

## 8. Henry Walker of Tunstall 1874-1957

*by Neil Wayne*

Ever since its invention, the Concertina has always been an instrument which has inspired great enthusiasm, dedication, and occasionally fanaticism, in its followers. From the lifelong efforts of Richard Blagrove, Giulio Regondi, George Case and the many other Victorian virtuosos, to the careers of Percy Honri and Alexander Prince, one is amazed at the dedication such men showed to their beloved concertinas. However, the huge popularity that the concertina enjoyed just a couple of generations ago was due not only to the work of giants like these, but also to the hundreds of thousands of ordinary folk all over Britain, whose enthusiasm made the concertina, for a time, the most popular instrument in the country. This is the story of one such man. Henry Walker was born in Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent, in 1874, and spent all his life in that town. Music was soon part of his world for he was given piano lessons as a youth, and was soon regarded as a good pianist. Not until Mr. W. Taylor, a well-known professional English concertina soloist, came to live in the next street did Henry Walker first become aware of the concertina. After hearing Mr. Taylor performing in the local pubs, he received his first concertina, a present from his mother, and from around 1896 Henry had regular lessons from Mr. Taylor. By 1900 concertina playing had become an important part of his social life and Plate 1 shows Mr. David Stanway (Treble 48), Henry Walker (Treble 48) and Mr. James Atkins (Bass), who often played together as a trio. On an outing to Blackpool around this time, the trio of friends set out determined to busk on the beach, but were too shy to play when it came to it!

The years before and after the Great War were the heyday of the great concertina bands, concertina contests, and the famous professional soloists. Although the stronghold of the bands was further north, in and around Manchester and Leeds, the famous prize bands: Heckmondwike, Ashton-under-Lyne, Oldham, Manchester, Mexborough, Bolton, Heywood, Atherton, Bury, all toured extensively, and Henry Walker often recalled

the visits of Ashton-under-Lyne Band to Trentham Gardens in Stoke.

The great Alexander Prince, then relatively unknown, lived for a time near Hanley, and played the duet most Saturday nights in Hanley Market place. Mr. Walker often met Prince at the house of Tom French, another Tunstall player, and sure enough, the playing of this great duet virtuoso soon influenced Henry to take up the duet, which rapidly became his favourite system.

While no known concertina bands flourished in and around the Five Towns, there were many informal groups of players, usually including Henry Walker and his friends, men like David Stanway, James Atkins, William Stanway, Tom French — all of Tunstall, Chris Sproston of Burslem, Mr. Prime of Newcastle-under-Lyme and Mr. Clarke (Plate 2) who introduced Henry to the International Concertina Association in later years. Monro Clarke of Leek was an important figure in the Staffordshire concertina world and a dealer, repairer and concertina music seller.



His octagonal stamp appears in all of Henry Walker's concertinas and in many of the good quality concertinas still to be seen in the

Stoke and Leek area. There is evidence that he supplied bands as far away as Mexborough and Oldham, and had close contacts with Wheatstone's and Lachenal and Co. I received a letter, shortly before Monro Clarke's death in 1968, which indicated his long contact with concertinas, as follows: "If you are interested in concertinas, I can supply perhaps more than you want, as I have been a collector for over 50 years: English 48 to 60 keys, Duets 46 to 81, metal or ebony ends, amboyna ends, gold plated ones, miniatures, trick concertinas, and lots of music..."



