The Galpin Oboe

An article originally written for the British Double Reed Society, c.1987

One of the most important instruments in the Bate Collection of Historical Instruments in the Faculty of Music of the University of Oxford is an anonymous oboe, catalogue no.200. It is known as The Galpin Oboe for it was one of the stars of the famous collection made by Canon Francis W. Galpin, and it is illustrated in his book, *Old English Instruments of Music*, indicating that it was already in his possession before 1910. Indeed, were it not for a discrepancy in pitch (allegedly in A) and length (said to be 25¾ inches long) it would appear to have been in his possession at the time of the Royal Military Exhibition in 1890; the description of no.205 in the catalogue of that exhibition otherwise fits it exactly, and no other trace of anything resembling that entry is known. The oboe was bought by Eric Halfpenny at the sale of the Galpin Collection after the Canon's death, and it was in his possession when he wrote the first major article on the development of the oboe. Subsequently he swapped it with Philip Bate for Bate's oboe by Thomas Stanesby senior (which is now in the Rosenbaum Collection in Japan). So much for its provenance.

Eric Halfpenny, following Galpin's attribution, judged the instrument to be English and dated it to c.1690. Harry Vas Dias, an eminent American maker of modern reproductions, has suggested that it is French, and dates it to 1680. Either could well be true, for it is certain that the baroque oboe was invented by makers at the French court in Versailles in the middle of the seventeenth century, and the oboe in the 1680s was known in England as the French Hautbois to distinguish it from the old shawm or wait pipe which was still then in use here. The maker is unknown, but it would be very tempting to attribute it to that great maker Pierre Jaillard who, when he settled in London in 1688, coming from Bresse in France, adopted the name of Peter Bressan (the Peter from Bresse) because no Englishman could pronounce Jaillard. Certainly the very heavy ivory mounts on this oboe resemble those on other instruments by Bressan, and certainly there is a rose engraved on the silver keys. Unfortunately I had to try to convince Bruce Haynes, one of the best of the modern players of the baroque oboe, and one who plays a copy of this instrument, that the rose is totally different from the Tudor rose with which Bressan branded his recorders and transverse flutes, and thus that the attribution to Bressan is untenable.*

This is all the more a pity because some of the earliest evidence that we have for the use of the French oboe in England comes from the Talbot Manuscript in Christ Church, Oxford. Talbot borrowed instruments from the most eminent performers of his day to measure and describe them, and both the treble and the tenor oboes that he borrowed, the latter and perhaps the former also from Mr.Finger, who is known as one of the first oboists in London, were indeed by Bressan. Today not one of Bressan's oboes survives.

Eric Halfpenny produced a table of measurements of all the early English oboes known to him, including of course this oboe, and including also the measurements given by Talbot, and the results are interesting. The Galpin is nearly an inch longer in the bell ($6^{5/16}''$) than Talbot's Bressan ($5^{5/8}''$), and almost half an inch longer in the lower joint ($8^{7/8}''$ against $8^{7/16}''$) so that Halfpenny's total length for the Galpin is $23^{3/8}''$ and Talbot's for the Bressan is $22^{1/2}''$. I have deliberately avoided translation into metric; Talbot measured in feet, inches, and eighths of an inch, and Halfpenny in inches and fractions thereof, down to sixty-fourths, and it seems best to leave them as they were, save to convert Talbot's 3½ eighths into 7/16. Those interested in such details should consult not only Halfpenny's article but also the plan drawn by Ken Williams and published by the Bate Collection, for this plan shows some slight differences, when the necessary conversions are done between inches and millimetres, between Halfpenny's measurements in 1948

and Mary Kirkpatrick's and Williams's in 1984.

Where measurements become really interesting is in the bore. Here we will turn to millimetres, for we can compare The Galpin not only with the Bressan but with other instruments of which The Bate Collection has published measured drawings. There is little point in giving full details here (all are available for those who are interested), but taking just the bottom of the tenons of the two joints and the very end of the bell (which is, on almost all these instruments, smaller than the maximum diameter, for there is normally an internal rim to the bell so that the opening is narrowed slightly), we can see how oboes change in style, and particularly how the English instruments differ as time goes on, and also how different the French instruments of the next generation were. This is most easily shown with a table:

	Upper tenon	lower tenon	bell end
English instruments			
Talbot's Bressan	12.6	18	48.7
The Galpin	11	16.2	48
Stanesby jr	10.8	16.8	43
Milhouse	11.4	16.1	40
Cahusac	9.7	15.2	40
Foreign instruments			
Richters	10.7	16.2	39.6
Bizey	7.6	11.4	42
Delusse	9.4	15.6	39

It is clear from this table that the bore of the Bressan was, if we can trust Talbot's measurements, enormous. The Stanesby jr is a rather plain instrument, but the bore follows his normal pattern; it dates probably from 1740-50. The Milhouse, probably a decade or two later, is a straight top oboe made in Newark, and thus presumably by Richard Milhouse rather than the more familiar William, who moved to London and made the bulb-top oboes which are often seen. The Cahusac is probably from the 1770s or so. Hendrik Richters was a contemporary of Stanesby senior, working in Amsterdam, and this oboe dates from around 1700. Bizey was a Parisian maker, and this oboe is probably from around 1720, and the Delusse, also from Paris, is from about 1785.

Where we see the sharp change is in France, with Bizey who was also a contemporary of Stanesby senior, and then with the next generation of English makers, exemplified here by Cahusac. The bore is considerably narrower and the sound is what we think of as a French sound, sweeter and more piercing, and quite different from that of the old English oboe, though still different enough from the modern oboe.

The old English oboe had a broad sound, wide and rich (how can one describe sounds in words?). The Galpin, when the reed really matches the oboe (a continual problem, of course) really gets one in the guts, a tremendously rich sound. The pitch, of course, is much lower than today. How much lower has been argued. One authority pitched it at A=407 Hz, about the same pitch as Bressan's recorders. Bruce Haynes is convinced that it plays at A=392, a whole tone below modern pitch and known today as French pitch because it is the same as some Hotteterre and other early French recorders. At both pitches, played with the appropriate reed of course, it seems to be perfectly in tune between upper and lower octaves, which makes it very difficult to say which is correct.

The tone of The Galpin oboe is such that it gives one a totally new realisation of what Purcell's and his contemporaries' music sounded like in his own time. It is this that I and my predecessor Anthony Baines felt justified us in allowing such instruments to be played occasionally, and we have been able to issue some recordings of some of the Bate Collection instruments, so that all may hear these wonderful sounds. While we make available the measured drawings already mentioned so that people can attempt to make copies of these historical instruments, nobody yet has produced an oboe that quite matches The Galpin for tone quality, any more than anyone has yet succeeded in matching our Bressan treble recorder for sound.

The Bate Collection is open to the public (Mondays to Fridays, 2.00-5.00 pm).

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* Added in 2006: It is of course possible that the key was made by a silversmith at Bressan's request and that the key-maker had noted only that a rose was required but not that it should be specifically a Tudor rose. So perhaps Bruce Haynes's contention is not untenable after all.