

CINEMA ORGAN NEWS

FROM BRITAIN



by
Ian
Dalgliesh



1985 will go down in history for the passing of the most famous of all theatre organists, Reginald Dixon. No other organist received such press coverage and TV and radio tributes. The top daily papers, the Times and Daily Telegraph, reported his passing on their front pages. The world famous Tower Ballroom in Blackpool was packed to its limits on Sunday 14 July at the memorial concert, which showed the esteem in which he was held. Arnold Loxam played prior to the actual concert; he is one of the regular team of players. There was a sherry reception for invited guests and dignitaries. Nigel Ogden compered the proceedings. Robin Richmond played, all agreed superbly, and recalled many personal memories of Reg. Peter Ashman presented a slide and audio tribute to Mr. Dixon; few were better placed to do this as Ashman wrote the best selling biography of Dixon a few years ago. To the right of the stage a commemorative plaque was unveiled by Reg Dixon's two daughters who were present with their families. It has a coloured photo of Reg. Also playing was the principal organist of the Tower team, young Phil Kelsall.

A special booklet was published by the Cinema Organ Society, written by Tony Bernard

The Reginald Dixon memorial plaque at the Tower Ballroom, Blackpool. (John Sharp photo)



THIS TRIBUTE IS IN
HONOUR OF
REGINALD DIXON M.B.E.
KNOWN TO MILLIONS THE
WORLD OVER AS
MR. BLACKPOOL
FROM 1930-1970 HIS
MASTERY OF THE TOWER
BALLROOM WURLITZER
ORGAN CREATED A MUSICAL
LEGEND WHICH WILL LIVE
FOREVER.

Smith, editor of the C.O.S. Journal. Now there is to be a Reginald Dixon Memorial Fund and people are talking of erecting a statue and coming up with other ideas. As one can imagine, EMI, Mr. Dixon's recording company, swiftly stepped in and brought out one double LP album made up from his final LP recorded at the Tower in 1970 and one of his first after he left the Tower made on the BBC theatre organ, and a week or so later another LP appeared on another of their labels made from items taken from the mid-and later-1950s after he switched from 78s to 45 rpm records. Both are welcome items and are happily reasonably priced discs. Bob Barratt, Mr. Dixon's A & R man, has a great many more items for the future.

Another "great," Sidney Torch, was honoured by receiving the "MBE" for services to the BBC Radio for conducting and arranging for the BBC Concert Orchestra. Only theatre organ fans know him for the organ, as to most people here he is a name for conducting and arranging on radio. His old "mount," the Gaumont State Kilburn 4/16 Wurlitzer, is having its large console overhauled and rebuilt in Northampton by John Bowen, the excellent organ builder who maintains the fabulous organs in Turner's Musical Merry-Go-Round at Northampton, England. Nigel Turner, the owner, told me this good news. Rank-Odeon, our third largest cinema chain, own the State Kilburn but have kept it closed for a few years. The vast cinema, capable of seating just over 4000, doesn't pay, they say. The console is to be moved back to the State and the building is to be altered for other uses and we hope the organ will come into its own again. We all miss it. How much access the organ fans will get may pose a problem, Nigel told me. Let's hope it all works out. The State has architectural "listing," which means in theory it can't be pulled down, at least without a major political row.

Another cinema also called the State at Grays in Essex, a real late-style gem dating from 1938 and housing its fiery splendid 3/6 & Melotone Compton has also shut down. A new owner bought it and then the local authority slapped a preservation order on the building and the owner closed the cinema down. Sadly, the fans are denied use of the Compton for organ concerts.

Another venue very popular for organ con-

certs is the delightful Regal at Henley-on-Thames, the rowing mecca. Here the cinema was built in 1937 without an organ, but a 3/7 Compton was installed only a few years ago. It came from the Ritz Cinema Tunbridge Wells in Kent. A supermarket chain wants to enlarge their store and now the battle is on to save the Regal. Several big names of showbiz like Robert Morley who live in Henley want to see the cinema and organ survive.