PLATE 1

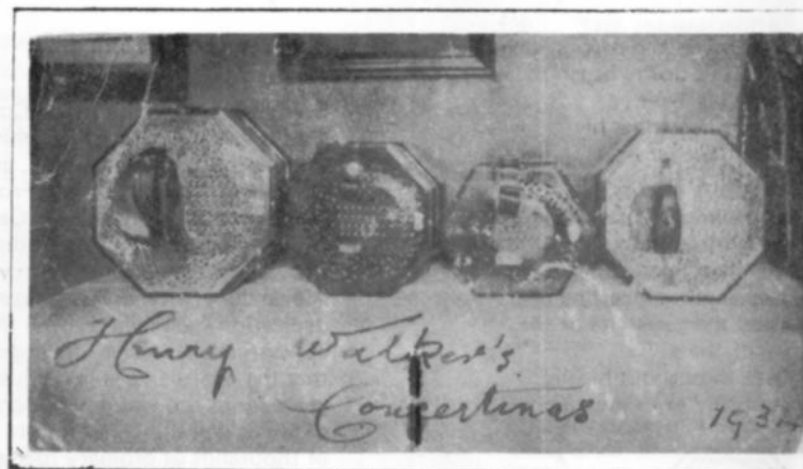


PLATE 3



PLATE 2



PLATE 4

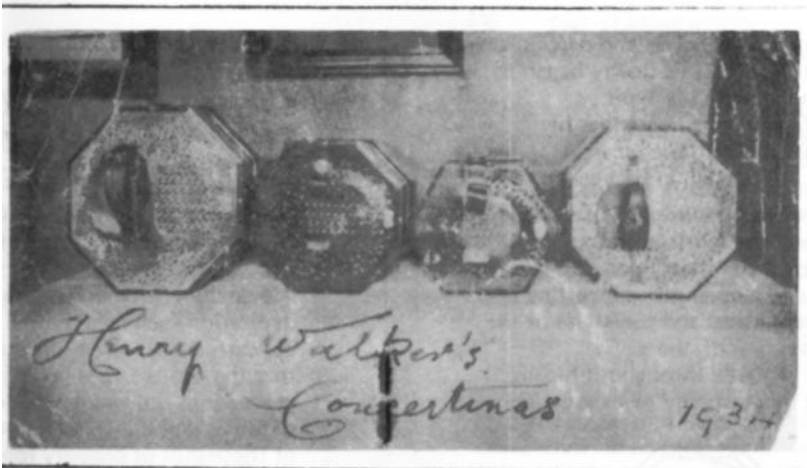


PLATE 3

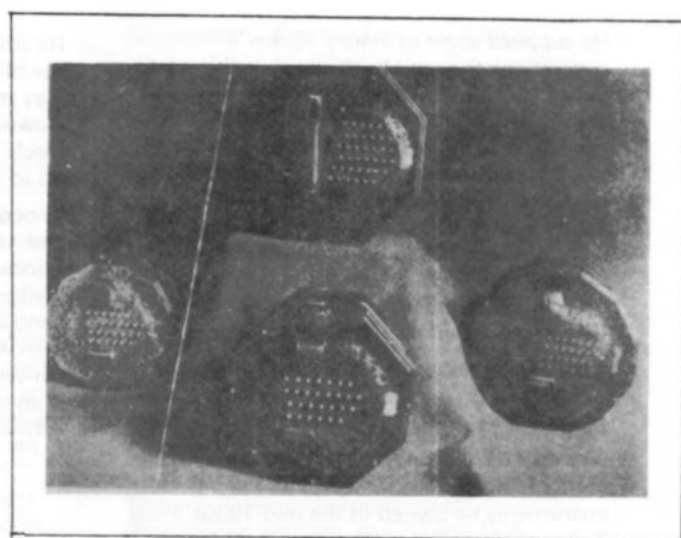


PLATE 5



PLATE 4



PLATE 6

He supplied some of Henry Walker's concertinas though Mr. Walker bought most direct from Wheatstone's to special order. Two of those which survive are of considerable interest. The first being a 59 key single action Aeola with the compass and tonal quality of a bassoon! A beautiful ebony-ended instrument, rarely used. The second is a 64 keyed Baritone Aeola, with raised ebony ends, which is unusual in having one pair of sides longer than the rest, giving the octagonal shape a "stretched" appearance.

Henry Walker seemed to have been most proud of his concertinas and two surviving photographs show a selection of the instruments he owned in the mid-1930s. Plate 3 shows, clockwise, a Wheatstone 72 key Aeola McCann duet, a Lachenal 56 key Edeophone, English with glass buttons, a Wheatstone 56 key English Aeola, and a metal-ended Lachenal Edeophone English, while Plate 4, dated by Henry as 1934, shows from left to right, a Wheatstone 81 keyed Aeola McCann duet, a Wheatstone 64 keyed English Baritone treble Aeola, a Lachenal 48 key "new model" Tenor English, and a Wheatstone 72 keyed Aeola with McCann duet fingering — every one a top class instrument, the like of which will not be made again.

That he was proud of his instruments is evident too, from Plates 5 and 6, which show him in 1919, at 45 years of age, and in 1930 when he was 56, a man of striking appearance and a strong preference for the McCann Duet! His repertoire was a varied one, largely typical of the concertina players of the first 30 years of this century — Marches, selections from the operas, overtures and sacred music, and items from the repertoire of Prince, Honri and the great concertina bands.

He taught his nephew Bert Walker to play in the early 30s, Bert taking the Treble 48 parts, while Henry accompanied on the Baritone English, but he always maintained that the McCann Duet system was the best — "It has everything".

He still played at local concerts and parties for the blind during the 30's, but slowly began to play mainly at home with his nephew. However Bert Walker remembers that his Uncle's passionate interest in concertina lasted up to his death, in Tunstall, at 83 years of age.

Though he was never famous, never recorded, and never achieved the musicianship of a Prince or a Honri, the story of men like Henry Walker shows us how much the concertina did contribute to the musical and social life of the men who were our grandfathers. The concertina, that he loved throughout his life, is an instrument most worthy of its growing revival.



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