

Hammond Organs in the UK 1935-55

(Peter Jones – South West Music Services – Last updated December 2023)

Introduction

While there is a reasonable amount of information available on the internet about the early days of Hammond in America, there is very little about the early history of Hammond in the UK. This piece is intended to shed a little light on the period 1935-55, and has been gleaned from research of surviving Hammond organs in the UK dating from that period, including contributions from the owners, small snippets of information from internet sources, and other verbal anecdotal evidence from Hammond enthusiasts in the UK. Please do get in contact with me if you feel you can add any information to this work.

Early exports

Hammond in the USA moved incredibly quickly from prototype and initial production in 1935, into export markets, with evidence of exports as early as 1936 (with one earlier exception – see below). It is even more remarkable, given they were having trouble meeting existing domestic demand for their innovative product in 1936 ⁽¹⁾.

In order to meet overseas various mains voltages and frequency requirements, the tonewheel generator motors and pre-amplifier transformer needed to be changed in the factory to suit each export country. At the time, there was only the start of standardisation around the world, or even in the USA for that matter ⁽²⁾. It is interesting to speculate that the fact that Hammond had to produce organs able to meet the various mains frequency existing within the United States at that time, might have made it much easier to move into export markets than otherwise. For example, Southern California had the same frequency as the UK at that time (50cycles)⁽³⁾.

Hammond Model A organs were in production in USA from June 1935 to October 1938. From observation of Hammond Model A organs coming up for sale on Ebay in the UK and contact with some sellers, I have established that all UK Model A's bore a Hammond serial plate.



The fact that these Model A's bore Hammond serial plates enables dating to be carried out using known data ⁽⁴⁾. Information from the admittedly few (seven) UK Model A's so far identified (April 2019), shows they have spanned the narrow serial number range 2398 to 2414. This would suggest (along with information below) that perhaps a single shipment, or at least very few, was made to the UK around 1936. There is more than one reference that suggests that some early Hammonds were shipped on the RMS Queen Mary liner ⁽⁵⁾⁽⁶⁾, and the connection to that ship is strengthened by

the fact that Laurens Hammond himself sailed on the Queen Mary to holiday in Europe with his wife ⁽⁷⁾. The exception to the above however, is one organ privately imported to special order in Oct 1935. This was Model A serial no. 395 and was ordered in May 1935 (just a month after Hammond came into production in the USA) as a 210v 50cycle organ. However, it was delivered as 115v 50cycles, with a stepdown transformer. This was almost certainly the first Hammond in the UK.

In December 1936 Hammond commenced production of the Model BC (until Nov 1942). This was mounted in a deeper cabinet which



could house the extra chorus generator (the same cabinet then used all the way through to the B3). The Model A was still available housed in this larger case (but without the extra chorus generator) as a 'cheaper' basic model. This was called the Model AB. With one or two rare exceptions, most UK examples of the BC and AB organs carry a Boosey & Hawkes Company serial plate instead of the Hammond serial plate (see section on Boosey & Hawkes era below).

The start of the Boosey & Hawkes era (c. 1937)....

In the autumn of 1936 (Laurens Hammond) made a trip to Europe with his wife and their European representative to set up deals for Hammond organs to be manufactured in Europe⁽⁸⁾. Boosey & Hawkes (B&H) was a relatively new company, formed as a result of a merger in 1930, and became the sole importer of Hammonds to the UK. From surviving organs bearing early Boosey & Hawkes serial plates, I would estimate their involvement started in late 1936 or early 1937, which would tie in with the date of Laurens Hammond's trip.

An article in the '[Electrical Review](#)' of August 1937 states that, '*The organs are now being manufactured from imported components, by the sole British distributors, Messrs Boosey & Hawkes*'. By this time one would expect these to have been Model AB and BC organs. Whether the earlier few Model A's were also imported as parts, or perhaps as whole organs, by B&H, is not known at this point. It is also unclear if the cabinets were also imported as a kit of parts or manufactured in England, as they were after WWII.



Model AB (above) showing two of the four original rivet holes from the Hammond serial plate underneath the Boosey & Hawkes serial plate

You can see on the back of the rheostat box on virtually all UK Model AB & BC organs, where the four rivets holding on the Hammond serial plate had been removed, and a replacement Boosey & Hawkes (B&H) serial plate attached with just two rivets.



