments. I have a faint memory that the article might have been titled 'Forty Pianos'. I wrote to Mr Colt, and received an invitation to meet and to see his collection at Bethersden. The day arrived; I arrived at the appointed time; Mr Colt did not. He was not at Bethersden. He was out of the country. It took about a year to arrange that first meeting, but we did eventually meet, and a long series of visits followed.



*Derek playing the magnificent Joseph Kirckman harpsichord of 1800 purchased by C. F. Colt from Captain Lane for £250 – his first harpsichord. Photo c.1967, C. F. Colt.*

---

<sup>3</sup> Used for an evening recital by one of the competition judges – in the event, a mixed success. At the end, the performer announced that though interesting, such 'experiments' were not for her. She resigned from the jury before the end of the competition.

<sup>4</sup> During the competition this instrument was moved to the concert hall for a lecture given by Gustav Leonhardt, one of the jurists. Seated at the instrument, Dr. Leonhardt began by praising the harpsichord and, wishing to be democratic, gave the first half of his talk in Flemish, the second in German. A single, brief right-hand phrase was played on the harpsichord to illustrate a point, but nothing more. We did not hear it played then or at any other time during the event.

C. F. Colt was an unusual man in many ways. One minor foible was an intense dislike of his given names. He was only ever known as ‘C. F. Colt’, ‘Mick Colt’, or by his workers, as ‘Mr Mick’. He had a highly developed visual sensibility, had a taste for Victoriana and Biedermeier furniture, particularly in blond woods, a talent for interior decoration and garden making. He had a keen sense of business, was clever – and unpredictable, sometimes behaving in a disinhibited manner. He had an exceptional eye for craftsmanship, was very musical, had a sharply critical appreciation of quality of sound and tone colour, though little ability as a player. He had a profound dislike of the appearance and sound of the modern piano. His German father Wilhelm Gleichner was an inventive entrepreneur who, having taken his mother’s surname, founded the firm of William H. Colt in 1919 at Bethersden in Kent. One of his many original ideas was to take advantage of quantities of imported Canadian cedarwood then becoming available, using it to construct ingeniously designed henhouses – these were serious henhouses intended for poultry farms. His first rural sawmill and workshops were established on the small estate, and the enterprise flourished. His son recalled having to attend travelling exhibitions of Colt henhouses, especially at the increasingly shabby Crystal Palace at Sydenham. Based on that business success, W. H. Colt reasoned that if he could make henhouses of cedarwood, then why not build houses for people out of the timber? This enterprise also showed promise which over the years developed into a significant business which grew and flourished under C. F. Colt’s guidance. Colt cedarwood houses built to a modular factory system became very popular in English rural areas, and there was a considerable export trade. For their time they were unusually environmentally aware. Their designs drew on Kentish traditions of house construction in timber, with a side-glance at domestic buildings in New England. Distinguished consultant architects contributed designs, one pre-war model even devised by Edwin Lutyens.

With the business in mind, C. F. Colt trained as an architect at UCL’s Bartlett School, there coming under the benign influence of Sir Albert Richardson. Brilliantly gifted and charmingly eccentric, Richardson in his architecture achieved a balance between neo-classicism and modernism, many of his projects now recognized as milestones of 20<sup>th</sup> century design. His eccentricity mainly concerned a passion for the Georgian era, focused on his house at Ampthill in Bedfordshire. Lit, apart from the kitchen, only by candlelight, the house became a shrine to that passion and period. On occasion Sir Albert would don Georgian wig and costume to be carried through Ampthill in a Sedan chair. Asked once if he wished he had lived in Georgian times he answered ‘But I do! I do!’ One important element of his collection at Avenue House was a group of early musical instruments, including an important grand fortepiano by Joseph Merlin. I do not know if Colt ever visited Avenue House, but I think it unlikely that he did not. I believe it unquestionable that Richardson had a deep influence on his interests and tastes. It was perhaps at Avenue house that Colt first encountered early pianos, and there formed the idea of creating a collection of his own.