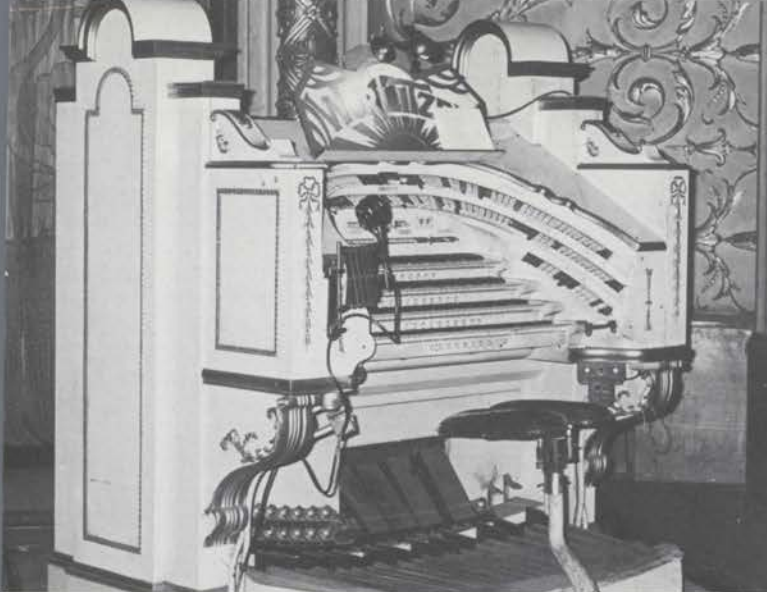
Two of the lesser known names for your collection of builders of theatre organs are Spurden-Rutt, builders of the Rutt Unit Organ, and Ingram of Scotland. To my knowledge, Robert Spurden-Rutt built only three actual unit-type organs, the Palace Cinema Slough in Buckinghamshire, the Super Cinema Oxford and the Regal Cinema Highams Park in North London. The last gem got buried and forgotten under the Bingo callers rostrum when the cinema went over to Bingo. A Scottish friend of mine, Charles Davidson, a commercial radio producer, purchased the little gem and stored it.

He also managed to rescue another unique "wee" gem, the 2/4 Ingram from the suburban Astoria cinema Costorphine in Edinburgh, Scotland's beautiful capital. This little old dear was broadcast very regularly on the BBC Radio in the golden era and was said to be the smallest theatre organ heard on radio. I have played it and can say it was delightful. After being stored and no home found for it, Charles bought it and also couldn't find a place for it and his 3/6 Rutt and his 2/7 Wurlitzer from the Rex Stratford, London. Now happily, he has loaned them permanently to St. Albans Organ Museum in Hertfordshire in the famous cathedral and Roman city, so alongside the Wurlitzer they own from the Granada Edmonton, once played by Don Baker, we can all enjoy the rare specimens of theatre organ building.

Meanwhile, the largest Wurlitzer installed in Europe, the 4/21 270 Special of the former Trocadero Cinema London, made famous by Quentin Maclean and the pride of the London area of the Cinema Organ Society, is about to appear with its new relay system which will improve the action of this most beautifully voiced organ. Another smaller but excellent Wurlitzer, Opus 2116, was installed in the vast New Victoria Cinema Bradford in Yorkshire in 1930. After being poorly installed in a club in the northeast of England, it has now found a beautiful new home of its own. Few theatre organs can boast this.

The NETOA (North East Theatre Organ Association) has installed it after a painstaking rebuild in a converted chapel at Howden-Le-Wear in County Durham in northeast England. The chapel has been rebuilt as a luxury cinema, complete with stage and slide effects and projection equipped. It is set to be one of our top concert venues, without doubt.

