

5. TOMMY WILLIAMS

In 1968, I was privileged to have a long chat with I.C.A. founder member, Mr. Tommy Williams of Battersea, who worked for many years as a tuner for Lachenal & Co., until their closure in 1936.

We talked at length about his early life, and about the craft and business of making concertinas, and I learned much about the part which the instrument played in peoples' lives in those days. Part One of this interview is published below, and will be included in future issues.

Neil Wayne: When did you see your first concertina?

Tommy : First one I had was an old 20 key Anglo; when I got older I paid off for an English make, a Lachenal, for 18/6d - real good one it was. Now we had a gramophone and a pile of Alexander Prince's records, and what puzzled me was that "I'm playing the wrong instrument - I can't get what he does, smooth playing, harmony." So I come across a bloke who told me what Prince played - it was a duet, and he said, "I've got one here I'll sell you", a 30 key, no, 46 key Lachenal, Brass reeds; so, I knocked a few tunes out of it, and later on (at that time I was only earning 15/- a week), I saved up enough money to go to Jeffries, in Praed Street, and get one of theirs. I thought to myself "I'll learn to play this properly, and go to someone who can play and who'll teach me." I went to Wheatstones and they sent me to a bloke called Rutterford; well, his father taught and his son played the duet. But somehow they gave me the wrong number and I couldn't find it. This man, this Ernest Rutterford never taught, he wouldn't teach anybody, said he hadn't got the patience.

Neil : This was a McCann system duet - did Jeffries make a McCann system?

Tommy : Oh yes, they could make 'em when the patent ran out, anybody could, because Lachenals let the patent run out. Well, I thought, I won't be done, I'll go to Lachenals, and there was a bloke putting up the shutters; he said "do you want to see our people?" I said, "What I'm after, I've got a McCann duet, and I wondered if you knew a teacher?" Well, he knew the right blokes - sent me to this bloke who played the English by ear - he was marvellous, he showed me all about harmony, and later I joined with him doing club turns, me on the Duet and him on the English. So, the 1914/18 war came along - 'course, we had to join up, I was about 21 then, so when I came home on holiday after 12 months, I thought I'd take a concertina back with me. I got hold of a Wheatstone 64 key duet and took that out with me, and I used to march in front, up to the line, playing marches - I played in all the camps, gave concerts. It was about that time Sidney Barnes wrote 'Destiny Waltz', and I made that popular out there, and years later, when Sidney Barnes died, they said, "He was best known for his 'Destiny Waltz', made popular in France by a soldier in the First World War." Well, I wrote to the Evening Standard, and claimed I was that soldier!

Neil : Were you born in Battersea?

Tommy : Yes, I lived in different parts, in fact it always used to puzzle me when I was young - we was always moving at night-time! My old man was in and out of work - he was a bricklayer's labourer - and we had a rough time, it was a struggle.

Neil : Did you see concertinas about much, before you had one?

Tommy : Yes, you saw good Anglos, Jeffries - some pawn shops specialized in 'em, wouldn't take any other things in pawn bar the Jeffries. Well, I picked an English, wondered what they was like - they was mostly four-fold, brass reed 48's - little did I know when I went to Lachenals that I'd be working for them as tuner and reed maker! Me and the bloke that was putting up the shutters became lifelong friends, so did the other man, George Leroy, who taught me a bit on the duet.

Before I met him, I went to a bloke who always advertised in the Exchange and Mart saying he wanted a tina - I went round to see him with my brass reed one, the 46 duet, and he said "My brother'll teach you", and he takes me round his brother's. He started me off, the way he started me, he'd play a tune, then he'd play so-and-so chord, and get me to play it, which I did do; he said "Next week, I'll teach you the tune." The following week, I played the tunes as well!

Neil : So that's how you learnt to play by ear so well?

Tommy : Yes, but the tuning helped a lot.

Neil : Who taught you to tune?

Tommy : Well, I'd played through a number of tutors, and this teacher said to me, "How'd you like to learn tuning?" I thought it would be handy to put my own instrument in order, and never had it in mind to take it up for a living. Anyway, he showed me how to fit reeds and reduce 'em, and he took a sample of my work up to Lachenals. They said, "We'll put him on 30 key Anglos and 48 key Englishes." Eventually, I became a regular there, taking the work home, the reed pans and also a test concertina - you had to have a test concertina so's they could put the tuned reeds straight into a new instrument.

