

T.C. LEWIS

a short biography
by John Maidment

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Thomas Christopher Lewis was among the leading organbuilders in late 19th century Britain and achieved wide fame for the tonal and constructional excellence of his instruments. According to Christopher Gray, in an article in BIOS Journal volume 22, 1998, he was born in London in 1833, the son of Thomas Archdeacon Lewis, a secretary to Charles Blomfield, Bishop of London. .

Lewis's initial training was as an architect, rather than an organbuilder, and he remained on friendly terms with many of the leading architects of the time, particularly J.F. Bentley, designer of Westminster Cathedral and of numerous organ cases for Lewis's instruments.

Lewis is thought to have begun organbuilding about 1861 [1] from his architect's office in Westminster, with a workshop in a disused church in Clapham, although the first known advertisement for his work dates from 1863. [2] For some years Lewis had made a special study of the work of the organbuilding firm of J.F. Schulze which had sent a small but tonally astounding instrument from its factory in Paulinzelle, Germany, for display at the 1851 London Exhibition. He was additionally on close terms with Edmund Schulze who erected the firm's English instruments. In 1868 Lewis established a factory at Brixton, in South London, gathering together a large team of skilled workers. The total number of organs built by the firm before 1900 is thought to be more than 600 .

Lewis was strongly inspired by the organs built in Germany by Edmund Schulze and in France by Aristide Cavallé-Coll. His instruments represent a synthesis of these two important influences, From Schulze was derived a predilection towards copiously winded flue choruses of great brilliance and power and the use of Germanic registers such as the Geigen Principal, Flauto Traverso, Lieblich Gedact and Rohr Flöte. From Cavallé-Coll came the use of harmonic flutes, strings and chorus reeds of arresting quality. Lewis's descriptions of the stops he employed are of great interest: "Open Diapason - full, mellow, brilliant and powerful intonation. This stop is exceedingly grand... Geigen Principal - a German stop - bright and telling quality... Lieblich Gedact - peculiar to Schulze, of Paulinzelle, Germany. . . Salicional - reedy and quiet ... Vox Angelica - the tone is extremely thin and delicate, being the softest of all open pipes ... Viole de Gambe and Flûte Harmonique - both French stops ."

His instruments were costly and lavishly built from first class materials, including spotted metal of thick gauge for reeds and flues down to 16ft length and mahogany for windchests. Wooden boots and shallots were used for reeds more than 8ft in length while metal was adopted exclusively for manual pipework less than two feet in length. They were invariably laid out on spacious lines with large slider soundboards, wide passage boards and generous winding.

The Lewis firm secured a number of important commissions, including the cathedrals of Ripon, Newcastle (Anglican and Roman Catholic), Southwark and Westminster, St Andrew's Hall, Glasgow, and many of the major churches in London such as Christ Church, Westminster Bridge Road, St Peter's, Eaton Square, Holy Trinity, Paddington and St John's, Upper Norwood. [5] The firm did not export many instruments and only five organs were sent to Australia by Lewis, the others being for St John's Pro-Cathedral, Brisbane, St George's Presbyterian Church, St Kilda, the Wesleyan Church, Tyrrell Street, Newcastle, and the Congregational Church, Petersham. [6]

Very few of Lewis's larger instruments survive intact and have not escaped the desire of later generations to alter, enlarge or 'improve' them, his continental palette of sound proving unacceptable to the generation of the inter-war period. His use of chorus reeds of free, blending quality on low wind pressure was derided by writers such as George Dixon. [7] Many organs, too, were destroyed during the second world war, especially in the suburbs of London. The St Paul's Cathedral organ is believed to be the largest Lewis instrument which has not sustained major alterations. All of the original pipework, windchests and tonal scheme survive.

Lewis was also known as a writer on organbuilding and bell-founding. His book *Lewis's Organ Building and Bell Founding* with its details of progressive specifications for organs from small to large was emulated by Cavailld-Coll in his similar work *Orgues de Tous Modeles* (1889). His work was highly influential upon several notable 20th century organ designers including G. Donald Harrison (creator of the American 'classic' organ) and Ralph Downes, both of whom acknowledged their indebtedness to Lewis. [8]

Lewis retired from his firm in 1905 and was later involved with Norman & Beard as joint manager of their London factory together with H. Davies from Willis & Sons. [9] Lewis died on 7 January 1915 at Clapham, London.

Lewis's firm continued building organs on its own account until 1919, when it amalgamated with Henry Willis & Sons under the style of Willis & Lewis, although the Lewis name was shortly afterwards dropped. The Willis firm moved its operations to the Lewis factory at Brixton which was later destroyed by enemy action in 1941. [10]

[1] Graeme Rushworth. *Historic Organs of New South Wales*. Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 19m, p.304-5; *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians*. London: Macmillan, 1980, v.10, p.708.

[2] Nicholas Thistlethwaite. *The Making of the Victorian Organ*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p.305.

[3] Based upon his order book numbers; the books are in the custody of Henry Willis & Sons Ltd, Petersfield, UK.

[4] *Lewis's Organ Building and Bell Founding*. 8th ed. Brixton: T. C. Lewis & Co., 1 W3.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] Rushworth, *op.cit.*, p.304-5.

[7] Cecil Clutton & George Dixon. *The Organ : its Tonal Structure and Registration*. London: Grenville, 1950, pp.83-4.

[8] Ralph Downes. *Baroque Tricks*. Oxford: Positif Press, 1983, pp.11-12, 33, 176; Jonathan Ambrosino, 'A History of the Aeolian-Skinner Company:

The Harrison Years', *The American Organist*, vol.24, no.5 (May 1990), p.269ff.

[9] Norman & Beard pamphlet (The Organ Club library, London).

[10] W.L. Sumner. *Father Henry Willis*. London: Musical Opinion, 1955, p.58.

See also: Christopher Gray, " 'The Highest Style of Art' an introduction to the life and legacy of T.C. Lewis (1833-1915)", *BIOS Journal*. vol.22, 1998, pp. 6-26