Model E carrying both Hammond and Boosey & Hawkes serial plates

Critically the serial numbering system that B&H imposed on their plates, bore no relation to the Hammond serial number system. This is evidenced by a few rare UK Model E Organs that somehow retained both Hammond and B&H serial plates. There is also the occasional Model K or KE that carry both plates (more details on Model K's below). This replacement of the original plates, makes dating using Hammond serial numbers impossible. I suspect the change to B&H plates happened sometime in late 1936 or early 1937. I have come across anecdotal evidence of a Model BC with a B&H plate (B&H 0071) allegedly purchased for a church in 1936, and a further one (B&H 0068) which was purchased by another church in September 1937. No original receipts were available in either case unfortunately.

To date there are just six known surviving Model AB organs in the UK. These are B&H nos 0001, 0003, 0017 (in my possession), 0018 and 0026 (a BC but stamped as an AB), and 0031.

There appears to be (in admittedly still very small numbers), comparatively, more BCs than ABs, and one can only conclude that once the BC became available, this was preferred for its second chorus generator despite the increased cost. A [Boosey & Hawkes price list](#) from April 1938, lists The Model BC (simply listed as Model B) at £390.00. This is placed above the Model AB (listed as Model A) which sold for £350.00. The emphasis on the Model B in the price list over the Model AB perhaps reflects the emphasis salesmen were giving at the time and explains why there are more Model BC remaining than Model AB today! The Model E was considerably more expensive at £550.00 and a Model F without chorus generator was £510.00



A20 tone cabinet. Boosey & Hawkes serial no 0017

The same price list gives the tone cabinets sold as Models C20, D20 and B40. The model A20 and A40 cabinets are not mentioned. Boosey & Hawkes did however sell Model A20 cabinets, as I have one in my possession (B&H 0017) which probably the only one still surviving in the UK. This is serial number is co-incidentally the same number as my Model AB organ, although there can have been no connection between them as I collected them from different parts of the country at different times. This indicates that B&H had separate numbering systems for the organs and tone cabinets. What is unclear so far, is whether each model of organ had its own separate numbering system.

A [Boosey and Hawkes advert](#) in 'The Countryman' dating from 1938 lists an impressive number of dealers located in Bedford, Belfast, Birmingham, Cardiff, Carlisle, Dublin, Glasgow, Guernsey, Huddersfield, Hull, Jersey, Leeds, Leicester, Liverpool, London, Luton, Manchester, Newcastle, Northampton, Sheffield, Sidcup, Stoke-on-Trent, Tunbridge Wells, Wisbech. The names of the dealers could be obtained on request.

UK Hammond oddballs!

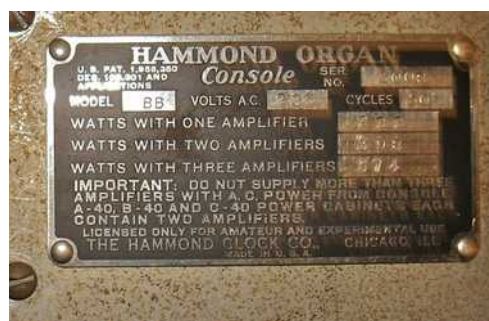
There are a couple of anomalies in the Hammond models in the UK at this time.

There are organs marked Model K; or in the case of Model E organs, which are sometimes marked Model KE. Variants found include:

- Model BC innards inside a Model D style case with Hammond plate marked Model K no 320 and a B&H plate stating model BC no 315
- Model AB innards in a B cabinet with Hammond plate marked Model K no 334 and a B&H plate stating Model AB no 0026
- Model E bearing Hammond plate marked Model KE no 1125 and a B&H plate stating Model E no 0082

Hammonds marked Model K seem to be unknown in the USA, so they appear to be ones destined for export. Why these are marked differently to others is unknown. There are for example other UK Model E organs bearing Hammond plates that state Model E rather than KE.

A further anomaly are the couple of examples of UK organs that are ostensibly Model BC, but bear Hammond plates stating them to be Model BB. Like the Model K, these things are not recognised anywhere else, and do not fit into any serial number dating that is known. The only answer would lie within Hammond factory records of the time.