5. THE TOMMY WILLIAMS INTERVIEW - PART 2

Continuing the interview with this Founder Member of the International Concertina Association, who worked as a tuner and reed-maker at Lachenals for many years and now has a small business buying, selling and repairing concertinas.

Neil : What did you do between leaving the army and starting at Lachenals?

Tommy : *Pay was so poor, I used to have to go busking of a weekend, playing outside of pubs. But all I wanted was the experience.*

Neil : Did you stop in London all the time?

Tommy : *Oh, I travelled about - I travelled with this here fellow who taught me. His wife, whenever I went there used to tell me, "he's out" - He wasn't out at all, of course, he was under her thumb! His brother 'd say, "lets go over and see Mr. So and So"; he had to ask his wife if he could go! I got no time for a man to be domineered by a woman: Oooh she was a cow!*

Talking about this here brass reeded instrument, I thought it'd sound alright with a set of steel reeds in it, so I went to Charlie Jeffries to get some of his steel, but he wouldn't part with it, kept it to themselves.

Neil : Was it fear of competition?

Tommy : *No, it wasn't that, there was plenty of room for all of 'em, the concertina was very popular, they was in demand.*

Neil : Were there any clubs or organisations then?

Tommy : *Well, they used to organise competitions, the audience was the judges, and usually the majority went for a favorite player, one usually wiped the floor with the rest. There was no adjudicator, as such. I never entered any, but I just used to go to the pub, and have a good tune-up!!*

Neil : What were prices like in the early days?

Tommy : *Well, for 18/-, second hand, you could get a real good instrument - not a professional model, but quite a good one. Them days, you could get 'em cheap, a Jeffries Anglo for 5 gns.*

Neil : A little more about work at Lachenals: Why was most tuning done at home?

Tommy : Well, it was piecework, you could wear your eyebrows out tuning a set of reeds. You didn't work in the factory, as they didn't have separate rooms, and you'd interfere with another man's tuning. About 50 worked in the factory, it was quite a big place and everybody had their part to do. No man made a concertina all throughout; the only man who makes 'em throughout is Harry Crabb, and the Chidleys when they was alive.

All the materials were British then; now they've got to have 'em imported 'cos they've got nobody to make reeds, that's the trouble. Harry Crabb makes his, he stamps the frames out. Not many of the workers were players, only Ballinger (one of the bosses) his two sons, my mate, and another one or two.

Neil : Were there any of the Lachenal family left when you were there?

Tommy : No, they'd all died out, I don't know when. Lachenal's wife sold the business to five workmen who'd pooled their resources. Harry Crabb's grandfather were one. When I come, it had dwindled down to two, named Ballinger and Sanders. The others had sold their interest, perhaps they'd passed out. But Sanders had the biggest share - he owned the property and bought the others out. This was at little James Street, just along the Grays Inn Road. They've pulled it all down now.

This Charlie Jeffries never knew a thing, never been taught anything - most extraordinary, as he turned out an instrument that no other maker could equal. He used the hardest steel there was, and the general construction of them was very solid.

Neil : Is it true that Harry Crabb's grandfather made them for Jeffries?

Tommy : That is correct, he done the woodwork, but later on, the first Charlie Jeffries became independent - he used to be a tinker. Then, of course, there was four sons - the last one did some time back, and the ones he turned out was shocking!!

Neil : What of the other workers at Lachenals when you started?

Tommy : They was all pretty old, perhaps been with the firm since it started, around 1829. Lachenals were the first makers, you can bet on that - Sir Charles Wheatstone, he commissioned Louis Lachenal to make them for him, under the name of Wheatstone. You often see some Lachenals, even though they've got Wheatstone's plate on, inside they've got the names of the notes on a paper circle, well, the name and address of Lachenals has been cut out! They are Lachenals, even though they've got Wheatstone labels. I've never seen a Wheatstone with Wheatstone's name on the paper inside.

Neil : I have some in my collection

Tommy : You can bet that its a Lachenal proper.

6. THE TOMMY WILLIAMS STORY - part 3

Concluding the interview with this founder member of the International Concertina Association, who worked as a tuner and reed-maker at Lachenals for many years and now has a small business buying, selling and repairing concertinas.

Neil: Who were the Chidleys?

