

Out of the henhouse

My first acquaintance with the pipe organ was the 1831 Thomas Appleton instrument in the Methodist Church in Nantucket, Massachusetts, where I grew up. When I was 13 it was dismantled for extensive work; I was permitted to climb inside, and became fascinated with how it worked.

While pursuing a music major at Wellesley College in the early 1970s, I learnt about Charles Fisk and the plans for a meantone organ in the Chapel there. I also began attending organ recitals and listening to recordings of organ music. Organ building seemed to combine my interests in music, the mechanics of musical instruments, wood and working with my hands with the possibility of helping to build an organ for my alma mater.

I talked with Owen Jander, chairman of Wellesley's music department at the time and the force behind the plans for the new

Fisk organ. He volunteered to drive me up to Gloucester for an interview with Charles – Owen's encouragement was invaluable as I set out on this unusual path. I later learnt that Charles had told Owen that if he ever had a student who was interested in organ building, he would give her a chance.

I passed my try-out and have been building organs for C.B. Fisk ever since. My work has primarily been in the woodshop. Currently I am a windchest maker. I also build casework and craft the keydesk area. I have put together many rollerboards and enjoy welding the aluminium arms to the rollers for those in the Cavallé-Coll style. We are all pretty much generalists in the shop – I have worked with steel, fabricated key- and stop-actions, and have made various small parts, alongside more usual items such as wind trunks, ladders, walkboards and wooden pipes. I have never made metal pipes, but early

C.B. Fisk counts several women among its staff, including Virginia Lee Fisk, Charles Fisk's widow, who has led the firm since 1983. Its female shop workers include Linda Cook who progressed from music major to multi-talented organ builder

on I learnt basic pipe-metal soldering, mostly to fasten hooks on to the backs of façade pipes.

From the beginning I went on installation trips. Although hard work, it's rewarding to see the country and to work outside the shop, as well as to get to know our clients. Well along in my career I began to work occasionally on the road as a voicing assistant, first with reeds and later with flue pipes. This led to some pipe preparation. It's never too late to learn something new.

Some of the pleasure of organ building comes from seeing the tangible results of my work all along the way. I enjoy taking something rough, like a plank of oak, and turning it into something smooth, rich, and lustrous, such as a music rack. I also love the simplicity and beauty of the mechanical connection of a key to the pipes. Finally, it is a privilege and a joy to see and hear the finished instrument in its home, and to see people moved by what we've done.

Linda Cook was talking to Jonathan Ambrosino.

►NEXT ISSUE

Catarina Grönlund of Grönlunds Orgelbyggeri



All-rounder: Cook's job involves many skills, from casework building to pipe preparation