

# Frank Bradbeer

*Paul Hale appreciates a brief, yet significant engagement with organ building and the resulting impact*

From time to time the British organ world is enlivened by the work of architects who develop a passion for organ-case design. One thinks of Bodley, the dynasties of Pearsons, Scotts, Compers, Caroës, Bucknalls, of Stephen Dykes-Bower; and of course David Graebe. All created a corpus of wonderful work which enriches the buildings in which it stands and the organs which it clothes. To that elite body the late Frank Bradbeer undoubtedly belongs.

Bradbeer's foray into the world of organ building was brief, but few men have made more impact in a mere handful of years. With his passing a pivotal driver of the development of the British organ during the twentieth century has left us. It is not too strong to describe him in these terms, for the work of Grant, Degens and Bradbeer was for a short period from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s a crucible in which prior conceptions were melted down and recast as the brave new organ of the future. Or not, from our perspective. But even if many *neo-classical* principles have been abandoned, and even if Frank's *brutalist* casework finds few adherents now, they were necessary; a kind of Reformation where burning zeal is required cruelly to strip away layers of complacent woolly thinking and create a new, crisp order, informed by historical knowledge and re-engineered design work. After all, look under the skin of our *elegant* new organs today and one finds in so many of them—the world over—aspects of just what Maurice Forsyth-Grant and Frank Bradbeer advocated: mechanical action of modern design, Kinetrol dampers on action-beams, schwimmers, pipes voiced with little nicking, slider-soundboards using modern materials for certain elements, steel as part of a building-frame, and so on. About the only aspects of their organs mercifully to disappear are chipboard and aluminium or steel wires as the basis of tracker runs (well, they've not quite disappeared...).

Frank was at the heart of this. How did it arise? He was born in 1927 in Welham Green, Hatfield, and educated at The Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Barnet; served in the 7<sup>th</sup> Lancers' Tank Regiment in Mogadishu (1945-48), and then studied at the Bartlett School of Architecture (University College, London; 1949-54). His



Photo: Bradbeer family collection

first post was with the brewers Ind Coope, for whom he worked in their architectural department at Burton on Trent. For some years he was happily engaged in design work on pubs and hotels, all in the vanguard of the new *clean* style which became so popular in the 1960s ... and is now mostly swept away as we reassess our relationship with the more florid and cosy Victorian style which it sought to purge (Frank's first *Reformation*?). Later employed by John Poulson ("the dodgiest man" he ever worked for) in designing schools (Middlesbrough) and local authority housing (Normanton, Pontefract, Castleford), Bradbeer returned to London in 1958 to work for the company then known as Ramsey Murray White & Ward. He was chief assistant (of about 30) to Charles White at a time when this large practice was at

work in Oxford University, in building Heathrow Airport, Hammersmith Hospital, and Hong Kong Airport. Bradbeer's 'special contribution' (as he put it) was the BEA central catering store and staff cafeteria at Hatton Cross.

When the company fragmented Frank formed, with some friends, Chapman Taylor & Partners and whilst there he and a member of staff made some analytical recordings on tape. These included organs, in the sound of which Frank rapidly became interested – particularly in the relationship of the tonal structure to the physical structure. He was put in touch with Bob Maguire & Keith Murray, who were rebuilding St Paul's church at Bow Common (into which in 1963 Noel Mander put a two-manual organ) and became consultant to their company. Through working on designs for Magdalen College School Chapel (Oxford), he came to know Maurice Forsyth-Grant, chairman of the organ building firm Degens & Rippin (later Grant, Degens & Rippin), who, amazed that an architect could show such a deep and progressive interest in modern organ design, took Frank under his wing and after a while made him a director, involving him constantly in the design, layout and casework of such projects as Boscombe Parish Church, Holy Trinity, Bournemouth, Ardingly College and St Mary of Eton, Hackney. At the same time Bradbeer's architectural work continued with (less enjoyable) War Department work, and in producing a printed Design Guide for his old friends at Ind Coope.