When I first visited Bethersden the collection was already very large, but only a few instruments were in good working order and none were in tune. I had learned to tune at the Guildhall while preparing Celia Bizony’s Neupert harpsichord for our early music classes (an S4 model dating from the 1930s)<sup>5</sup>. During a visit to Bethersden I offered to help with the tuning, then began some work on actions, and before long was appointed restorer and curator of the collection, working with a cabinet maker already established in the Colt factory. I moved to Pluckley, a notoriously haunted Wealden village close to Bethersden. There I lived in a Colt cedarwood

---

<sup>5</sup> In my final year at the Guildhall it became my own, first harpsichord.

house. For me, one exceedingly valuable feature of the collection was its sequence of English grand pianos by Broadwood, each close in date to the next in the series. Many had sufficient evidence of stringing, hammer covers and ephemeral materials to guide our restoration work. The most important consequence of this was an awareness of the 'linear' evolution of sound quality and character from the first Broadwood grands of the 1780s through to mid-Victorian instruments. If a piano did not fit into that sequence convincingly, then we knew that either the instrument or its restoration was at fault, and further study and work were needed. Contact with so many instruments of the first quality challenged and shaped expectations of my own ability in the craft. Since I had complete freedom to study and play the instruments, I came to regard the collection as a laboratory for understanding them aesthetically and mechanically. I realised how critical to an instrument's success was the quality of construction. The collection was also supremely important for its examples of French, south German and Viennese pianos which in those years, were almost impossible to encounter elsewhere in the British Isles. At Bethersden, one could find a piano to match almost any repertoire dating from 1780 to 1870.

The collection was housed initially in a selection of show houses on the W. H. Colt, Son & Co. site, or in any corner where a piano might be made to fit. This situation changed, however, when a misfortune was put to advantage. The very harsh winter of 1962/3 temporarily put a stop to all building work across northern Europe. Snow began falling on Boxing Day 1962, and the cold weather persisted until March the following year. In central England, only the winters of 1683/4 and 1739/40 were colder – snow drifts were up to 20-feet deep. Both the Colt factory and Colt house-building firm came to a halt. C. F. Colt turned this disaster into an opportunity, employing his otherwise out-of-work staff to build a 'sample' cedarwood Village Hall on site. This provided an entrance vestibule, the main concert room seating 120, a smaller secondary hall, and four other rooms.



*The main Colt 'Village Hall' concert room in its heyday, c.1970. Photo John Maltby for LP record sleeves produced at Bethersden.*

It is worth stressing the remarkable variety of construction and sound among all these early pianos. When they were manufactured there was no standard tone quality, in marked contrast to the relative uniformity and blandness we hear in the modern piano. Even the ‘dull, round, fluty’ tone quality characteristic of early English instruments masks the fact that each builder pursued an individual tonal ideal. Compositions taken from one instrument to another can change markedly in character and effect, suggesting that the music itself is mutable, that it can change its nature and spirit according to the medium on which it is played.

The new building not only allowed all the most significant instruments in the collection to come together, but the two larger rooms were acoustically good, and suitable for recording and broadcasts. The BBC at that time was assembling a sound archive, visiting Bethersden a number of times to record outstanding instruments. Colt instigated a series of commercial LP recordings, and annual recitals as part of Alfred Deller’s Stour Festival. The first of these was given by Viennese pianist Paul Badura-Skoda. I recall he played three instruments: the exquisite, small south German grand attributed by Colt (I’m sure correctly) to Schiedmeyer, a Conrad Graf of c.1830, and an earlier, wide-compass Viennese piano by J. A. Stein’s son Matthäus – this last instrument an absolute brute to tune. One of the LP recordings has stayed firmly in my memory: Ronald Smith, a gifted pianist with a prodigious technique, championed the works of Charles-Valentin Alkan, an admired though reclusive contemporary of Chopin and Liszt. Smith came to Bethersden to record an Alkan recital using two instruments. The first was a Viennese piano by Joseph Schneider, beautifully decorated with borders of polychrome ‘Tunbridge ware’ (a kind of micro-mosaic in wood) which had been shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The second was a London Érard grand of about 1870 which had the incisive brilliance, colour and slow damping ideally suited to this repertoire. Ronald Smith was fastidiously critical of his own playing, and the first session on the Schneider, with its many seemingly perfect takes, went on until about midnight. The following day was to be devoted to Alkan’s hair-raisingly demanding ‘Festin d’Ésope’ on the Érard. I would arrive early to fine tune the piano for the second session. Published in 1857, the Festin is a piano étude consisting of 25 variations to be played without a break, requiring almost demonic virtuosity. The *Allegretto* tempo indication is qualified by the words *senza licenza quantunque* implying that, no matter how many notes are to be played, the tempo should not vary. Despite the late hour, the darkness, with mist swirling mysteriously round the isolated building, Ronald Smith decided he would give the piece a quick run-through to try out the Érard. The recording producer-engineer happened to turn his machine on... The opening statement of the deliberately banal theme must be played staccato, while the left hand contributes a spare accompaniment of staccatissimo bass notes. The piano was exactly right, providing a tone that was clean, bright and precise, but surrounded by a luminous halo, a kind of supporting mist of sound. What followed was a breath-taking, note-perfect performance without any relaxation of tempo until the final fortississimo, staccato chord. Ronald Smith leapt away from the instrument saying ‘that’s your recording! I can’t possibly do that again!’ You can hear it on the Oryx LP, but please make allowances for the tuning of the untuned top octave.

