

# Odd Enough or Down in Ringmer Someone Stirred

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On the first day of June this year a small cactus flowered in Shaftesbury Avenue: not the famed thespian avenue in London's West End but another, somewhere in Middlesex, to which I have retired more or less. My wife Ilse had bought the cactus in a Northamptonshire village nearly sixteen years ago but flower it would not. The point of drawing your attention to the curious incident of the cactus in the day-time becomes clear when I tell you that it was a Carl Ebert cactus. In a technical journal like CUE, Ebert is the great name to remember in Glyndebourne's Golden Jubilee season. To the musician the name would be Fritz Busch. It is these two who set the course for artistic excellence of production; but someone had to be odd enough to build an odd opera house in such an odd location in the first place.

The name Christie popped-up, literally for it was on a lift, in my school days. The local Bernstein house was the Empire Willesden – the name Granada came later. Sitting in the front row of the circle it was possible to see Francis Soames playing

away for the silent second features without a single sheet of music on the desk. There can be no doubt that my one-man console control idea was born there. My interest in the cinema organ grew and soon I was reading everything about them I could find. The odd thing about the Christies was that whereas Comptons were built by Compton and Wurlitzers by Wurlitzer, they were built by Hill, Norman & Beard. Although my first real job was under Basil Davis in the cinema building world, I still did not become aware that the chairman and source of energy behind that firm from 1923 was a certain John Christie, ex-schoolmaster at Eton. Further that as my interest in organ consoles grew his was on the wane.

The man Christie arrived in the Strand Electric fittings showroom as I was sitting there – a lone soul in the slack summertime of 1932. As I recall, he did not make himself known: I was young and a nobody whereas he obviously wasn't. He said he was building an opera house and the object of his visits, there were to be several, seemed to be to tell me how unsuitable our Strand equipment was for it. Even the well-known

optical wave effect, which used to make our customers goggle, was no good as the waves merely surged and would not roll up the beach. When the new shining chromium-plated Grand Master at last completed the installation in our Seecol demonstration theatre he was equally scornful as I stood with my back to the thing. The only people who had the right kind of control and all other equipment were the Germans and enthusiastic descriptions of Teutonic wonders would follow. All this was hard to take as I had fallen for the German type of lighting layout while still at school; but when it came to control even they had got it wrong. I knew very well, by then, that there was only one man who had the right idea when it came to that – and that was myself!

By that time I was aware that my eccentric visitor's name was Christie but although I had my Light Console layout and circuits on the drawing board, I thought it tactless to mention it as I wanted Comptons to make it. The reason had to do with mechanics. I had learned from a book\* on the Cinema Organ published that year that only they and the Austin company in United States had all-electric action, the others used electro-pneumatics. This meant wind at the console to move the stopkeys (circuit-selectors) for piston (group-preset) and cancel action. Also the stopkeys were better, as they had a second touch and larger tabs for clearer labelling – all important in those distant days before circuits were identified by numbers. The truth was that on the technical and manufacturing side Compton were way ahead of Christie and Wurlitzer. One has only to look at their very early installation of a bakelite moulding machine in their own factory, the cross-bar relay and the setter relay for instant group-memory.

Subsequent reading about John Christie has shown me two things. First, that during the tenure of his office as managing director of Hill, Norman & Beard he went all out to improve the technical side of their organs. And second, that at the time he used to lecture me in the Seecol theatre; instead of one crackpot, myself, there were two crackpots there! Both of us were equally ignorant of the practical problems of staging Wagner with whose works we were quite besotted. John Christie was at that time around fifty, Fred Bentham was twenty-one. Christie had position and authority plus wealth, travelled



Organ console for Regal Marble Arch, 1928

\* The Cinema and Theatre Organ by Reginald Whitworth: Musical Opinion 1932.