

Musical Life in Edwardian Potton

Presentation to the Potton History Society, 28th October 2021 (with subsequent edits and references added, 7th April 2022)

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I'm going to be reading my talk this evening. I don't usually do this, and normally speak somewhat off the cuff when I present. However, the stories I'm going to tell have quite a few twists and turns and there are lots of dates and names, and I owe it to everyone here who knows far more about Potton's history than me to get these details right.

I want to start by thanking Potton History Society for inviting me to speak to you this evening, and for all their help with the research project I'm going to be talking about. Some time before the pandemic, I had a wonderful morning going through the archives here to discover a wealth of documents and artefacts linked to the people and families I'm going to discuss.

I work at the UCL Institute of Education, where I contribute to secondary school music teacher education courses, a Master's programme in music education and supervise doctoral research in related areas. I've always had an interest in the history of my subject and this was a major focus of my own PhD studies some years ago. I try to encourage all my students to explore historical perspectives in their work and adapt a similar approach in my own research. I firmly believe that one can't really understand where one is going as a practitioner unless one understands from where one's practice came.

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For this reason, I keep an eye out for historical objects relating to music and education. They can help bring alive links to the past far better than any text book. You can therefore imagine my excitement when I found this music examination certificate, by chance, in a charity shop in Bedford in October 2017. It records an intermediate violin exam which took place – in Bedford - on 2nd December 1909 - so close to 112 years ago.

With the certificate safely tucked under my arm, the urge to undertake some casual smartphone googling on the bus home proved irresistible. The certificate included not only the handwritten name of the examination candidate, but also her teacher and two examiners. What was known of these four individuals whose paths had crossed for this brief moment in the winter of 1909? Thus began a slow but deeply rewarding process of attempting to come to 'know' each of them and their families by piecing together fragmented accounts of their lives and music-making, as recorded in a very diverse range of sources. At that early point, I

didn't have a clue of the extent of the stories I would uncover and the people it would lead me to communicate with.

I also want to say before we get started that this is still an evolving story and new information comes to light regularly. I've also been hoping to contact family members of those involved and if you have any leads on this I'd love to speak to you. I have full ethical clearance from my university to talk to them.

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Maybe some of us here took instrumental exams at some point in our lives – or perhaps our children have. Perhaps we remember how we felt when we got the notification of the exam date in the post.

As Clara Taylor, the late chief examiner of the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music once put it: 'Candidates, teachers and parents will all feel the impact of those words in their own ways and it would be a rare being who did not experience a quiver of anticipation' (1998: 8)

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Research tells us that candidates often do experience heightened anxiety as exams approach, followed by sense of release afterwards.

Teachers and examiners also report feelings of responsibility. They recognise exams as key milestones for learners. Historian of the Associated Board, David Wright describes each examination as a 'fascinating nexus of the professional, social, economic and institutional spheres' (2013: 7). Whilst another scholar Valarie Ross (2009) describes the music examination as a 'symbolic act', the conduct and outcomes of which are signified by social and cultural expectations.

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Music examinations require the *right* action at the *right* moment by all those involved. Such a characterisation is consistent with the Classical concept of *Kairos*. Cultural historian Helj Jordhime describes this concept thus:

As opposed to the slow, long-term temporality of *chronos* [that's the gradual movement of chronological time we experience every day] *kairos* refers to a particular and exceptional moment, a rupture or a turning point, either in the sense of the right or the favourable moment, to speak or to act, or with reference to a

particularly decisive, fateful or dangerous situation... it describes a moment in time when different circumstances coincide or converge (Johdheim, 2007: 127).

In Greek mythology Kairos was the name of the youngest child of Zeus, typically depicted as having a single lock of hair at the front of his head. You have to grab him by this lock as he comes towards you. You can't catch him once he's gone by.

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So here I'm taking the position that a musical exam represents a Kairos. It is a moment pregnant with social and cultural meaning. And I believe that this definitely applies to the brief moment of the exam represented by this old certificate. I've used this exam certificate as a stimulus to explore the music-making, music learning and social functions of music of the era. Amongst other things, it's helped me understand the social functions of instrumental examinations, music in the life of Edwardian towns; the rise of the private instrumental music teacher in the Edwardian era; and the status and work of female professional music teachers and performers.