LaFleur Hammonds

There has been a suggestion that the J. R. Lafleur & Sons Company had imported Hammonds into the UK, prior to Boosey & Hawkes, from 1935 on ⁽⁹⁾. That date has not yet been substantiated, and all known La Fleur Hammonds have been built around the Model BC and Model E organs – both later models, which throw the date of 1935 in some considerable doubt. The La Fleur brand has long been associated with Boosey & Hawkes, who bought J.R. Lafleur & Sons in 1917 although they continued trading under their own name ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Where the J.R. Lafleur & Sons connection is less in dispute is the supply of Hammonds to the new theatres and cinemas of the day, housed in ornate customised cases. These were marketed as LaFleur Theatre Organs, rather than Hammond Organs. It is thought that they were sold under the LaFleur brand so as not to sully the rather more sober marketing of Hammond organs in the church and home markets ⁽¹¹⁾. A [LaFleur Theatre Organ brochure](#) most likely dating from 1939 lists three models: the “Ballroom”, “Casino” and “Rainbow”. However, within these models there was alternative cases of very different design. The cases were built around Hammond Model A-B and Model E/F organs.

The brochure makes reference to the first LaFleur models being introduced to this country a few months prior to Radiolympia (a radio, TV and electronics trade show) at which organists Donald Thorne and Harry Farmer performed in 1937 ⁽¹²⁾. Radiolympia took place in late August/early September, so this would date their introduction to earlier in 1937 (again contradicting the date of 1935).

However, several cinema history websites cite LaFleur organs being installed from 1936 up to 1938, and a newspaper clipping of one being installed after the outbreak of war in 1939. Cinemas where these seem to have been installed include Glenroyal Cinema, Briggate, Shipley⁽¹³⁾; Odeon, Sketty Cross, Swansea⁽¹⁴⁾; The Forum Cinema, Savile Parade, Chapeltown Road, Leeds⁽¹⁵⁾; Essoldo Cippenham, Slough⁽¹⁶⁾; Leatherhead Theatre (Crescent Cinema), 7 Church Street, Leatherhead⁽¹⁷⁾; Embassy Theatre, Peterborough⁽¹⁸⁾; Ritz Cinema, Quarry Hill, Grays⁽¹⁹⁾.

Well known organists Robin Richmond, Frieda Hall, Harry Farmer and Donald Thorne, have all been pictured with these instruments.



Robin Richmond

Hammond Novachords in the UK

The Novachord was arguably the world's first synthesiser, and was a rare beast even in the USA, with only 1,069 or so being built ⁽²⁰⁾. You would be forgiven for thinking that it was unlikely that any Novachords had made their way to the UK. However it seems that at least a few demonstration instruments were placed with famous band leaders of the day, who could promote the instrument in prominent places. This practice had previously been a clear early marketing ploy of Hammond in the USA, who used prominent musicians and composers to promote the earliest Model A organs starting with George Gershwin.

In the UK, there is mention of jazz pianist Arthur Young playing a Novachord with Hatchett's Swingtette (featuring Stephan Grappelli) at Hatchetts Restaurant in Piccadilly, London in 1939-1940. The Swingtette recorded a number of tunes with Grappelli and the Novachord for Decca in 1939 ⁽²¹⁾. The restaurant was second only at the time to the famous Café de Paris. There is also video of Billy Mayerl demonstrating a Novachord at Grosvenor House in 1941 in a British Pathe News film ⁽²²⁾. There is a possibility that it was the same instrument, as Arthur Young was injured in a bombing raid in September 1940 and never returned to the Hatchett's Restaurant ⁽²¹⁾. It could be that it then passed to Billy Mayerl, although this is just speculation based on the dates.

The Novachord featured on recordings by Arthur Young, including most famously several with Vera Lynn including 'We'll meet again' ^(23 & 24).

There is one reference ⁽²⁵⁾ that states there were ...'some twenty-two in London at the time of the blitz, and they were in fantastic demand in bomb shelter night clubs'. As the unpublished book is largely derived from interviews with Laurens Hammond himself, there may be little reason to doubt it.

