

# Douglas Reeve

## Britain's Man-of-Brass

by Dr. Norman Barfield

At a time when the whole of the theatre organ enthusiasts movement is following the lead of the ATOS London Chapter in the encouragement of new young keyboard talent as the "seedcorn" for the future of these beloved instruments, we in Britain are enjoying the uniquely distinctive style and talents of Douglas Reeve, who was himself originally promoted as the "Wonder Boy Organist" in his earliest days at the theatre organ.

This year Douglas celebrates 45 years at his beloved 4/51 British-built Hill, Norman and Beard (Christie) pipe organ in the Dome at the Royal Pavilion complex in his native Brighton on the South Coast. Happily, he is also heard widely in concert throughout the country, on broadcasts and on recordings.

He was born in Brighton January 7, 1918, in a room over a small shop, "Whittington's Dining Rooms," operated by his mother's family. The shop was located on Meeting House Lane in the oldest area of Brighton.

The buildings were originally built for the fishermen, who lived in them when the town was a small fishing village known as Bright-helmston.

Douglas showed signs of his exceptional musical talent at an early age. He began organ lessons at St. George's Church, Kemp Town, Brighton, at the age of nine. When he was 14 he became a pupil of the late Terence Casey, well-known theatre organist of the day, at the 2/9 Wurlitzer in the Regent Cinema in Brighton. Under Casey's expert teaching, Douglas soon mastered the technique of the cinema organ and became assistant at the 3/12 Compton in the nearby Savoy Cinema

At that time, Reginald Foort was playing the 2/6 Wurlitzer in the Lido Cinema at nearby Hove during a visiting season and invited Douglas to audition for him there. Foort was so impressed that he engaged Douglas to tour the major County Cinema chain — of which Foort was then Musical Director — as "Mas-

ter Douglas Reeve: Wonder Boy Organist" (complete with Eton suit, including starched shirt collar and short "bumfreezer" jacket). At the suggestion of Foort, Douglas adopted as his signature tune the World War I favourite, "Pack Up Your Troubles," which had been Foort's original signature before he composed his "Keep Smiling." The words of his signature have been Douglas' motto throughout his life.

Later, Douglas was based in the London area at the Regal Golders Green. While there he played his first broadcast concert on April 28, 1936, on the 4/22 Compton theatre organ in the St. George's Hall BBC studio near Broadcasting House in central London (the studio was destroyed in the London "Blitz" early in World War II). He has been "on the air" ever since.

Joining His Majesty's Forces at the outbreak of war in 1939, Douglas was invalided out of the Army in 1941. He returned to Brighton and was appointed Borough Organist in 1942, the position which he still holds today. His is probably the best-known name in this ever-popular British holiday resort (regarded by many as the South Coast equivalent of the famous northern theatre organ "Mecca" at Blackpool).

No profile of Douglas Reeve would be complete without a complementary cameo about the Dome and its organ. The Royal Pavilion Estate was designed by the British architect William Porden and built as a seaside palace for George Prince of Wales, afterwards Prince Regent, and subsequently King George IV.

The Dome, which forms part of the Estate, was built as the royal stables. It was completed in 1805 and opened in 1806. The dominating feature of the building was, and is, the central dome or cupola, which subsequently gave the name "Dome" to this famous building. The dome itself is 80 feet in diameter and 65 feet high. Around the outer circle was stabling for 44 horses, and on the upper floor there was accommodation for grooms and other servants, as well as harness and saddle rooms.

In 1850, the Royal Pavilion Estate was purchased by the Brighton Corporation, and in 1867 the stables were transformed into a con-

A recent photo of Douglas Reeve at the console of the 4/51 Hill, Norman and Beard organ at the Dome, Brighton. (John Sharp photo)







Douglas' birthplace was in a room over "Whittington's Dining Rooms," on the left in the photo.



This family portrait, taken in July 1918, shows Douglas on the lap of his mother, May, his sister Irene, brothers Cecil and Nigel, and his father Nathan. He had a younger brother, Raymond, who was killed in World War II.

cert or assembly hall. During World War I the building was used as a hospital for wounded Indian soldiers.

The interior of the Dome was completely remodelled in 1935 and the present false ceiling introduced. In 1936, the Father Willis organ, which had been installed in the 1860s, was replaced by the present specially-designed dual-purpose instrument built by the renowned British master organ builders Messrs. William Hill and Norman and Beard. They were the makers of a number of early straight orchestral cinema installations and of the highly successful "Christie" unit theatre organs.

With a large four-manual horseshoe console, and embodying all the features of the company's Christie theatre installations, the design specification was the result of co-operation between Stanley Roper, the organ-

ist of the Chapel Royal, Windsor, and Dr. Alfred Abdey, Brighton Borough organist at the time. The specification was also heavily influenced by Quentin Maclean, who was already well known in the musical life of the town as a result of his residence at the Hill, Norman and Beard organ at the Regent Theatre.

Both a theatre and concert organ, the Dome instrument has 51 ranks of some of the best pipework ever to emerge from any British organ manufacturer, including a Tuba Mirabilis which Douglas Reeve uses to outstanding effect. The pipework is enclosed in four chambers situated on the sides of the proscenium arch. The console is mounted on a trolley and can be moved to the centre of the stage or stored on a lift below when not in use. Quentin Maclean gave the opening recital on May 15, 1936.