I believe local history offers us a unique resource for exploring these kinds of interpretations because they get us away from the 'great man', top-down view of the past which so often leaves out stories of marginalised groups and forgotten individuals. Because I know you will obviously be particularly interested in the links with Potton, I'm going to focus on these tonight – but there are so many other threads of the story too. Sadly, then, there's no time to tell the stories of either of the examiners who are named on the certificate but who also had incredibly interesting musical lives as well.

By the way, you might not be familiar with Victoria College of Music, but it had begun operating as an examination board in 1890 (VCM, n.d.) – the same year as the first exams were taken with the more well-known Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (Wright, 2013). Despite a somewhat controversial beginning which we have no time to go into, and – some have argued – some rather over-zealous competitive tactics by larger exam boards over the decades, it is still in operation today.

Louise Robarts, the Robarts Family and musical life in Potton

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Let's start with the exam candidate, Louise Marie Robarts. She lived here in Potton and was born in early 1885 (GRO, 1885) into the Robarts family - a reasonably comfortable family of coal merchants, auctioneers and estate agents (PHS, 1985).

I took the left hand illustration from PHS Newsletter No 5 - and the name Stapley will also be prominent later. I also recently found this delightful little blotter pad with the Robarts company Logo on Ebay. I think it dates from slightly later – 1936 if the number on the bottom left-hand corner is to be believed.

Now, I'm not going to talk in much general detail about either the Robarts or the Stapleys. I know that they were both prominent Potton families thanks to their respective businesses. I am also aware that they have been discussed in various back issues of the PHS newsletter. So I know that those present will know far more about them than me already. I'm instead going to focus on their musical activities, which were no less prominent than their businesses and other activities in their day.

Sadly, it seems that Louise's mother Louisa died aged only 32, less than a year after Louise's birth (Parry, 2000). This left father Walter to raise Louise, her brother Henry and sister Ethel with support from a housekeeper and general domestic servant (PHS, 2009).

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In common with many middle class families of the time, music played a central role in family life and gave the Robarts a prominent social position. Louise's parents had performed together before her mother's untimely death and **[Slide 10]** her father had served as the honorary secretary of Potton Choral Society. **[Slide 11]** During Louise's childhood he was leader of Potton's orchestra. According to PHS newsletter 6, Louise's grandfather James had also been a local musician and composer (PHS, 1985). **[Slide 12]** James was also very much involved with liberal politics and this continued into Louise's generation– there are newspaper accounts of her family's provision of live music at liberal social events right up until 1912. Louise, her brother and sister all followed their father to become violinists, so the Miss Robarts here could be either Louise or sister Ethel. Here's that name Stapley again and we'll come back to this again shortly.

The Wishing Cap

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The Robarts siblings performed together as part of the band accompanying a local production of William Smyth Cooper's operetta *The Wishing Cap* at Christmas 1908 and again at Easter 1909, staged to raise funds for the Parish Nurse Fund (Yates, 1985).

The leading light in this production seems to have been Frederick Baines and we are lucky to still have the original piano-vocal score that he used for these very performances in the PHS archive. We also have a lovely scrapbook of the time.

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In particular, high-quality photographs of the operetta's cast and band survive, offering striking portraits of Louise, Henry and Ethel as they were just months before Louise's exam.

[Slide 15] You might have seen these in the Pictures of Potton Vol 2 book (Yates, 1985), where the production is mistakenly referred to as the Wishing CAT. According to this source, the pictures were taken in "Fennemore's Yard, now PO" which I assume is – or was – the Post Office? Clockwise from top left you can see Henry Robarts, A. Elphick, S. Kitchener, S. Fennemore. Louise Robarts, Ethel Robarts, and G. Bartle.

I came across these pictures in the copy of the book in Bedford Library soon after finding the certificate. I had hoped to find general some snippets of information about musical life in Potton at the time, but was absolutely gobsmacked to find a picture of Louise herself, just a few months before she took this exam. I knew at that moment that I had a good story on my hands.

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Getting back to The Wishing Cap, I can find very little on the composer William Smyth Cooper, except that at the time he was a popular composer of a genre of light-weight musical theatre known as fairy operetta. This genre was very popular throughout the late Victorian and Edwardian periods. One of the earlier works in this genre, and also one of the most prominent, is Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe* and some scholars trace the typical formulae of mortals interacting with supernatural creatures such as fairies and witches right through to the *Wizard of Oz* (Higgins, 2015).

In this case, the story is something like this, and of course it is important to acknowledge that the somewhat stereotypical racial depiction of Roma people as child snatchers is not something to which we would subscribe today

I'll let you read through the synopsis for a moment.