Although the piano was invented towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it did not become a common or popular instrument until the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup>. Despite the vitality of Viennese musical life and culture, the piano was almost unknown there until 1780 when the Countess Thun purchased an instrument from Johann Andreas Stein which Mozart borrowed for his public concerts, generating a craze for the instrument. The encounter between Mozart and Clementi in the presence of the Emperor in 1781 shows that, apart from the Countess’s instrument, there was then a shortage of playable pianos in Vienna. The two musicians were, incidentally, unaware of an element of competition in this meeting before members of the

court. One of the instruments was not in good order, out of tune and with three sticking keys, apart from which, Clementi's performance must have reflected his training and career as a harpsichordist. Their audience gave the 'competitors' equal honours, Mozart actually respecting Clementi's ability. His account of the 'duel' and other encounters in letters to his father, in which he described Clementi as a *ciarlatano*, like all Italians, must be taken with a pinch of salt, for he struggled to convince his father that his presence in Vienna was indeed advancing his career and prospects above that of the competition. An interesting collectors' conundrum regarding early Viennese pianos is their dating; they are seldom dated, and often somewhat younger than their apparent age. A complicating factor is that Viennese pianos often went back to their builders to be repaired and upgraded: Michael Latham has demonstrated that Mozart's Anton Walter piano was substantially rebuilt later at his widow Constanze's request. Modern copies of the instrument do not actually represent the instrument as known by Mozart.

While living at Pluckley I decided the time had come to attempt making a new instrument. I had attended the first meeting of the Ruckers Genootschap at the Vleeshuis in Antwerp when the 1650 Ioannes Couchet muselar, newly restored by Hubert Bédard, was presented and played in concert by Gustav Leonhardt. I was enchanted by the sound, and while in the Vleeshuis museum studied and measured a muselar by Ioannes Ruckers of 1611. This served as the basis for my own first experiment – and 22 muselars that followed at Pluckley, Finchcocks and Welbeck.



*The last muselar from the Adlam Burnett workshop, made in 1982 for Richard Burnett.*

It is not generally known that in the early '60s C. F. Colt decided to bequeath his collection to the Galpin Society. He announced this, without prior notice to anyone, at an annual meeting of the society in Edward Croft-Murray's house in Maids of Honour Row, Richmond. Croft-Murray was Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, a keen amateur musician and distinguished member of the Galpin Society. The entrance hall of this wonderful house is decorated with panels depicting European and oriental scenes by Antonio Joli, paintings commissioned by Handel's impresario J. J. Heidegger, a previous owner. The large music room on the first floor, with a splendid Kirckman harpsichord once owned by Dr Charles Burney, was the atmospheric setting for this unexpected announcement. Brian Galpin, then chairman of the society, received the bombshell with remarkable self-possession, thanked Colt sincerely for his great generosity, expressing the hope that for Mr Colt's sake as well as that of the Society, he would remain with us for many years to come. The Galpin Society was clearly bemused by

the proposed gift: they had no premises to house such a collection nor means to maintain it. A great deal of covert discussion and activity must have followed the announcement, reaching a climax in an undeniably undiplomatic letter written by Brian Galpin to Colt saying that he would be pleased to learn that the Reid School of Music in Edinburgh had agreed to receive the collection in due course. Unfortunately, this agreement had been arrived at without consultation with Colt – who immediately indignantly struck the bequest from his will.

