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JUNE 2013

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# WHARFEDALE AIREDALE CLASSIC

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# Airedale update

Wharfedale have introduced a new classic Airedale. Tony Bolton listens to the only pair currently in Britain.

**T**here are some words that have an ability to reach across the ages; the word Wharfedale for instance. Founded in 1932 and synonymous with quality

loudspeakers, they have used the name Airedale before, usually with cabinets as massive as the rock-laden Yorkshire countryside from which they originally sprang.

The latest incarnation of the

Airedales is the Heritage Classic which stems from the pen of Wharfedale's Director of Acoustic Design, Peter Comeau.

There is no other way of describing these speakers, other than



**Designer Peter Comeau outside the factory in China, with Hi-Fi World representative Anna Chang.**

massive. I listened to them in the house of Dave Cawley, of Dartmouth based distributor, Sound Hifi ([www.soundhifi.com](http://www.soundhifi.com)). On my previous visit, the room was occupied by a pair of Klipschorns, and it is fair to say that the Airedales are some of the few loudspeakers that can actually make the former look small! They measure 1354 x 800 x 540mm (H x W x D) and weigh a truly back-breaking 108kg. Dave told me it took three men from a removal company to carry them into the house, after they had been shipped on pallets from the factory in Shenzhen, China, where Peter Comeau works.

As befits a top of the range product, the hand oiled and waxed

walnut veneering on the cabinet is exemplary. This covers 25mm thick MDF, which is braced internally with plywood. The trims are solid wood.

They look impressive with the covers on, but lurking beneath is a 130mm bass driver sitting above a generously sized port. Above this is a 200mm bass/mid unit. The 75mm midrange unit is incorporated in a die-cast aluminium mounting shared with the 25mm front tweeter. On the top of the cabinet sits the 25mm supertweeter which is accompanied by a rocker switch to turn it on and off. I tried it in both modes over a few tracks and settled for leaving it switched on for the rest of the listening session. I found that I preferred the air that it gave to the sound, and also the increase in definition and extension that it seemed to give to sounds right across the frequency range.

The bass, bass/mid and tweeter all use Alnico magnets, while the midrange cone is backed by a barium ferrite magnet and the supertweeter uses a neodymium magnet. Cone material also varies, with silk used for the three high frequency drivers, Kevlar and paper for the bass/mid, with the bass cone being of a tri-laminate construction of glass fibre/ carbon fibre/ glass fibre.

The signal is distributed through a hard-wired crossover in which all connections are crimped. It uses hand-wound laminated silicon-steel inductors for the bass sections and specially selected low-loss 630V polypropylene capacitors for the mid and treble units. The components are

mounted on two separate boards, and the terminals are bi-wireable.

Dave was powering them with a Luxman L-505 integrated amplifier and his own Timestep phonostage, both of which I happen to have reviewed recently (see *Hi-Fi World* October 2012 and April 2013 respectively). The Timestep powered Technics turntable and Marantz CD player were known to me from previous visits.



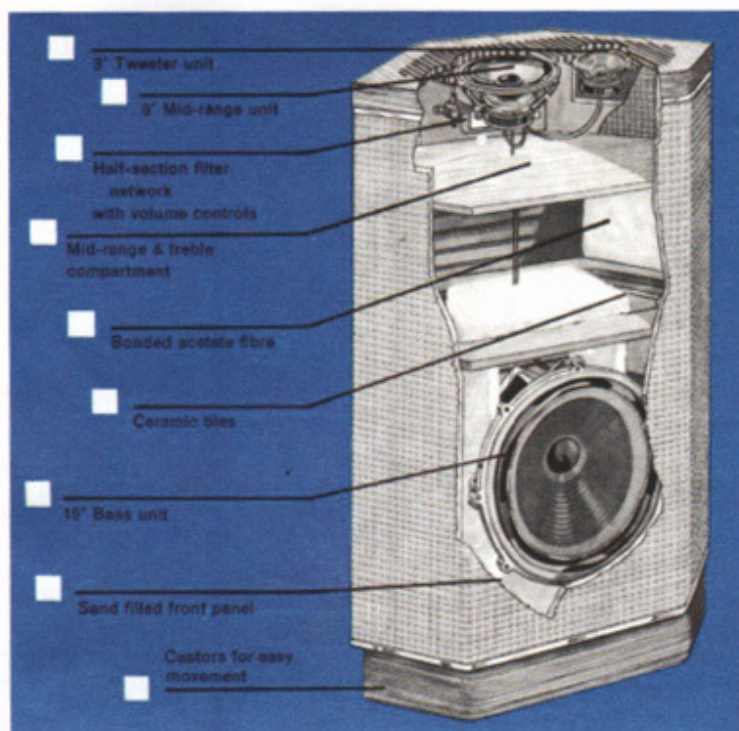
**Rear terminal panel carries heavy duty bi-wire terminals with shorting links. They accept 4mm banana plugs, spades and bare wire.**