Smyth Cooper appears to have been a school master in South London, who composed these fairy operettas specially for school prize days and the like (Norwood News, 1919a; 1919b). He would then go on to publish them and they were very widely performed, by all accounts – particularly popular with amateur and children's groups, such as schools, religious groups and youth clubs. I've found references to these performances into the 1930s and the odd one or two in the 1940s, but after that, the *Wishing Cap*, and indeed all of Smyth Cooper's other works appear to recede into musical obscurity. I don't think a recording of this work, or perhaps any of his works, exist, so I have mocked up an extract of the overture on the computer to give you a flavour. I think in fact the music is pretty good and deserves a re-

appraisal – there are certainly shades of Arthur Sullivan here. I have tried to match the instrumentation in this version to the picture of the band, so three violins, cornet, snare drum and piano – it gives us a sense of what would have been heard nearby where we are currently sitting just over one hundred and ten years ago. Quite possibly this is the first time it's been heard in Potton since!

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***** WISHING CAP EXAMPLE *** (41 seconds)**

The Music Exam

Louise would have celebrated her 25th birthday in 1909 and, like Henry and Ethel, was as yet unmarried and living in the family home. By this time, Henry had joined his father's business as an auctioneer and Louise and Ethel were undertaking the housekeeping duties formerly the responsibility of servants (PRS, 2011). As you will know far better than me, life in Potton had been transformed over the previous fifty years by the coming of the railways (Yates, 1945). Just over twelve miles away by direct rail connection, the county town of Bedford was now an important centre of business. And with Pottonians' outlook shifting west to Bedford, it is perhaps unsurprising that local families with the necessary means began to avail themselves of the services of the county town's burgeoning music teaching workforce.

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Louise's violin teacher was Ethel Diemer, wrongly named Edith on the certificate. I don't have a picture of Ethel, but there are several of her father Philip – a prominent musician and music teacher in Victorian Bedford (Benson, 2015). By the time of the exam Ethel was aged 39 and would have been teaching violin for around 15 years (Gibbs, 2017; Musical Herald, 1896). Her father had studied alongside Arthur Sullivan at the Royal Academy of Music in the late 1850s. Upon his return to Bedford, he co-founded the Bedford Musical Society. Ethel and her sister Norah were also involved in their performances. Philip also established a popular private teaching practice in his home in the recently developed and decidedly up-market De Parys Avenue. By the 1890s his music school was attracting 200 pupils a week (Musical Herald, 1896). Mr Diemer had to add another floor to his house to accommodate this growth and also built a dedicated music room, complete with sound insulating walls and a separate entrance (Musical Herald, 1896; Bedfordshire Times and Standard, 1944).

Philip Diemer died in 1910, just a few months after this exam in fact. Ethel, her three sisters and their mother - musicians all - decided to continue their school.

The rapid growth experienced by the Diemers was indicative of general trends in private music tuition in Bedford and nationally. Bedford boasted the seventh highest music teacher-to-population ratio in the country by this time. Of particular note was the number of young, unmarried women making a living as music teachers. As popular music historian Dave Russell notes, music teaching was 'a socially acceptable route to some degree of financial independence...., largely resistant to concerns about women's advancement beyond their 'correct' domestic sphere' (Russell, 2016, p.150).

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So let's turn our attention to Exam Day – Thursday 2nd December 1909. That week of December was unusually cold and stormy, with the day of the exam itself, marked by some of the strongest winds, overcast skies and torrential rain seen in Bedford that year. It is possible that Louise had stayed in town the night before; the Diemers had been known to host pupils for periods some years earlier (Musical Herald, 1896). However, if she travelled directly from Potton that morning by train, she would have taken the 30-minute journey, arriving at around ten to nine at the earliest (Bradshaw, 1968).

I haven't yet been able to establish exactly where the exam was held. Victoria College documentation of the era refers only to an examination centre in 'Bedford', with the most likely locations being a rented hall, school or a teacher's own studio (VCM, 2019). A number of factors point to the latter. Firstly, as we've heard, Philip Diemer had a very well-appointed teaching and performance room at home. If this was indeed the location of the exam, then Mr Diemer's probate records (Bedford and Luton Records Service BMB4/1/14/56) give an excellent sense of the surroundings. The music room held, amongst other instruments and equipment, a Broadwood grand piano, a smaller 'cottage' piano, and a harmonium. In terms of décor, the room reflected a transition from late Victorian to Edwardian fashions. Lace curtains harked back to previous decades, whereas a carpet square and linoleum surround reflected the more recent Edwardian preoccupation with hygiene (Hockman, 1994). The room was finished with a Capodimonte vase, bronze figurine, candlestick pair and other small ornaments, lace curtains, framed photoengravings and pictures.