Tommy: The Chidleys were nephews of Sir Charles Wheatstone, his name was Rock Chidley. They carried on up to the 1930's and 40's and the elder of the brothers died and left the youngest son. Well, he'd never made no will, and some of the family wanted the business sold. Booseys was after these premises in West Street, Charing Cross, the old Chidley place.

Neil: I have an old tina with the label "Chidley maker, late finisher to Wheatstone and Co." - Does this mean he used to work for Wheatstones?

Tommy: Well, Chidley sort of started the business - Sir Charles Wheatstone though he invented a lot of things, always had other people to carry 'em through, work 'em out. He wasn't really involved with the business premises at all, wasn't really involved, they just carried the name on. Chidley was the last owner of the business. His father never made no will, the business was shared and he lost all interest. He'd come there once a week, sort of supervising. Meanwhile, Lachenals was going strong, exports as well, a vast quantity. Other makers couldn't compete with the methods they used. A bloke'd slog his eyes out to make a set of reeds - it'd take him a day - a long day at that. With Lachenals, you'd help yourself to reed frames and tongues from boxes; they gave you two files, one for reducing and one for fine tuning. Wheatstones used to do 'em up in packages, and I don't suppose there was few over, just enough, so no mistakes!

The pay was 10/3d for doing an Anglo, a guinea for doing an English, and they paid 9d for a girl to make a bellows.

Neil: Did you meet Alexander Prince - the great Duet player?

Tommy: Quite a few times: he was very eccentric, and talked of nothing but the tina and music.

Neil: Did workers go from one maker to another?

Tommy: Not much, but when Lachenals closed, one of our finest tuners, name of Green, he went to Wheatstones, they wanted him bad. I started doing accordions, but I did a few tinas for Wheatstones and they said "Come along to us". I said "I'm busy with accordions", but I got fed up with 'em, though.

Some of Lachenals' staff went to Wheatstones, my mate that was putting the shutters up, though he'd had the opportunity of learning the trade fully, he went out and did odd jobs like what a boy could do, and saw to the despatching. He worked at Lachenals for 45 years, stamping out frames and cutting up steel for the notes, and his father before him.

We finally closed in 1936 - it was the depression, very often they'd have no money to pay out for the workmen. They'd go and say "Where's the money?", and the boss got so fed up he decided to close the works down.

Neil: Was demand dropping off then?

Tommy: No, we could have ticked over with repairs done, far from making. We had the whole world, Wheatstone couldn't compete with us - Lachenals' methods of making were much quicker, more or less mass production. All the uprights where the levers go was pushed in all in one go. Other makers, they put 'em in one by one, with a hammer, but ours was pushed in with one go. The brass reeded instruments, they was all stamped out, tongues and all, all that had to be done to 'em just tuned. They was all fitted, some as accordion making - the frame was stamped out, reed was stamped out, all to within a fraction of an inch, all the parts shaped out by a planing machine. Later on Wheatstone had that. When I made sets of reeds, they'd give you the pen boards with a set of empty frames already in, knocked out on a fly press.

Neil: How many sizes of reeds in, say, an English?

Tommy: Well, there's not much difference between the two halves; they used to number the reeds, for us to go by, biggest note 22, smallest note, No. 1.

The paper circle on the pen boards was just to guide you. When Chidley made 'em, he just stamped, branded his name on 'em. The little numbers like L13, R15 stamped on the ends were to guide the tuners.

Neil: Did nay other makers try to make all the reeds in one piece?

Tommy: No, we were the only people who done it, and only on the cheap brass reed ones. Most of the cheap ones turned out for about 50 bob were brass reed. Brass reeds were still being made to turn out a cheap instrument, mostly they was exported.

When the firm finally closed, Ballinger turned over all the Salvation Army orders to Harry Crabb, whose father was dead then, rather than let Wheatstones have it. Well, the machinery and all that was put up for sale, along came Wheatstones and bought the bloomin' lot up, and scrapped most of it. Nobody else could get it - well, I didn't have the money, it was offered to Harry Crabb and he didn't have the money. It all went for as little as a hundred quid, including the gas oil that drove the machinery. They took barrow loads of unfinished work, they'd come into it alright.

Neil: Do you wish you'd have had the chance to get hold of it?

Tommy: Yes, I could've done with it. Me and my mate and one of the pan-board makers we had a lot of repairs that'd never been called for - partly finished Edeophones, we had 'em. I ought've been inside
Of the bosses, Ballinger died in the infirmary, his two sons, they went into the motor car business. Sanders didn't have no sons in the business.