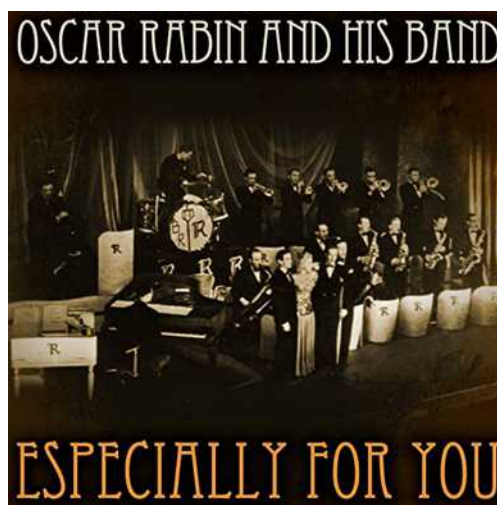
Novachords seem to have been regarded as novelty instruments at the time, and were used by touring big bands in the UK as a special feature during an interlude in the main band's performance. In 'Talking Swing – The British Big Bands' by Sheila Tracy ⁽²⁶⁾, there is an example of this with Oscar Rabin's Romany Dance Band which featured Eddie Palmer on the Novachord who played in the breaks with the rhythm section of the band. The account also mentions how Palmer's Novachord was rented from Boosey and Hawkes but was always breaking down. Not surprising considering its complexity and which would not have been suited to life on the road.



Eddie Palmer at the Novachord with what looks like an A20 tone cabinet (minus the outer doors).

Palmer was featured in BBC Home Service scheduling in May 1941 ⁽²⁷⁾. In March 1951, Palmer was featured in the Musical Express as a 'well-known exponent of the Novachord', although it noted that for this particular restaurant performance he would not be using the Novachord as there was 'insufficient room for the instrument on the restaurant stand!' ⁽²⁸⁾

Another Novachord player who played in orchestras was Billy Hutchinson who played with the Peter Fielding Orchestra and the Dennis Ringrowe Orchestra. According to Robert (Bob) Bell, who worked with Billy at Tyne Tees Television, Bill played the Novachord at the Oxford Galleries Ballroom in Newcastle-upon-Tyne during the dance-band intervals ⁽²⁹⁾.



Oscar Rabin poster – the Novachord can just be seen to the left of the piano.

Post war, Novachords found their way into the BBC's radio programming. Charles Smart had a small band called the Moonrakers in which he played a Novachord⁽³⁰⁾. A programming opening sequence for a programme called Tip Top Tunes in 1947 featured an introduction to the BBC Light Programme theme tune 'Oranges & Lemons' which featured Charles Smart of Novachord and Celeste⁽³¹⁾. 'Orange and Lemons' was originally the station identification of The Allied Expeditionary Forces Programme, which went on air on the 7th June 1944 (D-Day + 1) and was broadcast until the end of WW2. This theme was then picked up by the BBC Light Programme for use during intervals in the service during the '50s and '60s. It was usually played on a novachord⁽³²⁾. It consisted of about 12 seconds of the tune repeated over



and over again, with a short break between each, and played in single notes on a Novachord with a sustain⁽³³⁾.

Both Charles Smart and Eddie Palmer played the Novachord on BBC radio programmes throughout the 1940s and 1950s as featured in the Radio Times of the period. There is mention of Eddie Palmer playing the Novachord in the Radio Times as late as August 1958⁽³⁴⁾.

Oddly, to date I have not seen any UK voltage Novachords in this country. The only two known currently in the UK have both been USA models brought over here in recent years by enthusiasts. So where have those 22 Novachords gone that Laurens Hammond talked about? If all 22 were rented out by Boosey & Hawkes, then it is possible that as they needed repair in later years (probably 1950s), that B&H just scrapped them as not worth repair. If anyone knows of a genuine UK model, do let me know!

Outbreak of World War II...

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 stopped all unnecessary imports and no new Hammond models reached the UK until import restrictions lifted in 1955^(35 & 36). American merchant ships were banned from entering dangerous wartime waters, and during the first nine months of war the British, so far as they were able, had kept their ships away from United States harbours in order to eke out their dollars. By the end of 1940, Britain had run out of dollars to pay for anything anyway!⁽³⁷⁾.

This means that a whole slew of organ models, tone cabinets and early Leslies (tallboys) produced in the USA between 1940 and 1954, are totally unknown in the UK. These include organ models BV, B2, C2, RT2, M, M2 etc. It is only when the import restrictions were lifted in 1955, coinciding with the release of the new Hammond models (B3, C3, RT3, M3 etc), that any fresh stock was available. There was possibly the occasional exception, evidenced by a surviving M2 from 1953 with UK voltage and frequency motor and generator.

One effect of the wartime restrictions was that, instead of the early models being replaced with newer models, they were looked after and serviced.... part of the 'make do, and mend' mentality of the times.