Happily, though, we do know a great deal about what would have been expected of Louise during the exam itself, thanks to an extant syllabus held in the Victoria College Archives. The College was kind enough to share the 1909 syllabus with me. As well as scales, arpeggios and sight-reading exercises – things we can still recognise from instrumental music exams today – Louise would have had to play two short pieces, taken from lists A and B.

This repertoire offers a fascinating insight into the musical fashions and educational objectives of the time. As is still common today, the syllabus featured a range of well-known

composers from the Western Classical Canon but also some then-newly-composed works which are perhaps less familiar today. In fact, one of these was by a composer whose life and work have become very important to scholars of compensatory music history in the last few years. Samuel Coleridge-Taylor is now recognised as a very prolific composer of British-African heritage. They are extremely proud of him in Croydon, where he grew up.

Unfortunately we don't know which particular pieces were played by Louise, or whether her programme was her choice or the choice of her teacher. Nonetheless, here's a flavour of three pieces taken from these lists – including the Coleridge-Taylor - which I was able to find in the sheet music collections of the British Library. No recordings exist so again I've mocked up these versions on computer.

*** REPERTOIRE EXAMPLES *** (2:02)

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We know that Louise received this certificate at the Diemers' annual prize-giving and concert at Bedford's Corn Exchange. This coincidentally took place just four days after the exam. The concert was documented in the local newspaper, reminding us of the importance of these kinds of public events as an advertising mechanism for music teachers. As David Wright (2013) notes, this was a fierce free-trade economy and those teachers whose pupils received the highest honours could command the highest fees. It was customary to submit a full list of recent exam results to the press, and you can see Louise's name here.

We learn that Bedford's municipal Corn Exchange was 'filled to the point of overflow with parents and friends' for the prize giving concert. Louise is not recorded as having performed a solo during the concert but may well have formed part of the orchestra which opened the event with a rendition of Beethoven's *Prometheus* overture amongst other items.

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Whatever her involvement, Louise's presence at the Corn Exchange—not to mention her success in the exam itself—was clearly a source of considerable family pride and the Robarts family were also keen to celebrate Louise's achievement. They took out their own newspaper announcement the following Friday.

These announcements were very common at the time – and were typically laden with implicit meaning for a middle class readership, including advertising a daughter's marriageability (Jibril, 2017).

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We don't know whether Louise was in the market for a husband – but it is the case that she was soon married. Almost two years to the day after the exam, she married Walter Stapley (GRO, 1911). As will have already been evident, Walter was from another of Potton's musical families, and combined work in his family's drapery store with roles as entertainer, singer, pianist, bandleader and promoter.

For a period, he ran a concert repertory company and, by the time he joined the Royal Flying Corps, the precursor to the RAF, in the latter half of World War 1, he had also added cinema proprietorship to this portfolio of entertainment activities (see National Archives AIR 79).

How long the couple had courted is not yet known, but – as we've seen - members of the two families had come together for local performances regularly over the previous twenty years so they would certainly have known each other for some time and quite possibly performed together.

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Louise wasn't done with musical examinations. Potton History Society hold calling cards for both her and her husband. Louise's suggests she later achieved her AVCM or 'associateship' of Victoria College, and that she was pursuing engagements as a violinist. This said, the extent to which Louise joined Walter in his professional music-making and entertainment activities is not clear. However, she appears to have continued her tuition with the Bedford School of Music and performed a violin solo (interestingly in her maiden name) as part of the school's annual concert in June 1912 (Bedfordshire Times and Independent, 1912). The first of the couple's four children arrived in June 1913 (GRO, 1913) and it is noticeable that her name becomes scarcer in reports of local music making after this point. Nonetheless, Louise's calling card confirms that her status as a qualified musician was a very important part of her identity.