### How did you come to move to Finchcocks?

Chance once again, this time originating in a meeting at Bethersden. At the Colt collection we entertained many pianists some of whom were encountering historic instruments for the first time. Colt decided that with so many visitors he would charge an entry fee to be collected at the door. When Richard and Katrina Burnett first visited the collection, they were greeted outside the Village Hall by Colt with hand outstretched in welcome – to receive £5. Only then was the door opened to admit the visitors. Richard was already noted for his outstanding performances on early pianos. I had heard that he was forming his own collection and had acquired a Viennese piano by Conrad Graf – this piano, ‘Opus 998’, most unusually, is dated 1826 on trapwork within the key-well. Both Mr Colt and I were deeply interested in this instrument. Graf was a distinguished piano builder who, in the mid-1820s, made instruments with four strings to a note to produce greater power. Graf lent one of these new pianos to Beethoven, hoping to overcome at least partially, the composer’s deafness<sup>6</sup>. Opus 998, though conventionally tri-chord, was basically in fine, original condition, possessing an almost complete set of original strings, its leather hammer covers, cloth, and so on. The proposed restorer of the instrument very sadly died before undertaking the work, and I was commissioned to do the work in his place. This great instrument played a significant part in Richard Burnett’s professional career. You may hear it at its idiomatic best in Richard’s recording of Weber’s Grand Duo Concertant Op.48, with clarinetist Alan Hacker, a performance which I believe has never been surpassed.

The first muselar after Ioannes Ruckers I made at Pluckley in 1969 was launched at a recital by Colin Tilney in the Purcell Room, South Bank. It attracted some attention, and I began to receive enquiries and orders from other players. Three more muselars followed, while I continued restoration work on antique instruments, including some from Richard Burnett’s growing collection. The prospect of an increasing order book and need to provide workspace for help with the work was making my small workshop increasingly impracticable. Richard and his wife then lived in Pimlico in an ingeniously designed house built on a trapezoidal site; it had a narrow, steep, and treacherous staircase with a remarkable variety of winding treads. It was not a house designed to accommodate a large collection of pianos – most were lodged in the houses of a wide circle of friends. In addition to Richard’s career as a pianist, he and Katrina (who trained at drama school and has a great gift as a writer) ran the Pimlico Group, specialising in educational outreach work. With a small band of young actors, they worked indefatigably, taking performances of music, poetry and drama into schools.

Richard Burnett’s wish for premises suitable for housing a growing collection of instruments which could serve as a performance and recording space, and a study centre, combined with the

---

<sup>6</sup> Graf also provided this instrument with an ‘amplifying’ aid. Gerhard von Breuning in his memoir of Beethoven described it: ‘Above the keyboard and action was a kind of trumpet, like a prompter’s box, made in the shape of a bent soundboard of thin wood; the intention was to concentrate the sound of the instrument in the player’s ears.’ Apparently, Beethoven’s Broadwood piano had earlier been fitted with a similar ‘listening’ device.

need for a more substantial base for the Pimlico Group, and my need to expand into a larger workshop, were requirements that gelled together. We agreed to a partnership, and a search began for the elusive premises which would meet all those needs. After several false starts, the magazine *Country Life* provided an answer. An advertisement appeared for Finchcocks, a Kentish Georgian house in baroque manner dated 1725. For a number of years it had housed the Legat Ballet School, and though in consequence was somewhat worn out and requiring considerable restoration work to the fabric and entirely new services, it offered great potential – and was blessed with a row of old classrooms nearby which would make admirable instrument-making workshops.

Richard and Katrina purchased the house – and in 1971 I moved into a building-site which endured for the next three years. The workshops were established in the old classrooms, and the business grew. We were joined by highly talented craftspeople who flourished in the environment provided by the house, and later went on to distinguished careers of their own as instrument makers, conservators and restorers. It was an excellent time for such an enterprise, as there were so many gifted young talents developing their own careers within the early music movement. The recording industry was expanding rapidly, performers such as David Munrow and Christopher Hogwood were taking their music around the world generating new, young audiences. Concert halls and recital rooms frequently sold out. The BBC played an energetic part in this blossoming interest in an enterprise which largely belonged to young people. The restored house opened to the public, offering demonstration tours, talks and concerts; it became an important recording venue and study centre – and this continued vigorously until the Burnett's retirement from the house in 2017.



