

# CINEMA ORGAN NEWS FROM BRITAIN



by  
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## The stuff of which legends are made.

Hello again. My word, 1985 is certainly out to be *the* anniversary year.

One of our oldest seaside resorts is Margate in Kent. The most famous cinema being the Dreamland, part of a 24-acre theme park started in Victoria times. The old silent days cinema with its straight organ was pulled down in 1934 to make way for a typical super cinema of 2050 seats equipped with a 4/19 Compton which curiously incorporated 13 ranks from the Noterman straight organ of the silent days. Compton gave it a new console and the patent Solo Cello unit, a real string bowed mechanically, amplified and played from the console (fairly common at this period), and one of the greatest grand piano attachments you could imagine. Apart from being played from the console in the usual way, it could be made to play itself via a roll player, leaving the organist free to do his own thing with the pipes.

The brilliant young organist chosen to become resident at this prestigious cinema was Lewis Gerard, who was lured away from the vast ABC

circuit's Ritz cinema in Leeds, Yorkshire. Friday, 22 March 1935 saw the great opening of Dreamland Cinema and Garbo decorated the screen in *The Painted Veil*. In no time, Lewis Gerard became a stellar attraction at the powerful Compton with its typically British illuminated console of rainbow style, complete with its "flame effect" created by revolving glass mirrored drums inside the main glass pillars. The theatre shut for a period when the war came, like all cinemas and theatres in the U.K.

Gerard went in 1938 to another chain of theatres, but happily returned to Dreamland immediately after the war ended. He left for Canada playing the new Minshall organ and eventually became a leading concert demonstrator organist and consultant for Baldwin in your country, where he has lived ever since. A long time resident of Santa Barbara, California, he often has popped back to see relations and have a private tinkle on his old Dreamland organ.

One cannot speak of the Dreamland Margate without thinking of Gerard, so it was with the very great-

est of pleasure that the legendary pair should rise once more on 24 March 1985, 50 years after the opening. How many organs can boast that? How many organs are still in situ after 50 years? Not many.

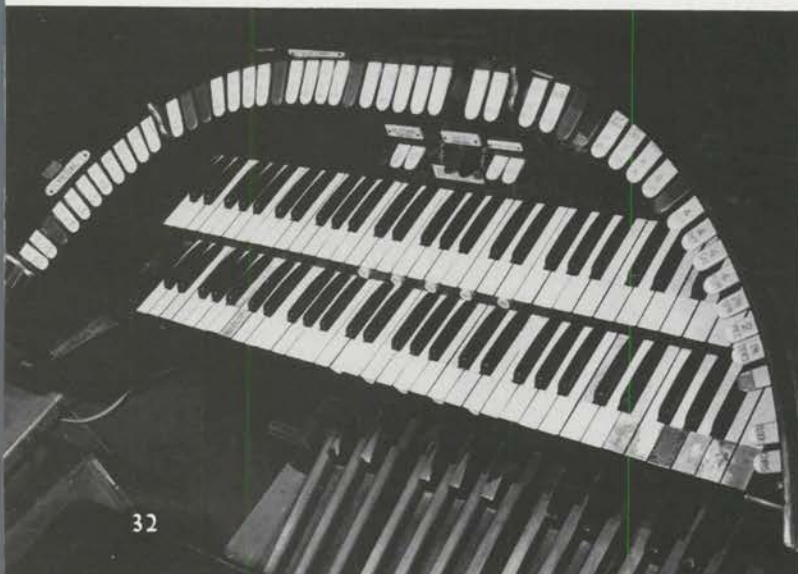
Sadly, the theatre has changed to a Bingo hall now, but the organ is kept in playing order by members of the Medway Theatre Organ Trust, who hold four concerts a year by top name organists who are assured of a big reception and one of the best attended venues in the U.K. It's the only theatre organ for many miles around this part of bustling southeastern England.

"Jerry" Gerard, as he is known in your country, recalled memories to the packed audience. A great many remembered his organ solos and broadcasts. He recalled how they were trying out the console lift just before the cinema opened, when a cable snapped and the huge console dropped suddenly to the bottom of the pit. He held on for dear life. The chairman of the Dreamland, the aristocratic J. H. Iles, peered over the pit and said, "Are you in distress, Mr. Gerard?" Jerry said his reply was unprintable! He played at the 50th anniversary the same medley of tunes that he played in 1935, and that's real nostalgia for you.

A great character and a great player, a pro. He has made over 700 TV appearances in the USA and Canada and played in all 50 states, but it has amazed me that Jerry has never, to my knowledge, played any theatre organ concerts in the USA. He may be better known for his work with Baldwin and now with the Allen company. He comes from a distinguished family of organ builders in the U.K. Yes,

Opus 999, a 2/6 Wurlitzer at Rye, Sussex, England, grammar school. The 60th anniversary of its original installation was celebrated in April. (John Sharp photo)

Lewis "Jerry" Gerard at the 50th anniversary concert of the Dreamland Cinema Margate, Kent, England, 4/19 Compton-Noterman organ. (John Sharp photo)





The truly legendary Reginald Dixon M.B.E. seated at the Wurlitzer in the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool. (Dalgliesh collection)

happily, some legends do live on.