Ethelle Stapley

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Walter's older sister Ethel - known professionally as Ethelle with an L E at the end - had made a name for herself locally as a child virtuoso violinist. Ethel had gained her London Academy of Music silver medal in July 1898 through studies at Bedford School of Music with Ethel Diemer's sister Norah (Biggleswade Chronicle and North Bedfordshire Gazette, 1898). Norah's own musical pedigree was impressive, including study at the Frankfurt Conservatorium with a teacher who would later also teach composer Paul Hindemith (Fritz Bassermann) (Bedfordshire Times and Standard, 1944; Skelton, 1995). Ethelle also gained

a series of scholarships to study with Adolf Pollitzer, a renowned violin teacher of the day who also taught Edward Elgar (Biggleswade Chronicle, 1900; Grogan, 2020).

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Perhaps these pedigrees rubbed off on Ethel because she soon embarked on a professional career in music herself, having gone on to gain her LAM gold medal in 1901.

In fact, we can see that she was already advertising locally as a violinist, available for parties and concerts on moderate terms – by the end of 1898. And I'm indebted to Peter for sending me a whole folder of newspaper cuttings dealing with her local musical exploits around the turn of the century. Here's just one brief example, from a concert held at Biggleswade and District Skating Club in November 1900, where we learn that Ethelle 'completely brought down the house'.

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Subsequently, Ethelle was in Huntingdon by September 1902, and had been appointed as the local representative of the College of Violinists. This was another exam board of the day, and her duties would have included arranging three or four examination sessions a year. This is unlikely to have brought in enough for Ethelle to live on and it is possible that – in common with many local exam board representatives, then and now – she was combining this with music teaching.

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It was not long, however, before she began a new career as a music hall and variety artiste, appearing at first with various co-performers at industry dinners and private events. One early example was the Annual Dinner of the Incorporated Society of the Medical Officers of Health at the London Trocadero in October 1904.

She also appeared on the British seaside pier circuit, such as in Rhyl, Wales in June 1904 and at St Annes in April 1907. Around the same time, she also joined Barclay Gammon's touring company 'Les Artistes Mondaines'.

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You'll see that a frequent co-performer was the comedian and singer Ambrose Thorne, known as 'Brosie' to his friends. The two clearly became close and Ethelle and Ambrose were married in February 1906. We have both this announcement and a detailed report of the big day itself in the Biggleswade Chronicle [March 2nd, 1906] – that's definitely worth a read.

Ambrose, pictured here in around 1906, was 11 years older than Ethelle. She had been born in 1881 and he around 1870. Ambrose had also been married briefly in the 1890s and may have had a son with his first wife, who had sadly died aged only 28 (Ledger, 1898).

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Ambrose's career had begun in the 1890s and by the early 1900s he was clearly well enough known to be used to advertise sheet music for songs with which he was associated. He also composed humorous songs himself and was known by colleagues to be an excellent impressionist, although it is unclear whether he used this skill in his act (Rose, 1951).

Two years into their marriage, Ethelle and Ambrose embarked on the first of two seasons in South Africa. The first of these trips was organised by Johannesburg theatre impresario Sidney Hyman. With his brother, Sidney Hyman ran the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg at the time and seems to have arranged for many prominent UK music hall artists to travel to South Africa to appear there, including Marie Lloyd, Sir Harry Lauder and George Robey (Latilla, 2013; Murphy & Pulter, 1989).

Ethelle and Ambrose, together with a group of fellow performers, left England on 27th June 1908 for their first trip, travelling on the steam ship Kildonan Castle. Interestingly Ethelle used her married name of Thorne on the passenger list, but clearly wished to retain Stapley for professional purposes (Ancestry, n.d.a).

During this first trip, they appear to have performed solely at the Empire before returning to England that October (on the Carisbrook Castle) (Ancestry, n.d.b). Ethelle tended not to be billed in newspaper advertisements of the time, with the focus staying on Ambrose and also Kitty Gordon, an up and coming actress of the day. Ethelle was, however, mentioned briefly in list of performers in the last week of the residency.

Slides 31 and 32

Here are a couple of pictures of the Johannesburg Empire as Ethelle and Ambrose would have known it (Latilla, 2013).

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Once back from South Africa in October 1908, Ethelle seems to have returned to what we might now term the 'corporate entertainment circuit'. Here she is performing at the annual smoking concert of the Stationers' Social Society in December 1909. Ambrose doesn't seem to be amongst the company, but Ethelle's finale to the first half – a humorous song entitled 'When we want a change in the government' - appears to have been by someone named

Thorne, so perhaps that was one of Ambrose's own compositions. We know that he did compose songs with political overtones, as can be seen from this co-written number [**Slide 34**] from the previous year. Ethelle returned in the second half, this time performing Dvorak's Humoresque on solo violin. A smoking concert, by the way, had been a Victorian invention whereby usually a male audience would assemble to smoke, eat and drink, and talk about politics or other social concerns, whilst listening to live music.