Anecdotal information from Leslie Hill, who knew David Morne, a Hammond engineer at B&H in late 40s/early 50s, gives some interesting insight. According to this source, Boosey & Hawkes bought up a lot of second hand Hammonds during the war years when they couldn't import them. They renovated them and set up a hire dept to rent them out from their Edgware Factory. The British comedian and entertainer, Tommy Trinder, apparently bought up a lot of them to rent out to his showbusiness contacts³⁸. Tommy Trinder also 'discovered' the well-known organist Jerry Allen⁽³⁹⁾.

With the lack of newer model organs, early models were upgraded (eg Model A to AV etc) with the old parts being destroyed rather than let them be recycled (presumably protectionism on B&H's part). There is anecdotal evidence⁽⁴⁰⁾ that this practice was continued by Boosey & Hawkes from their Edgware Road premises, and in the field, as late as 1969-70. It is said this

was because they could improve the re-sale value of the older models to churches if they were upgraded with vibrato-chorus and rounded edge keys.

There were also a lot of technicians (amateur and professional) who made up their own scanners to upgrade earlier models ⁽⁴¹⁾. These being the days when there was a good solid engineering base in the UK and plenty of workshops set up in people's sheds. Apparently, you could not get proper Hammond parts unless you had an import license, which was probably impossible to obtain.

How many pre-war UK Hammonds?

It is interesting to speculate how many Hammonds were sold in this country prior to World War II, and in the absence of any actual export/import records from the time, you have to look at the evidence provided by the Hammonds remaining in the country now as a guide and extrapolate from that.

As discussed earlier, the information from the nine UK Model A's (which all bear Hammond serial plates) so far identified (Dec 2023), shows they have spanned the narrow serial number range 2398 to 2414 (with one exception). It would be reasonable to expect that this does not represent the full extent of the serial no range, and it may well be other examples outside the range will come to light. However, if this range was accepted as an indication, then we would be talking just 20 Model A organs; all possibly in one shipment. This makes any surviving examples very rare beasts.

From the 5 or 6 examples of Model BC organs still surviving (and the six Model ABs), the information available to date on these span a Boosey & Hawkes serial number range up to and including 0316. A BC organ (B&H 0203), had an original receipt and guarantee dating to 9th November 1938. It is known that imports stopped at the outbreak of World War II (Sept 1939), so there could not have been that many more. It would be reasonable to expect perhaps a maximum of 350 UK Model AB & BC organs probably sold at most, maybe less.

Hammond Model E (sometimes marked as KE) organs do exist in the UK but are very rare. There are seven currently known surviving examples, six of which carry both B&H AND Hammond serial plates. B&H serial number range includes from 0052 – 0100 and those also carrying Hammond serial numbers range from 1090 to 1161.

Conserving the survivors...

So the early Hammond Models remaining today in the UK should be treated as rare survivors from a very small number of original sales and very much worth conserving intact.

If that can be said of the organs, then even more so of the tone cabinets that would have been sold with the organs (A20, A40, B40 C20, D20 etc), and which probably scrapped as the newer more powerful models (PR40s etc) became available after the war, and then of course as the Leslie speakers became the norm. Of these early tone cabinets, hardly any survive in the UK. To date (Dec 2023) there only known to be one A20, two B40s, and two D20s. Sadly there is also the serial plate only surviving of a C20 cabinet which was scrapped due to water damage.

This article is an open research work in progress, so please do contact me with any information you may have, no matter how small that may contribute to this.

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Robert (Bob) Bell

Various owners and technicians in the UK and the rest of the world

Links & downloads:

[Hammond catalogue](#) – circa post April 1938

[Boosey & Hawkes Price List 1938](#) (Courtesy of Bevis Peters)

[Boosey & Hawkes Guarantee for Hammond BC 1938](#) (Courtesy of Bevis Peters)

[Boosey & Hawkes advert 1938](#)

[LaFleur Theatre Organs Brochure c.1939](#) (Courtesy of Gordon Crook)

[Boosey & Hawkes Brochure c 1936-37](#) (Courtesy of Brian Nursey, Suffolk (ex-employee, Miller Organs, Norwich))

[Electrical Review – 13th Aug 1937](#) (Courtesy of Brian Nursey, Suffolk (ex-employee, Miller Organs, Norwich))

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