I had brought a large bag full of favourite records and proceeded to spend the next eight hours track hopping my way through as wide a range of music and genres as I could.

Early on I tried out some heavyweight orchestral music courtesy of Wagner. The Airedales were in their element, presenting me with a large-scale staging of the Overture to 'Die Meistersingers von Nurnberg'. The impact and weight of the drums were nicely balanced against the rest of the performance.

**The original Wharfedale Airedale conceived by Gilbert Briggs in 1961. It had a 15" bass unit and upward facing midrange and tweeter. Loudspeakers like this were put against the wall and the resulting reflections from the wall gave an omnidirectional property to mono sound. The new Heritage Airedale mimicks this effect with an upward facing super-tweeter.**





**Cut-away drawing of the original Airedale, 1961, showing its upward firing drive unit array.**

but they were intimidating in their intensity all the same. They stood in equal proximity to a beautifully integrated midrange and treble that had shape and texture aplenty. As the Overture ends the orchestra fades back to the sound of a choir and organ being played softly (this is the complete opera rather than a concert version) as the action starts in a church.

After the grandiloquence of the opening, the change in mood to small orchestration and voices was handled well. When there is such a change in both dynamics and atmosphere a lot of big speakers leave me feeling that something is suddenly missing. The Airedales, instead, left me feeling more drawn into the sound as the intimacy of the setting graduated to a solo voice with a few strings accompanying. It was smoothly done, and felt both natural and realistic.

A while later, I was exploring jazz sounds and received a vivid demonstration of just how responsive these speakers really are. I was playing Louis Armstrong's live recording made at New York's Town Hall in 1947. It sounded flat, uninteresting and almost recessed away from me. Yet the next record, 'Ella and Her Fellas' sounded fresh and enjoyable. Knowing that Audio Technica cartridges tend not to flatter older records (to my ears, at least) I was not surprised by the alteration in sound quality, but by the obviousness

signal was fed to them.

The change from mono to stereo with the Ray Charles LP resulted in little expansion of the soundstage, but an alteration in the way it was populated. The sound in mono was so deep and detailed that I felt that the soundstage extended quite a way back through the walls behind and beside the speakers, and that everyone playing had room to move and breathe. The stereo placement augmented this with an equally extended and spacious staging, with Ray well lit at centre, the orchestra behind and around him. The backing singers seemed to appear over to the right, from an inky blackness, with voices well enough separated that, had I felt inclined, I could have been tempted to try counting them.

The opening track of Lou Reed's 'Coney Island Baby' LP, 'Crazy Feelin' had an altogether nearer perspective, due to his close-miked voice and the guitars gently backing him. Again, I felt that the scale of the presentation was about right, leaving me

"I expected scale and majesty but was pleased to find that they also do closeness and delicacy with the same level of appropriateness"

of the difference. Any preconceptions that the Airedales might be enhancing or enriching a sound were negated, and I came to the conclusion that they seemed to give a pretty faithful rendition of whatever standard of

with the feeling that I was in a small environment with a full sized person singing in front of me.

I ended my listening with a wander through some electronica, starting with (inevitably) a Shpong



**No fewer than five men work on finishing an Airedale cabinet in the Shenzhen factory. It's 35 degrees Centigrade outside and in, hence the fan.**



The Heritage Airedale on display at a hi-fi show in Guangzhou, China. It is distributed there by SWT – Sino Wharfedale Trading, one of China's biggest audio distributors. China and the Far East like traditional Western products, especially Wharfedales.