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Ethelle and Ambrose returned to South Africa in 1912. This appears to have been a tour of several theatres, with Ethelle typically now getting top billing with Ambrose. This time she also garnered some very good reviews of her own as well. Here are two. The first mentions the 'golden opinions' which she had attracted. The second notes that she was a 'violinist of considerable merit, and also appears to advantage with Ambrose Thorne in his comedy work'. So it's clear that the two were something of a double act.

Now the fact that Ethelle and Ambrose are associated with these visits to South Africa is a pleasing coincidence, because Ethelle's family-in-law, the Robarts, had a South African connection of their own. As you can read about in PHS Newsletters 6 and 7, a branch of the Robarts family emigrated to Durban in 1849. Interestingly, we learn from these newsletters that the family's musical traditions travelled with them, and that modern descendants of this family branch included a music teacher.

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After their second trip to South Africa in 1912, coverage and advertisements for Ethelle seem to peter out in the archives, and I'd love to know more about what she did next. We know that upon her return from South Africa, she was once again back on the corporate circuit as we find her performing at a Smoking Concert for the staff of London pharmacy company Barclay and Sons that November.

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The last time I can find Ethelle within the British Newspaper Archive is in February 1913, when she seems to be appearing solo at Victoria Cinema in Newmarket. But it's a great write-up on which to end.

Note that she's Ethel, with no L E here – it's not clear whether she had reverted to this more traditional version of her name, now that she was in her early 30s, or whether this was an oversight on the part of the newspaper. A reference to her in The Stage newspaper the previous year still had the final L E.

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We do know what Ambrose was up to after this point, though. His star was very much in the ascendancy, and soon after the outbreak of the first world war, he was starring in the London Hippodrome's war-themed review show *Business as Usual* (Ellacott, 2018). This ran from November 1914 to May 1915, and Ambrose and co-star, the very well-known Violet Loraine, recorded several of the show's songs - we can hear a couple now. The first is *We've Been Married Just One Year*, but in fact it was its B side, *When We've Wound Up The Watch On The Rhine*, that became a major hit of the winter of 1914/15 (Williams, 2015). In 1999 it was selected by the BBC's John Peel as part of a project celebrating the most significant records of the twentieth century (John Peel Wiki, n.d.). Let's take a listen to both songs.

***** WE'VE BEEN MARRIED JUST ONE YEAR EXAMPLE *****

From 'Violet Loraine - The Only Girl in the World' (Windy Ridge, CDR64, 2016) – originally released on 78 as Columbia 2484 (Matrix 29221)

***** WIND UP THE WATCH EXAMPLE *****

From: 'Laughter on the Home Front: the songs and comedy that kept a nation going during the Great War' (Pavilion Records, PAST CD 7047, 1994) – originally released on 78 as Columbia 2484 (Matrix 29222).

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Ambrose continued to make further recordings in the war years, including a duet in 1915 with Ella Shields. You may not know Ella Shields by name but you might well know another of her songs that is still quite famous today. This is "Burlington Bertie from Bow", where Shields impersonates a down-at-heel London gentleman with ambitions of grandeur.

Yet despite this apparent good fortune, in common with many prominent music hall artistes of the day, Ambrose was not above returning to slightly more humble appearances in the kinds of end-of-the-pier and seaside shows where he had started out, even if it meant a significant drop in wages for such engagements. In fact, I gather that such engagements were a lifeline for professional entertainers who faced a lack of larger theatre work in quieter, summer periods (Rose, 1951).

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Here he is, bottom middle, as a member of Wallis Arthur's Pierrot Troupe in Westcliff-on-Sea in 1914 – so presumably this was for the summer season before he started at the Hippodrome. A Pierrot show, by the way is a light-hearted, family-friendly concert party style format which featured a fairly standard line up of sketches, songs, comedy routines and instrumental performances. As a singing comedian, Ambrose would have been very well suited to this.