For Douglas' first five years at the Dome, the building was used to provide dance hall facilities for the many servicemen and women stationed in the area. During this time he established a special reputation, not least through the cheerful rendering of his famous signature tune.

Douglas would usually play for half an hour in every two hours, and his appearance at the organ seemed to be the cue for the air-raid warning to be sounded. This in turn

Young Douglas Reeve at the console in the Regal Hampstead.

(John Sharp photo)



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Douglas addresses the audience at the Dome during a concert for the 1976 London Safari. (John Sharp photo)

would cause the M.C. to interrupt his playing with the words: "Ladies and gentlemen, I have to inform you that the air-raid siren has sounded." On one such occasion, the M.C. came to the microphone with a note of real anxiety in his voice as he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, I have to advise you that the *local* alert has now sounded. Those of you who wish to may go to the underground shelters beneath the Dome. In the meantime, Douglas Reeve will continue to play."!

At the end of the war, the Dome reverted to its former function and became, once again, a magnificent concert and conference hall. In 1946, Douglas inaugurated the "Tuesday at the Dome" show centred on the organ. This unique weekly programme has since played to well over two million people, thereby earning the distinction of being mentioned in that great British tome, *The Guinness Book of Records*.

Douglas Reeve's instantly-recognisable style has since introduced hundreds of solo broadcasts from the Dome, and he has been heard frequently on the BBC Radio feature "The Organist Entertains," both as presenter and contributor.

In 1980, Douglas starred in a BBC TV programme called *The Entertainer*. He has broadcast on all three BBC theatre organs — his first-ever broadcast being in 1936 from St. George's Hall, as noted earlier. In later years, he played the second BBC theatre organ (the ex-Foort Möller) many times and, more recently, Douglas was heard for several years in the Sunday morning series of programmes from the third BBC theatre organ in the Playhouse, Manchester.

After many years as resident Borough Organist, Douglas also became Manager of the Dome, a position he held for 20 years. He was then promoted to the post of Assistant Director of the Brighton Corporation Entertainments and Publicity Department, a position he held for five years. He retired from management in 1979, but has continued to

play at the Dome, and has been able to play much more widely throughout the country.

Douglas met his future wife while in the Army during World War II. She was in the Women's Auxiliary Territorial Service and he was in the Royal Engineers. She, also, was from Brighton, but it was in Aldershot that they first became acquainted. Joyce and Douglas were married in 1944. They shared a love of music, and Joyce, who had a lovely singing voice, frequently appeared in concert with Douglas, becoming well known to audiences throughout the country. Joyce died in 1982.

The Reeves had a daughter, Sally-Ann who is now married to Andrew Hindell. They are both teachers and live in North London. They have a delightful little girl called Alison, who, of course, is the apple of her grandfather's eye.

Douglas has six solo recordings to his credit: "Pack Up Your Troubles," issued in 1966 on the occasion of his 25th anniversary as Borough Organist by Carwal (no longer avail-



Joyce and Douglas during a concert in the recreation hall of the Marston Green Maternity Hospital, c. 1980.

The stables and the riding house, Royal Pavilion, Brighton. A reproduction of an aquatint by John Nash.







Douglas' son-in-law, Andrew Hindell, daughter Sally-Ann, and granddaughter Alison.



Douglas believes in starting his granddaughter, Alison, on the piano at a very early age.

able); "Brighton Brassy," issued by Concert Recordings in the early 1970s (no longer available); "Pack Up Your Troubles," issued by RCA (no longer available); "A Perfect Combination" and "Say It With Music," issued by Grosvenor Records. Douglas accompanied his wife on the cassette "Douglas & Joyce," also issued by Grosvenor Records. His most recent recording is a cassette issued by Grosvenor in 1986 entitled "Douglas Reeve Invites You To Pack Up Your Troubles." All of the recordings were made at the Dome.

Although music has been Douglas' primary occupation throughout his life, it is also his hobby. He finds great relaxation in playing, and has a Wurlitzer electronic organ and a Bluthner grand piano in his music room.

His other interests are Rotary International, bowls and cooking. In 1985, he was president of the Rotary Club of Brighton, and whilst attending the R.I.B.I. Conference in Blackpool was able to give a Sunday concert at the Tower Ballroom, an organ he had not played since the war.

Douglas finds bowls a game which is very much to his taste. It requires considerable skill and concentration, and is a useful and not too energetic form of exercise.

Cooking has always interested him, and now that he has to cook for himself he finds it no hardship. He is particularly attracted to cooking with yeast and bakes all his own bread.

Another activity which occupies a good deal of time these days is speaking to various

groups on "My Life in the Prince Regent's Stables," a subject which, after 45 years, covers a wide range of experiences. In 1986, Douglas was unanimously elected president of The Cinema Organ Society, to succeed the late Hubert Selby, founding president.

Today, Douglas Reeve is a popular and welcome recitalist at Organ Societies up and down the country, and it is not surprising that

his name continues to be associated with all that is enjoyable in theatre organ music. He sets the supreme example to all the aspiring young organists that we are striving so hard to encourage and support. His unique style of playing, coupled with the exceptional qualities of his beloved Brighton Dome organ, can be aptly described as "The Perfect Combination." Long may he continue. □

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