The largest cinema circuit here is ABC (Associated British Cinemas, to you) and they employed well over 200 theatre organists in the golden era, many top names. Gradually all their organs went when the cinemas were twinned and tripled to make complexes. One organ remained, the very beautiful 3/8 &



The unusual console of the 4/16 Wurlitzer of the Gaumont State Kilburn, made famous by Sidney Torch. (John Sharp photo)



Phil Kelsall at the Tower Ballroom Wurlitzer during the Dixon Memorial Concert. (John Sharp photo)

Melotone Compton in the ABC Royal at Plymouth in Devon. It was nationally known for its thousands of radio broadcasts by Dudley Savage, a household name on radio. Now, unbelievably, ABC are installing a Compton in their splendid ABC Savoy Northampton. The house was tripled, two minis in the stalls (ground floor rear) but that leaves the chambers and old stage still intact and so the manager, Ken Porter, an avid organ fan he told me, wanted to see those chambers filled with organ again. The original organ, a 3/7 & Melotone Compton, was removed many years ago, but happily before long those chambers will ring to the sound of another Compton. Another friend of mine, Mark Burgess, owned a couple of theatre organs and like his friend Charles Davidson, couldn't find anywhere to put them, so he has come to an arrangement with ABC to lease them.

Richard "Dave" Pawlyn, the well-known organ builder of Aylesbury, is installing parts of these two Comptons in the ABC Northampton. One of the Comptons was designed by Harold Ramsay for the Union Circuit's Ritz Cinema in Cleethorpes, an East Midlands seaside resort. It was a 3/7 & Melotone. The other is the famous 3/10 & Melotone Compton that was built in 1938 for the world famous Warner Theatre in London's Lei-

cester Square. It was removed to make way for a vast 70mm screen when they put on *My Fair Lady* and Warner Brothers donated the organ to a teacher training college chapel in Canterbury, Kent. They sold it to Mark Burgess. We are all simply agog over here with this news. Could it lead to more ABC managers getting their way and putting organs back into those vacated chambers?

The Warner console was quite beautiful. It was circular and the console came up backwards and then turned round for the solo, most delightful. The builder who installed it in the chapel in Canterbury chopped this "one off" rarity up to make it a two-manual! He also threw out the wooden Tibia and traps and that lovely Melotone unit. Well, you can't win all of them.

A circuit that didn't go in much for organs was Odeon. They had a very strong style of architecture and decor, and soon lovers of the "Odeon Style" will be able to moon over their lost and bulldozed favourites as Mercia Publications are bringing out a tome showing all of the cinemas constructed by Oscar Deutsch, the founder of Odeon. Now it's all part of Rank Organisation, along with the former Gaumont Circuit.

Mercia Cinema Society now tells me that they are happily going to follow this with a book on Gaumont-British Cinemas, who,

along with their arch rival ABC, were responsible for installing more organs than any other circuits in Europe. So fans of the rapidly vanishing "Super Cinemas" have something of which to look forward.

WIN
AUSTRALIA
NEW ZEALAND
TOUR

Read about the ATOS-sponsored Tour to Australia and New Zealand on page 28 of this issue. Then check the New Member Contest on page 29 so that you can get in on this trip with your expenses paid.

On holiday recently I sampled two of the three most famous commercially successful theatre organ installations in Europe, the Cushing organ museum in Thursford in Norfolk and Turner's Merry-Go-Round at Northampton, both equipped with fabulous 3/19 "BAL 4" model Wurlitzers, as many of you know. Thursford's organ came from the Paramount Leeds in Yorkshire and Northampton's from Paramount Newcastle-on-Tyne. Nicholas Martin is resident at Northampton and plays daily. They have recently put in the new Christie Transmission relay system. At Thursford George Cushing showed me the video equipment for displaying the resident organist's talent to the vast daily crowds. Robert Wolfe plays there. He is about to leave as I write this column for seven dates, including Detroit Senate 13 October, Riviera Tonawanda 16 October, Rochester and Casa Loma, and finally Shea's Buffalo on 3 November. Robert's latest LP "Say It With Music," made on Cushing's Thursford 3/19 of course, is excellent. It was recorded at a "live" concert, the record producer being none other than Bob Barratt of EMI and Reg Dixon fame.

Where I came in! Have a Happy Christmas, all of you. Wonder if Father Christmas will leave a Wurlitzer in your stocking?

The original console of the Compton organ in the Warner Theatre Leicester Square London.

(lanpix photo)

