

Gerard Brooks

A short Profile

FOLLOWING the resignation of Winston Churchill in April 1955, Anthony Eden succeeded him as Prime Minister, calling an immediate general election. A popular figure, he increased the Conservative majority from seventeen to sixty. Alas, his success was to be short lived, the 1956 Suez Crisis bringing a premature tragic end to his premiership: Anthony Eden resigned on 9 January 1957.

However, Suez was not the only notable event of 1956, as Gerard Brooks was born on 3rd September in Abingdon, Oxfordshire. In 1961, when Gerard was just five years of age, his father got a job at the Eurochemic plant in Mol, Belgium, and the family spent the next three years living there. Thrown in at the deep end, Gerard was sent to the local international school where English was *not* one of the languages spoken! He thus had to pick up French as best he could, and he remembers hearing a recording of himself chatting with a school friend at the age of six in perfect, well-accented French, albeit with a limited vocabulary. Sadly, on his return to England he stopped speaking French, but the seeds had been well-sown and when he took it up again at secondary school, much of it returned and he remains a fluent French speaker today, helped by the two years he spent in France as a graduate student.

He had been given piano lessons in Belgium at the local conservatoire and started the organ when he was about twelve. His interest was sparked by his father's love for the instrument: his father had never had the chance of music

lessons at school so it became a great source of joy to him that his eldest son took up the instrument. Gerard initially went to see James Dalton at The Queen's College, Oxford for a consultation lesson but was deemed too young to start learning at the time. Soon, however, he began lessons with the late John Webster, then organist of University College, Oxford and the University Church. Webster taught him a secure and correct pedal technique over the two years that Gerard studied with him, but his early death at the age of fifty-five brought an end to what was a very fruitful teacher-pupil relationship. After a year with Walter Hillsman, Gerard was awarded an organ scholarship at Lincoln College, Oxford, where he spent three years reading for a degree in music. He was now visiting Susi Jeans at Cleveland Lodge in Dorking for private lessons. At the end of his university course Gerard decided that he would like to study in France – a desire that sprang from his fascination with the French organ sound. He was able to put this into effect when he became the first organist to win the Stephen Arlen Memorial Award, given to a musician to study abroad. He initially planned to spend three months in France but with the help of various other scholarships and by working as an accompanist he was able to stay on in France for two years, enrolling at the conservatoire of Strasbourg and working with Daniel Roth.

On his return to England, he went to Homerton College, Cambridge to do a PGCE and then began working as a music teacher, briefly in Oxford and London and then at Wantage, combining this with the post of Organist at St. Helen's Parish Church, Abingdon. During his time as a class music teacher he began writing school musicals, which



Gerard Brooks

Photo by C. Jilks

was to bear fruit later with the publication by *Boosey & Hawkes* of *Nativity News*. In 1987, he moved to London to be Associate Director of Music at All Souls, Langham Place, where he was to spend twenty years working alongside Noël Tredinnick. As well as having responsibility for the choir there, he toured with the All Souls Orchestra, playing in all the major British concert halls and Moscow Conservatoire. During this time, he continued teaching part time at Islington Green School and also began playing in West End shows as a deputy keyboard player: the brother of a school friend was, at the time, the assistant conductor of *Phantom of the Opera* and he invited Gerard in to see the show with a view to deputising as a keyboard player. Gerard notes that the skills needed for this were well-served by his training as an organist: the ability to follow a conductor and singers was just as important, and changing 'patches' or sounds on complicated electronic keyboards was not so very far removed from changing stops by pressing pistons! He played first in *Phantom of the Opera*, and then in *Starlight Express*, *Aspects of Love* and finally *Mamma Mia!* Although a very different world from that of the classical organ, the professional discipline required was just as rigorous!

Gerard's career as an organ teacher began with his involvement with the *St. Giles International Organ School*, working with Anne Marsden Thomas. He is now a teacher with the *Royal College of Organists Academy* and a professor at the *Royal Academy of Music*. However, he has maintained his associations with schools, teaching at Latymer Upper School in Hammersmith and more recently at Sevenoaks School.

In 2008, Gerard was appointed Director of Music at Methodist Central Hall, Westminster where he directs the choir and plays the famous *Hill/Harrison* organ. He also acts as Organ Curator of the his-

toric *Bridge/Drake* organ at Christ Church, Spitalfields. At both churches, he organises a prestigious recital series.

As a recitalist, Gerard has played in many venues: he instituted and played every year for twenty five years in the series at Oxford Town Hall alongside his series at All Souls' Langham Place. He has played in many European venues including the cathedrals of Notre Dame, Paris, Cologne, Trondheim and Westminster Abbey. In 2007 he was invited to play on the monumental Skinner organ at Yale University.

His recording career began back in 1986 with an LP (remember those?) of transcriptions by Edwin Lemare on the *Father Willis* organ at Oxford Town Hall. Over the years since then he has recorded a great deal of French repertoire on historic French organs in Rouen, Perpignan, Laon, and Paris, encompassing the music of Gigout, Saint-Saëns and many other composers. In 2014, he began an association with Fugue State Films which resulted in the acclaimed DVD set *The Genius of Cavallé-Coll*, and *Widor: Master of the Organ Symphony*.

Gerard is the current President of the *Royal College of Organists*. Normally a two-year term, due to the pandemic this has been extended to three. This is an honorary appointment, involving attendance at Trustee meetings and making a speech and presenting diplomas at the College's annual conferment ceremony.

Gerard is married to Charlotte, recently retired as a clinical oncologist at Maidstone hospital, and they have two children: Hamish, a motorsport engineer and Verity, currently pursuing a piano performance course in Adelaide Australia.

Our KCOA is indeed fortunate to have Gerard as a member and many remember our visit to London, hearing him play, demonstrating the fine qualities of the *Bridge/Drake* organ at Christ Church, Spitalfields.