An account of Wallis Arthur's troupe around this time, which includes Ambrose, is to be found in Clarkson Rose's (1951) autobiography *With a Twinkle In My Eye*. Rose, recalls Ambrose staying in Arthur's accommodation in Westcliff around the end of the first world war but, interestingly, he doesn't mention Ethelle. This might be an oversight, or it could be that Ambrose and Ethelle were by this point pursuing different professional opportunities and Ambrose was alone. But it seems that their personal relationship might also have been under some strain, because there are two records in the National Archives from 1921 (see National Archives refs J 77/1802/6193 and J 77/1754/4651) indicating that Ethelle was seeking a divorce. The first of these, a wife's petition for the restitution of conjugal rights, suggests that they were living apart by this point. Such a petition was the only legal way at the time that a woman could institute divorce proceedings and so it was no surprise to find a second record, which is actually Ethelle's petition for divorce. I've not seen these documents themselves, only their entries in the National Archives' online catalogue – so more work is needed to find out a little more about how all this played out. Certainly, there is no mention of this development in the newspapers of the time.

Ambrose continued to perform in regional theatre and record further sketches for gramophone release right up to his death in 1936 at the age of 66 (*The Stage*, 1937).

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After the record in the National Archives, I know nothing more for certain about Ethelle until her death in 1954. There is only one other possible clue to her later professional activities. This is a reference – in of all places, the *Electrician Journal* - to an Ethel Stapley (again, no E) appearing in a production of a straight murder mystery play called *9.45* in 1930 in King George's Hall, London.

Of course, this might well have been an entirely different person, but also might indicate that as she approached her 50s, she had, like Ambrose in his later years, turned to straight stage acting instead of musical performance. It's a bit of a puzzle, though, as the character she was playing here was supposed to be an unmarried young party girl – so I'm not sure if a 49-

year-old Ethelle could have pulled that off. There is a picture of this production in the Electrician Journal, and I'm just not sure. Perhaps there is a resemblance with one of the ladies on stage. See what you think.

Canada

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I've got one final twist in this tail to share with you before I finish.

I was intrigued to find a poster and programme for an 1875 concert in Teeswater, Canada in the PHS archive, alongside other Robarts musical related items. So we can be sure that there was a Potton connection because the poster and programme have made their way back here all the way from Canada.

Teeswater is a small town in Southern Ontario and it had only been founded for some 20 years by this time. In fact, the town hall where this concert was performed had only been built a few years before (Culross Historical Society, 1984).

So how did this poster and programme end up back here in Potton? Thanks to a family history sheet held in the PHS archive, plus a bit of detective work with Canadian historical sources and some kind assistance from correspondents in the Teeswater area, I think I've solved the mystery.

We've already discussed Walter, Louise's father, and his central role in the musical life of Potton the 1870s. We've also noted that Walter's father was another musician. Well Walter had around 10 siblings according to the PHS family history sheet, one of whom was James whom the family sheet notes was 'by 1860 in Canada'.

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So crossing over to Canadian Census records, we find a record for James Robarts, living as a farmer in Amabel, Ontario - some 50 miles from Teeswater - at the time of the 1871 Canadian census.

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We also find a J R Robarts – by this time a cabinet maker - in Teeswater itself by 1876, thanks to a surviving county directory (County of Bruce Reporter Office, 1876). So it seems that James and his family were certainly in the right area by the time of this concert. This would make the Mrs Robarts in the poster his wife, the 30-year-old Susan. Given that she

was clearly the leading light in this concert, it's fascinating that another of the Robarts family appears to have married a musician.

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There's another twist to this story, relating to the repertoire performed at the concert. At this point, we must acknowledge that the song I'm about to discuss has what is now considered to be a highly racially offensive title. I'm not going to mention it in full and I've blurred it out on the screen. But we can see that Mr Robarts (whom we surmise was James, brother of Walter, if you recall) closed the concert in Teeswater with a rendition of 'The funniest N-Word Alive'. Now, if we look back at a programme held in the PHS archives for a concert in Potton just two months before this, we can see that the first half was *also* closed by another Mr Robarts (whom we presume on this occasion would have been Walter) singing a song with the same title.

So perhaps this was a favourite song of both brothers, and perhaps James had sent back these materials to Potton to demonstrate that his commitment to the family music making traditions remained alive and well in his new life in Ontario.

By the way, despite its highly-offensive title, I was keen to know more about this song. Sadly, I've drawn a complete blank, although the phrase 'the Funniest N-Word Alive' was employed in advertising for an African American variety artist by the name of Fred Davis who toured England some 15 years later¹, so perhaps this was something he also used to sing. It was, of course, a very different time.