A week of inspiration which proved a turning point for Grant Degens & Rippin was to take place in 1964, when Grant took the directors and Frank Bradbeer on a short continental tour of organs, organ builders, part makers and pipe making companies. The work of Stinkens, Giesecke, Laukhuff, Marcussen and Rieger impressed them mightily – even the old Compton men Ted Rippin and Johnny Degens. The modern organ cases which Frank saw and sketched became the inspiration for what was to follow, as he designed the numerous *work-principle* tone-cabinet cases which flowed from Grant Degens & Bradbeer, becoming as much their hallmark as anything else they did. The Rieger, Schuke and Marcussen cases of the late 1950s and 1960s proved an inspiration, even if Frank's development of their styles eschewed almost all ornament and become supremely functional – just as his kitchen designs were!

With Maurice's encouragement, what was to become a somewhat startling change of life for Frank occurred in 1965. When working on designs for Blackburn Cathedral, for which Grant was trying to get the contract for a new organ (see his book *Twenty-One Years of Organbuilding* for a colourful version of this chapter in the history of the firm!), Frank found himself accepting—over dinner at Manchester airport—the job of Managing Director at Grant Degens & Rippin (which did not go down well with the old Compton hands of whom the shop floor mainly consisted). On Rippin retiring soon after Grant promptly changed the name of the company again to Grant, Degens & Bradbeer.

Frank found the Hammersmith-based organ firm 'a shambles', with no proper office and no administrative staff. He set up systems (in later years he was to produce, for a house he designed, one of the very first computerised quantity surveys) to monitor purchasing (pipes, actions and even soundboards were often bought in from European supply houses) and gradually brought necessary order to a plant which moved up a gear and produced, from his drawings, a stream of new instruments over the next six years: Holy Family Millbrook (Southampton), the Guildhall School of Music & Drama (for Professor Nicholas Danby), the University of Sussex (a remarkable, glass-encased

instrument opened by Lady Susi Jeans), St Martin, Hull (where the church's architect, George Pace, allowed Frank free range in designing the case, thus initiating a productive if sometimes tense relationship between them culminating in the New College case), St Joseph's College Chapel (Birkfield, Ipswich – another pure Frank case with wood and metal pipes in prospect) and Tooting Methodist Church.



▲ Lyons Concert Hall, York University

In 1968 came the first of their four most important and arguably finest instruments, an organ for Alan Harverson in St Mary's RC Priory (The Servite Priory), Fulham Road, London. This was the first three-manual mechanical-action organ built in Britain for a generation or two; in all respects it set the style and many of the constructional principles for the three other iconic GDBs – New College Chapel, Oxford (1969), Lyons Concert Hall, York University (1969) and St Mary's Church, Woodford (Essex) 1971. Bradbeer was fully occupied in case and layout designs for these instruments and in producing working drawings, as well as managing the production and work-force. Only at New College was he frustrated, for there his startling design for a slender central case (with glass swell front) and detached pedal towers against the north and south walls was rejected by the college in favour of a design by the college architect, George Pace. This was clearly a development of Frank's basic plan, but with the Pedal towers attached: consequently much of the famous Reynolds west window was lost to sight. Though Grant suggests in his book that the relationship at New College between Pace and Bradbeer was amiably constructive, this is not born out by letters held in the archives, which show all too clearly Frank's frustration at what he saw was a design which impeded practicalities (there was initially no access under the pedal towers or Rückpositiv, for example) and ignored the west window (even Samuel Green had fitted his

organ into a divided case to display the window). Pace ‘won’ and the result is there to be seen. He forgot that the case needed a back of some sort as it would be seen on entering the antechapel (one can imagine Frank’s quiet grin at this oversight – not one he would have made), at the last minute hastily drawing a typical example of his firm’s slatted oak structures, manufactured at great cost and attached rather oddly to the back of the painted chipboard case.

The building of the Woodford organ proved the next turning point in Frank’s life, for as it was being made, the company was forced by compulsory purchase out of its Hammersmith premises, which it had shared towards the end with the fledgling Pennells & Sharpe – who made most of the New College casework. Its machinery and a very few of its men (principally John Bailey) took up residence in the commodious factory of Alfred E. Davies of Northampton, a company then run by the founder’s son, Jack Davies, unfortunately not a man considered to be in sympathy with GDB ideals. Grant offered Frank a retainer of £1,250 per annum plus fees to continue to work for the firm on the design side; Frank felt ‘for various reasons’ as he later wrote, that he could not pursue those prospects. And so he left. Grant Degens & Bradbeer was never the same again, but perhaps its work was done; the seeds were sown for the organ reform movement to blossom and then mutate into something quite different, though informed by the principles and passion of a Grant and a Bradbeer.

