# DOUBLE Dutch Treat

Ornate facade of the street-organ complements perfectly Amsterdam's older architecture.


This year marks the fifth anniversary of BMA's East Midlands-Amsterdam route and sees the addition of a Sunday service to give return flights daily except Saturdays. A vital centre for today's businessman, the city also retains much of its traditional Dutch charm - including the street-organ and the herring cart, as **Jack Goldfarb** reports.

Amsterdammers like to tell you that their city is full of surprises. They're right. Made up of 90 islands, Amsterdam has more canals than Venice and more bridges than any other city on earth. The half a million bicycles outnumber the cars almost four to one. Here you can mail a letter on a tram. Or you can view, in this not-too-sunny city, an incredible year-round profusion of flowers.

And where else will you find the two most beloved institutions, antiquated street organs and pungent herring carts? Both are lamentably disappearing from the brick-lined streets and tree-shaded canal-banks of the Dutch capital. The visitor who does not want to miss these dual delights of Holland's unique folklore should go before it is too late.

Street organs first appeared in Amsterdam 100 years ago and reached their peak of popularity between 1920 and 1940. Generations of Amsterdammers grew up humming and dancing to the calliope sound, a catchy medley of airy, rollicking and nostalgic melodies.

Although the number of ornately-painted street organs has drastically declined in recent years, sentimental Amsterdammers still stuff enough guilders into the copper collection boxes of the nine remaining operators to keep, for the time being, the pop songs, folk tunes, waltzes and marches blaring out loud and clear.

The *pierement*, as the street organ is affectionately known (the word probably derives from *pierewaaien* – to carouse), is usually operated automatically nowadays, but two or three organ-grinders still crank by hand. By calling sympathetic attention to their manual efforts, these hardy operators gather up a lot more guilders.

Under the law, only handicapped persons can operate the street organs now, paying an annual licence fee of about £2·35. A daily Police Department schedule regulates the organ locations on a rotation system, designating who plays where and when. A time limit of ten minutes is set for each site to avoid traffic congestion. But in easy-going Amsterdam, the only time strictly kept by the organ grinders is the jingling of their *mansebak* collection boxes as they shake them in rhythm to the music.

Valued at at least £12,000 each and weighing about a ton, most of the organs are old instruments that have been restored, altered, added to or subtracted from. But they have not multiplied. No new *pierement* has been built for many years. Because of exportation to Dutch societies abroad, the number of organs in Holland has steadily shrunk.

The baroque organ facades are decorated with carved wooden figures – members of the nobility, carnival people, buxom ladies, military men, even transvestites. These animated dolls pirouette, ring bells, pound drums, pluck harps and do all but sing. The handsome carvings, sculpted in France and Germany and sold for a guilder (23p) each not so long ago, are worth a thousand (£230) today.

Employing the player-piano principle, songs are pumped out of the *pierement* on 8-metre long punched-cardboard music scores that play for two minutes each. Street organs carry a repertoire of about 40 melodies, but the heavy favourites are invariably songs about Amsterdam. In fact, more songs have been written in Dutch about Amsterdam than about anything else.

**Street-organ competitions soon have the locals dancing in the streets.**

While street organs have "dwindled down to a precious few," *pierement* buffs are actively trying to preserve those that are left. A Circle of Street Organ Friends has organized (no pun intended) individuals and institutions to buy up retired instruments and halt their exodus abroad. Some of these rescued organs have been installed in the From Music Box to Street Organ National Museum in Utrecht where they are played at Thursday concerts.

The Circle of Friends also arranges frequent contests – organ orgies – where well-known instruments with typical names like *Cry Baby, Snoopy, The Bell, The Arab, Flower Girl, Iron Henry* and *Cement Mixer* formally perform before judges.

**Herring stalls have fixed locations and are regularly checked for cleanliness.**

But somehow the colourful old street organ seems out of its element at museum concerts and official competitions. Like a captive lion in a concrete cage.

No one knows for sure when the first herring cart rolled on to Amsterdam's streets, but the Roman historian Pliny, who died in 113 A.D., noted the Netherlanders' passionate appetite for fish.

The town's bye-laws in the 12th century mentioned the existence of a fish market in the main Dam Square. In Holland, "fish" is usually herring.

Rembrandt is said to have once asked an Amsterdam herring vendor the price of a fish. When the herring's rotten odour assailed his artistic senses, he politely inquired if it were any cheaper without the smell.

In the Dutch capital today, herring vendors serving up their succulent snacks on paper plates have no chance to sell anything but the freshest of fish from their immaculate wooden carts. Hygienic controls are fanatically enforced in this city of conspicuous tidiness.

Unlike the mobile street organs, Amsterdam's herring carts do their brisk business at fixed locations where the municipal Marketing Department keeps a watchful eye and a sensitive nose on their business.

Besides checking up on sanitary conditions, weighing equipment, rent and tax payments, the Marketing authorities require every stall-owner to attend a year's course in fish-mongering.

The vendor is taught how to trim and prepare herrings, how to maintain a super-clean cart and all he could ever want to know about fish lore.

The sweetest-tasting fish, as all *Clupea harengus* sophisticates know, is enjoyed in May and June when the season's first catch, the new 'green' herrings, arrive on the stalls. The very first barrel is traditionally presented to the Queen. Purist customers at the

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stalls look down with scorn on those naive nibblers who adulterate these cherished green herrings by eating them with the chopped raw onions provided in heaped bowls.

All other kinds of herring, however – salted, pickled, marinated, and cold storage (prices range between 1 and 2 guilders, about 23p to 46p) – are usually devoured in customary Amsterdam style with the fish grasped by the tail, swished around in the onions and held skywards as it is swallowed bite by bite.

For those who prefer eating in the more classic manner, the herring and its variation, the pickle-and-onion-filled rollmop, is offered in small chunks speared with toothpicks.

In front of Amsterdam's Central Station I watched a redheaded young herring seller chattering his breezy sales pitch as he deftly scaled, decapitated and filleted a silvery fish in 20 seconds flat.

"How many can you do a day?" I asked him.

"About 200," he said cheerfully. "I make a decent living, but I'll probably give up the job. Who wants to sell herrings all his life?"

I asked him something else.

"Who are my biggest customers?" He pondered a moment, then roared with laughter. "Why – pregnant women, of course!"

**Customary way to eat a herring is to grasp it by the tail, hold it high and lower it into the mouth.**