"they are truly magnificent in looks and sound"

LP then diverting to the more brutal sounds of Dave Tipper's CD 'Music For Sound Systems'. This is hardcore trip-hop and not really my sort of music, but it is very useful for testing the performance extremes of both an amplifier and speakers. The bass is deep, pounding and utterly relentless, and at high volume can very easily show up a speaker that is hanging onto a note a little too long. It also reveals sonic imbalances, where the bass appears to overpower the other sounds for example.

The Airedales and Luxman together acquitted themselves well, with bass that was floorshakingly deep, very fast, and followed a tune all of the way down to the lowest note. The last few tracks contain short test tones starting at 40 Hz, rising to 45 then dropping to 30Hz. Sitting on the sofa, armed with Dave's SPL meter, I found a pretty even response across the range.

'Even' is a good word for the sound of these speakers. I was impressed by the speed and power behind their presentation. I expected scale and majesty, but they also do closeness and delicacy with the same level of appropriateness. They seem highly responsive to source and would, I think, sound amazing fed by a valve amplifier of suitable quality and power. With a claimed 90dB efficiency and a nominal 6 Ohm load they are well within the capabilities of the

Icon Audio 845 monoblocks that reside at World Towers, for instance.

So if you have a biggish room, high quality source and amplification components, and £24,995 spare, then I would thoroughly recommend treating yourself to a pair of Wharfedale Airedale Heritage Classics. They are truly magnificent in looks and sound.

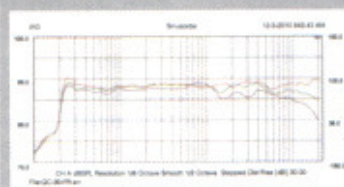
## MEASURED PERFORMANCE

The on-axis forward response of the Airedale is shown in the red trace. There is strong subsonic output at 26Hz from the 15in bass unit and this will provide a sense of bass power even in big rooms.

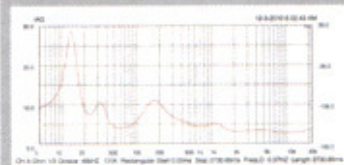
The lower midband above 180Hz is reproduced smoothly by the loudspeaker's lower midrange unit. This

### FREQUENCY RESPONSE

Red - on axis



### IMPEDANCE



### MUSIC USED:

Wagner 'Die Meistersinger Von Nurnberg'. Hans Knappertsbusch conducting the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Chorus of Vienna State Opera, Schoeffler, Edelmann, Gueden. Decca Records Ltd. LXT 2659 - 64. 1954.

Louis Armstrong and His All Stars. 'Louis Armstrong New York Town Hall Concert Album'. His Master's Voice. DLP 1015.

Ella Fitzgerald. 'Ella And Her Fellas'. Brunswick Records. LAT 8223. 1957.

Ray Charles 'The World of Ray Charles' London Records. SPA U 361. 1974.

Lou Reed. 'Coney Island Baby'. RCA Records. NL 83807. 1981.

Tipper. 'Music For Sound Systems'. Fuel Records Ltd. RED 12/4/99. 1999

### SYSTEM USED:

Technics SL:1210 Mk.II (with Timestep T-01PSU) / SME V/ Audio Technica AT33EV. Timestep T-01MC phonostage. Marantz KI Pearl Lite DC Player. Luxman L 505 amplifier.

hands over to a dome midrange unit that extends output smoothly upward to 3.5kHz, the response graph shows. A slight trend down above 4kHz will make the midrange easy on the ear. A partnering dome treble unit comes into action above 9kHz and slowly lifts treble upward toward 20kHz. The upper firing treble unit shares its output, but can be switched off.

The impedance curve shows the 15in bass unit has a high dc resistance and it will not draw a lot of current, in spite of its size. Couple this with a high 90dB sound pressure level at one metre, from one Watt input power and you have a loudspeaker that is easy to drive and draws little power; 40 Watts per channel will be more than enough for very high volume.

The Airedale will have strong low bass and a smooth midrange measurement shows. It is tailored for accuracy. **NK**

## WHARFEDALE AIREDALE HERITAGE CLASSIC LOUDSPEAKERS £24,995



### VERDICT

Classic name and styling allied to 21st Century cabinetry, crossover and drivers to produce a class leading speaker.

### FOR

- phenomenal but controlled bass output
- open and very detailed
- supertweeters add air and definition

### AGAINST

- size and price

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