*Adam Burnett copy, 1979, of the oldest surviving harpsichord in the world,  
the Royal College of Music's clavicytherium of c.1480.*

*Photo Michael McCarty.*

Despite all the above, it was a terrible decade in which to undertake such an enterprise, one marked by financial and social instability. From 1971, with the floating of the pound against the US dollar, the Sterling/US dollar exchange rate became unstable – from \$1.63/£1.00 in 1976, it reached \$2.40 by the end of the decade. Simultaneously, in the mid-1970s UK annual inflation rose disastrously to a peak of about 27%. The combination of high inflation and volatile exchange rates made overseas trading almost unmanageable – our business with USA clients abruptly died away. In October 1973, western governments' support of Israel in the Yom Kippur war against Egypt led Arab oil producers to impose an embargo on oil exports to the west. The cost of oil immediately quadrupled, and prices rose. A confrontation between trades

unions fighting for wage increases and Edward Heath's government resulted in strikes, serious fuel shortages and a long succession of major power cuts. In the following November a national State of Emergency was declared and to conserve power, three-day-a-week working for manufacturing and commercial industries was imposed from 1<sup>st</sup> January to 7<sup>th</sup> March 1974. At Finchcocks we somehow continued working, often by the light of kerosene lamps. We later encountered 'The Winter of Discontent' of 1978-9 during which public service trades unions fought against the then Labour government's attempt to cap wages and control inflation. The resulting strikes during extremely cold weather early in 1979 involved transport, refuse collection, hospitals and even gravediggers. Once again, the country was brought almost to a standstill, a chaotic situation eventually resolved by pay awards in public services of up to 20% across the board. It seemed that the entire economic system and rational governance were being overthrown, a situation that led directly to the successes of the Conservative Party and Margaret Thatcher in the 1979 general election. We struggled on till 1981 and decided to disband the workshop. The reasons were purely economic. It was a comfort to know that the musical dividends had been great – and that Finchcocks would survive, the collection continue to grow and the educational outreach work continue.

### Tell us about your time at Welbeck

Chance yet again. I continued to work at Finchcocks finishing off the last instruments while looking for another, solo workshop. The telephone rang: the caller was an acquaintance of David Rubio who had heard of my situation. He told me of a new arts-educational charity on the Welbeck Abbey estate in Nottinghamshire where a suite of craft workshops had been built. The builders, the trustees of the Harley Foundation, were looking for craftspeople to occupy them. Negotiations took some time, but we came to an agreement in 1982, and with Bernd Fischer, a brilliant craftsman who had worked with us at Finchcocks, took a workshop to share on a 50/50 basis. We were the first occupants of the new studios. Welbeck is an extraordinary place, dominated by a large house based on the remains of a Premonstratensian monastery, colossally extended by the reclusive fifth Duke of Portland who refused to meet his social peers, but corresponded copiously with them. He was the 'Underground Man' who laced his park with two-and-a-half miles of underground carriage drives so he could move about the place unseen. He may have been eccentric, but was highly intelligent and charitable, remembered for his philanthropy during the 'Great Cotton Calamity' when Nottinghamshire cotton workers were made destitute in consequence of the American Civil War and failure of raw cotton supplies.



*Instruments made at Welbeck by Derek: a fortepiano after Anton Walter for Christopher Hogwood, and a clavichord after Christian Gottlob Hubert for Virginia Pleasants, now at the Royal College of Music.*

I continued to make instruments, but increasingly disliked working with machine tools – I feared a loss of concentration and an accident. I had gradually become involved with the educational developments of the Harley Foundation on the estate, and on the death of the administrator, took over that position, and eventually became the curator of the Portland family's art collection at Welbeck Abbey. Finally, I gave up my workshop entirely, and laid instrument making and restoration aside.....



*..... but not quite; Derek in 2020 restringing the first Adlam Burnett clavichord after J. A. Hass made at Finchcocks.  
Photo Douglas Hollick.*

Derek Adlam © April 2020.

To be continued..... perhaps.