A grammar school hall in the picturesque mediaeval town of Rye in East Sussex may not seem a place to celebrate a 60th anniversary, but it was on 21 April when Trevor Bolshaw and Michael Wooldridge played a splendid concert on Wurlitzer Opus 999, a 2/6 Style D, unique over here for being the second Wurlitzer to be opened in Britain. This was on 6 April 1925, so, like Dreamland, was virtually to the day again. Its original home was the suburban Tottenham Palace in north London, a converted music hall or variety theatre. Jack Courtenay, a pioneer name, opened several of the early Wurlitzers over here. His brother was Alex Taylor, also a well-known organist. Both played in your country.

In 1957, Mr. May, the music master of Rye Grammar School, bought the organ for the hall then being built complete with stage. The chamber was built at the back of the balcony where the projection box would be in a cinema. The console is placed with its horseshoe facing the wall at the left side of the balcony, possibly to stop pupils being too interested in the organist. However, the seats are turned around to face the rear of the hall for occasional theatre organ concerts on this little gem with all its silent era

charm so different from the typical six-ranker of the talkie era, the golden era over here. Somehow, through the years the traps were not thought to be important in a school. Opinions on that subject have changed, I'm happy to say, so now they are searching for drums and cymbals to go with the chimes and a newly acquired glock, Nigel Spooner, the chemistry and physics master, told me proudly.

Another Wurlitzer, without doubt the most famous worldwide, is also celebrating her birthday. Opus 2187, "The Dancing Queen" herself, the venerable 3/14 and grand piano of the Tower Ballroom Blackpool.

Opened by her designer, the legendary Reginald Dixon, on 10 April 1935 as a 3/13 with the console sliding forward on rails on the bandshell, the organ's fame was assured. No organ has been heard by so many. More records made and sold than any other — several million-sellers, thousands of broadcasts since its opening, more money spent on its upkeep and known to millions who are not remotely interested in organs, it has become a part of show biz lore in Europe.

After Dixon retired Ernest Broadbent took his place; a superb player, but ill health forced his retirement from the organ and concert touring scene. A new change of policy has meant bringing in a team of younger players to handle the incredible daily schedule of this historic organ.

Dancing is continuous in the fabulous ornate ballroom from 10:30 a.m. till 10:30 p.m. every day except Sundays. The blower is cooled off by having a Technics organ playing for about 30 minutes at a time throughout the day, then the console rises on its fast lift to lure the dancers onto the magnificent sprung floor.

Since the fire of 1956, when the French-style console got roasted and the tabs buckled in the heat as the floor caught fire, the console was mounted on a lift with sliding trap door cover. Its grand piano stands alongside the raised console and fascinates the public as its keys go plunking up and down in the rather unkind manner in which Wurlitzers seem to treat their piano attachments!

After the war, Mr. Dixon had the upright piano removed and the grand piano from the Opera House theatre Blackpool wired in its place. He also had the pipemaking firm of Rodgers

in Leeds make and fit a Solo String rank in place of the Vox Humana, and a Tuba Mirabilis rank made and fitted. After the fire, soot was removed and the console rebuilt, and he had the Gamba and Tuba Mirabilis from the Opera House Blackpool Wurlitzer switched in place of the English-built Solo String and Tuba Mirabilis, which went into the Opera House where they remain, so it's all Wurlitzer. A £67,000 overhaul took place recently, but it has been maintained every year since it was built. It does earn its keep, you can't deny that.

Everyone here was saddened to learn that Reginald Dixon died on Thursday, 9 May, aged 80. He had been in poor health for a couple of years, and was unable to attend the gala 80th birthday concert arranged for him at the Tower Ballroom earlier this year.

Ena Baga was wartime chief organist at the Tower whilst Reg was in the airforce, and now the great Ena Baga is to return again after 40 years for a special concert May 12.

Chief organist today is the hugely popular Phil Kelsall, born in 1956. He

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landed a record contract with EMI, no less, and they put out an LP every year nationwide. European sales, BBC broadcasts and winter concert tours have brought the organ world to Phil's feet. His latest LP is in strict tempo. Titled "Party Dance Night at the Tower," it contains 16 different tempo medleys of tunes like tangos, fox-trots, quicksteps, even the Agadoo, a new dance.