After leaving GDB in 1970, Frank went to work for Robert Matthew Johnson Marshall & Partners in their Welwyn Garden City office. He was engaged first on Wentworth College at York University, on Hillingdon Civic Centre and on the new Holloway Prison, amongst other notable buildings. His son Tom adds: “After RMJM he spent a brief time with Phippen, Randall and Parkes at their offices at Hampton Court before going to work for The National Building Agency, (a body set up to look at the state of local authority housing stock across the country), and produce a computerised rolling programme of repairs in order to help the Local Authorities budget more effectively for repairs to their houses.” This proved very convenient for the pursuit of his other interests after work – music (in the City Churches and at the Royal Festival Hall) and pubs. In those days he was perhaps the only man commuting daily to London still wearing a dark suit and a bowler hat. Tom again: “It was at the point when The NBA was dissolved (July 1982) that my father, in association with a couple of colleagues set up NBA Technical Services, providing the same services as before but as a private company. During this time I believe he did work for both Oxford City council as well as the County Council.”



Photo: Frank Bradbeer Associates

▲ A quirky detail of Frank’s at University College, Oxford. ‘off to the pub...’

It was after forming Frank Bradbeer Associates that Frank’s involvement with conservation and improvement of historic buildings grew, particularly in Oxford. He became the architect for University College Oxford, where he produced a number of projects of which he was proud. He was pleased with his clever library conversion there, and of some of the well-appointed student accommodation that he was able to squeeze onto the site. He also became the architect at the Oxford Union, caring for the historically important debating chamber (restoring the pre-Raphaelite murals) and the offices, bar and entertainment rooms. He enjoyed working with and talking to the craftsmen who worked on the buildings, and remained friends with some of them until he died. He loved working in Oxford (where he also did some work at the Bullingdon pub); he could talk about the architecture there with great knowledge, and he made many good Oxford friends, particularly at the bar of the Oxford Union. He continued to work in Oxford long after he should have retired, though he took semi-retirement in 1993, relinquishing his position as Principal. His company moved its head office to Oxford in May 1995, becoming almost totally a small Architectural practice, the NBA Local Authority Mass Housing Surveys having dried up as a result of stiff competition. Frank commuted from East Anglia, by bus and train, via London—a very long journey—in order to remain involved. His final project in Oxford was an unexecuted design, produced with Roderick Gradidge, for a boat house for University College, to replace the historic one burnt to the ground.



Photo: Andrew Moyes

▲ St Margaret’s, Blackwood – Frank’s last organ case.

In 1994 an organ case was designed for a new Nicholson organ at St Margaret’s church, Blackwood, Gwent. The parish had been left a very generous bequest and was wondering what to do with all the money. One of the PCC members had a son who worked for

Frank's practice, so his name was suggested and he was taken on as consultant. This smart case proved to be his organ swansong, though he did delight in Bishops' addition in 2004 of a long-awaited Trumpet stop in his own instrument at All Saints' church, Thornham.

Frank Bradbeer continued to be keenly interested in architecture, designing a community-built bus shelter for the village green at Thornham where he and Sheila lived, close to All Saints' churchyard where he now lies. That design has been copied (both with and without permission!) in villages along the North Norfolk coast.



Photo: Bradbeer family collection



Photo: Bradbeer family collection

▲ Frank's final piece of design – a bus-shelter for his own village.

Frank Bradbeer was a member of the RIBA and of the MIB, an FRSA, the author of a government hand-book on architectural measurements and co-author of *The English Public House: a Way of Drinking* which neatly reminds us of one of his other passions. He became involved with choirs and choirmastering/organ playing, at Hatfield, Essendon and Thornham, was a keen gardener, horse-rider, huntsman, cricketer and rugby player – as well as an inveterate partaker of snuff. A gentleman with a passion for tradition yet a modernistic eye for functional design; one who expected high standards of himself and of others. The evidence of those high standards surrounds us as we contemplate his work; the man himself is now sadly taken from our midst.

Frank was forced into full retirement aged 74 when he suffered his second stroke in September 2001. This stroke cruelly deprived him of speech and the use of his right hand, so he could no longer play the piano or organ, nor write or draw. These afflictions were hugely frustrating for him, and for those around him who knew how much more he had to contribute.

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