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There's a nice outcome to this part of the story. In trying to track down the Teeswater Robarts connection, I made contact with various archivists, librarians and local historians in this region of Ontario and they have provided lots of excellent information on the other performers mentioned in the programme, although sadly not on the Robarts family themselves. Teeswater, it turns out had a very rich musical culture from its foundations and it was very common for family and community gatherings to feature music and song (Culross Historical Society, 1984). I had sent copies of this poster and programme to one particular local historian, who also happened to be involved in renovating the Teeswater Town Hall after it was modernized to meet modern fire regulations in 2018 - at a cost of more than 200 thousand Canadian dollars (Hill, 2020). I was delighted to learn that they had printed these

¹ E.g. see p. 6, col. 2 of the Barry Dock News, May 15 1891, available at: <https://newspapers.library.wales/view/4595318/4595324/>

out with the intention of framing them and displaying them in the newly redecorated hall. So these ancient links between Potton and Teeswater have been revived once more.

Summing up

So how might I sum up what I've learned from all of this work? In *this* presentation it has only been possible to rely some of the stories and information that have come to light through my research. Yet I hope you will agree that the richness of the evolving narratives is immensely compelling. It draws me as the researcher to engage ever more closely with the available documents and artifacts.

It is possible that I have been lucky with this certificate, and other combinations of individuals would have offered less fertile possibilities for research and storytelling. However, I doubt it. Instead my instincts are that all historical lives have the potential to teach us a great deal, if we are able to locate the necessary evidence.

To return to the idea of this music exam as a Kairos, it's notable that by starting with the certificate and then gradually moving outwards to explore the individuals and their families – so, if you like a lateral exploration rather than a more traditional vertical mining of the past – I've been able to pick up a range of hitherto forgotten individuals with important and interesting stories. For instance, I've not found a single source of literature dealing with Smyth Cooper's operettas yet in their day they were performed by many thousands of young people in this country and throughout the empire. Similarly, despite his high-profile career, the only sources I've found which mentions Ambrose Thorne's career to any extent are two books by Clarkson Rose (1951; 1964) – and they were published in the 1950s and 60s. Similarly, despite teaching upwards of 200 pupils a week in the 1890s and, despite their musical pedigree including associations with Arthur Sullivan, the Royal Academy of Music, Clara Schumann and the Frankfurt Conservatorium, little is known in Bedford today of the Diemer family, beyond some coverage in the recently published history of the Bedford Choral Society (Benson, 2015).

My last observation relates to the enduring persistence of musical behaviours from one generation to the next. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there was a view that musical 'talent' was innate, inherited and fixed. It was something that could be objectively measured, something akin to the contemporary obsession with IQ tests. By the 1980s and 1990s this view had radically changed within the fields of psychology and education, with researchers demonstrating that it was environmental and familial exposure to music in early childhood that seemed to be one of the strongest indicators of future musical behaviour. This has resulted in the currently widely-accepted view amongst educators that *everyone* is musical and can develop and improve their practical musical abilities over the

life course, given appropriate encouragement and opportunities (McPherson & Hallam, 2009). This is a view to which I wholeheartedly subscribe and which has guided my twenty years of practical music teaching.

But stories like those of the Robarts and Stapleys give us pause for thought, and ask us to consider afresh these 'nature vs nurture' debates. We've seen how their musical behaviours continued over several generations, and that some of them ended up marrying individuals who were also active music makers and performers. During the course of my research, although I was not looking for them, I did come across references to more recent descendants of these families. I can't really discuss these in detail because in some cases the information I have come across relates to people still living or only recently deceased – and it would be unethical of me to disclose this. But I will say that in some cases, it seems that these predispositions towards musical activity have continued right up to the very recent past.

It's very difficult for us to come to any definite conclusions about all this, because it could well be that in situations where an individual engaged in musical activities, they were more likely to meet in some cases marry others with similar pursuits. We've seen this with Louise and Walter, Ethelle and Ambrose, and James and Susan in Canada. In turn, when children have come along, there is then perhaps a stronger chance that these will be brought up in homes where practical music making is valued, encouraged and supported.

So to finish, I think that *this* is a really clear message for us all. Music making and learning clearly does matter a great deal, in terms of our identities, our societies and – for many of us – our livelihoods. What we do with our children may well endure into future generations. Therefore, stories like the Robarts and the Stapleys certainly remind me of the need to continue to encourage and support the next generation to continue making and learning music in the most diverse kinds of ways. Who knows, in a hundred years or more future historians might be telling similar stories of our own children's musical exploits all around the world.

Thank you very much.

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See accompanying slides for further details of newspapers and magazines cited

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