

## **A Visit to the Workshop of Richards, Fowkes & Co.**

*Fig Life Express*, May 2007 – Lindsey Young

As the most recent addition to the Organ Committee, I spent the last weeks of February and the beginning of March bringing myself up to speed on this most ambitious parish project. At the same time, Bea and Ted Hole, long-time members of our parish, were touring Tennessee to visit their granddaughter and, as luck, or the Holy Spirit, would have it, the shop of Richards, Fowkes & Co. (RFC), makers of our future instrument. Joel Martinson introduced the three of us upon their return and within a few days I was sitting in the couple's kitchen over coffee and photographs.

Their first organ stop was in Knoxville to see the nearly finished RFC Opus 15 at the University of Tennessee. While I admired photos of the grand, amber-colored concert instrument, Ted excitedly recounted his experience watching Bruce Fowkes at work "voicing" the organ. Voicing is the painstaking process wherein the organ-builder visits each individual pipe of the assembled instrument making tiny, perfecting adjustments that ensure each pipe speaks with the correct pitch, color and tone. In Ted's words, "...Bruce was actually peeling, with a knife, as much as a millimeter or two off the ends of pipes before replacing them and tapping and shaping the ends with his 'tuning cones' to achieve the final correct pitch indicated on his hand held meter."

I gathered it was the first time either Bea or Ted had had the opportunity to catch a glimpse of what lies behind an organ's façade. Like the tip of a very ornate iceberg, the organ façade (the pipe and casework we see from the congregation), only represents a small fraction of what lies within the instrument. Inside the organ case of an instrument like the one at UT Knoxville, or our future Opus 17, lies a labyrinth of platforms, ladders, wind chests and chambers housing a forest of wooden and metal pipes. Ted and Bea were literally scaling ladders inside the organ to watch Bruce voice the pipes.

Then it was on to Ooltewah where the couple was treated to a tour of the RFC shop and introduced to the crew. They watched a class in session at UT Knoxville live via webcam from Ralph's computer. Trent Buhr, the foreman, showed them beautiful hand drafted conceptual drawings of Transfiguration's future Opus 17. Ralph converts these drawings into computer and CAD drawings, which will be used "...to plot huge sheets to scale for the shop workers to use to fashion the cases, wind chests and wood work," explains Ted. "Their tools are unbelievable! A Japanese planer, in one fell swoop, created a perfect poplar board to measure, with the smoothest finish you can possibly imagine. No sanding or hand rubbing could improve on it."

In the metal workers' room Bea and Ted were introduced to Dean Wilson and Andy Wishart (who hail from Leeds, England). Dean and Andy were making pipes. "Andy planed a flat piece of metal by hand (the blade of the planer has to be sharpened 3 or 4 times a day) until it was like a mirror, all the while checking it with calipers for thickness. Dean showed us the pipe mandrels and used one to hand-roll a small pipe as we watched." The Holes were shown the enormous pots for the molten alloys and the table where the liquid metal is poured out. "The soldering machine was not turned on but we could see how it worked."

In one of Ted's photographs, carefully marked boxes and crates containing the parts and pipes of the firm's Opus 16 are lined up, ready to be shipped to Duke University for the new seminary chapel. The Duke organ is the only instrument left for RFC to complete before the firm turns its full attention on Opus 17, commissioned by Transfiguration.

Both Bea and Ted emphasized how welcoming everyone was, both at UT Knoxville and at the shop. Instead of being made to feel like they were interrupting or getting in the way, they were made to feel very much at home. In fact, Ralph explained that Westminster Presbyterian in Knoxville used to send 20 or 30 visitors at a time from Knoxville while they were working on Opus 7. The organ builders keep working while you're there (in fact, Ralph disappeared into his office once initial introductions were complete), but they are delighted to explain what they are doing and teach visitors about their highly skilled and specialized craft.

When asked what the most surprising aspect of their trip was, Bea responded that she finds it incredible, when she stopped to think about the sheer number of different parts and pieces it takes to assemble an organ, that this feat is accomplished by only a handful of master craftsmen. Ted agreed, reiterating the number of skills it takes to accomplish these works of art, from metalworking to woodworking, draftsmanship and meticulous voicing of pipes.

I have to admit, when I was first introduced to Ted and Bea Hole, I was certain that at least one of them was an organist, given the enthusiasm and detailed knowledge they displayed recounting their trip to Joel. I was very much surprised to learn later that the couple's knowledge and fascination with organs and organ building was first kindled when Ted joined the Transfiguration Organ Committee only a few years ago. So I had to ask what is it about this project that has captured their hearts and imaginations so completely. After a thoughtful pause, Bea answered that here at last was something tangible, something you can hold. A long-awaited dream was becoming real here, and now, in their (our) lifetimes. Organs, she noted, last for centuries; think of the grand instruments in the cathedrals of Europe. But right now we have a window of opportunity to participate in a piece of Transfiguration's history that will outlive all of us.

I found her response very moving, and asked if she and Ted would elaborate on this idea further. Here is their response:

*The importance of Legacies: The predecessor to Fr. J.D. Godwin was Father Terry Roper. He was able to retire years ago content that his legacy to Transfiguration would be the beautiful painted art of our altar and triptych. We are so fortunate.*

*Furthermore, on legacies, Fr. Godwin in his constant striving for perfection has envisioned a new notable organ for Transfiguration. He told our organ committee in July of 2004, "We have a real need for a greatly enhanced and larger organ. One of my hopes is that we add this one missing component of powerful worship at Transfiguration." He continued, "I envision a builder of note who is not currently represented in the Dallas area."*

*Six months of diligent search followed, a contract was signed, and now in March of 2007 Richards, Fowkes & Co., the builder, has just completed some pipes of the first stop (of 46) for their Opus 17, our organ at Transfiguration.*

*Now as Bea and I consider our love for J. D. and the Fig and as we reflect on his passion for excellence in all things as our leader, we are moved to ask, "How can we help? How can we buy a pipe or a rank of pipes to honor him in his reach for the ultimate in the music and liturgy of Transfiguration?"*

*This event will be a remarkable happening in a small window of the longer history of Transfiguration and we are to be a part of it. It will affect our generation and the many, many generations to come.*

*This organ will be the Legacy of our highly respected, Fr. J.D. Godwin.*

*In anticipation,  
Ted and Bea Hole*

For more information, visit the Richards, Fowkes and Co. shop online at:  
<http://www.richardsfowkes.com>.

*Lindsey Young has been a member of Transfiguration for two years, is active in neXtgen and the Transfiguration Choir. Lindsey majored in Organ Performance and English at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music of Oberlin College.*