Dance-type strict tempo records are the "in thing" this year in the big-time theatre organ scene. In Northampton, young ex-Tower organist Nicholas Martin's latest LP offering is "Dance Time at the Merry-Go-Round," recorded on the fabulous 3/19 BAL 4 Wurlitzer of the Merry-Go-Round, a superb organ museum in Northampton in the midlands of England. The organ came from the old Paramount theatre Newcastle-on-Tyne originally, via a stint in an auto showroom where it was played for concerts. Jesse Crawford said it was the best Wurlitzer he played when on tour over here for Paramount's British circuit. It remains so, in the opinion of many.

One of the older members of the Tower Blackpool team is Arnold Loxam. He has just issued his finest LP on Grosvenor Records label called "At Home," a recording which gets away from the dance tempo and exploits often better the tone colours of the Tower organ. He leaves the sometimes overworked Tierces and Quint stops of the Tower organ alone, and we enjoy a fresher sound from this most English of British Wurlitzers.

Mention must be made of Arnold Loxam's previous LP, also recently out on the Kinura label, made on the famous AVRO Radio station four-manual 19-rank organ in Hilversum, Holland. Dutch builder Standaart started the organ in 1935 but went bankrupt and Compton was brought in from the U.K. to finish the job. Standaart had built the console and ordered the reeds from Gottfried in the USA, something they always did. According to legend, Compton provided 15 ranks of pipes. Jacket notes on an LP by Dutch organist Bernard Drukker said it was mostly Compton, but now we are told it does not contain any Compton pipework! It does not have the strident sound of the later Standaarts (six came over to Britain in the 1930s), and AVRO Radio has always stated that it is a Comp-

ton. For a famous broadcasting organ it remains a mystery.

All in all, it's a bumper year for Arnold Loxam, and anniversaries and organ playing keeps you young, we read. It must, as veteran console star of the Gaumont-British chain's heyday is Bobby Pagan, who celebrated his 80th birthday with a concert at the splendid Worthing, Sussex, Assembly Hall Wurlitzer 3/10 in a joint concert with your talented Rob Calcaterra, who is highly popular over here. There was a "This Is Your Life" segment.

A lady called "Big Bertha" brought gasps from an audience recently when I presented a tribute to Paramount for the Cinema Organ So-

ciety in London. I showed off all their British circuit houses (now Odeon controlled) and several famous USA Paramounts, like Oakland, New York, Portland, Seattle, Aurora, Toledo, Denver, Birmingham (Big Bertha's home) and my favourite Brooklyn Paramount. Rudy Frey and others helped me locate some lovely slides.

London cinema buffs were recently sampling the delights of Paris cinemas, all organless these days, including the Paramount Paris. Its 2/10 Wurlitzer is now in a private house.

That's all for now. Time to press the down button. Keep those Voxes chuffing merrily.

IAN DALGLIESH □

## BOOK REVIEW

**Encore for A Worthy Performer, by Daniel M. Costigan. Published by Rahway Landmarks, Box 755-D, Rahway, New Jersey 07065. \$3.95 per copy (postpaid).**

This story of the Rahway Theatre graphically reminds us that each old movie house in this country has its own history and serves to keep us in touch with a time when the pace of life was less hectic and movies were still a kind of magic. A group of concerned individuals has organized Rahway Landmarks which is dedicated to the restoration and preservation of the Rahway Theatre and its 2/7 Style E-X Wurlitzer Opus 1923, and *Encore* was published to help finance this project. Author Daniel M. Costigan states in his introductory notes that this book is intended as a "kind of tapestry of interesting facts in the life and times of a local institution." And it is.

Although Rahway, New Jersey, is not an American megalopolis, there were three opera houses there before 1900, and competition for the first movie theatres was intense during the 1920s. In 1928, when the Rahway opened, it appeared to be the winner of the "great race." Costigan tells us that the \$20,000 Wurlitzer was its real attraction, and that the "unique acoustics of the hall made the relatively small Rahway organ sound enormous."

Hard times during the '30s found theatre owners and managers devel-

oping some rather creative promotions to draw patrons, and the Rahway was no exception. In 1933, the theatre's management staged an elaborate wedding on the Rahway stage complete with "organist, vocalists and ushers from the staff." The honored couple celebrated their 51st anniversary in 1984.

The life of the Rahway during the war years and the troubled economic times that followed parallels that of hundreds of great old American theatres, but this story is special because of the determination of the Rahway citizens not to let this landmark theatre and its Wurlitzer die.

In 1967, when I was performing in New Jersey, Bob Balfour took me to see the theatre and invited me to play the organ. I was impressed with the way the sound filled the auditorium, and I agree with their claim that it is the "biggest little Wurlitzer." It feels good to know that another theatre and its organ will be preserved for future generations.

Costigan's narrative is quite readable, and the only flaw I find in the book is the poor reproduction of some of the illustrations. *Encore for A Worthy Performer* is not just an "encore;" it is, hopefully, a preview of a new life for the Rahway Theatre and its "biggest little Wurlitzer." To that end, I would recommend the book to theatre and organ lovers.

PAUL QUARINO □