

Report of West of England Group meeting at Westonzoyland, Som., on 5th March 2016.

It was with keen anticipation that fourteen members crowded into a new venue in Westonzoyland, the home of Dennis and Valerie Warren.

Dennis is an enthusiast of the works of Noel Coward, and his theme was “Noel Coward’s Cavalcade, 1900 – 1930”. The play is a saga of two families, the Marriotts and the Bridges – which inspired the TV series “Upstairs Downstairs”. The story is patriotic - even jingoistic, and became politically incorrect in the post-war years, but Coward intended it to be partly ironical. It is interspersed with popular songs from 1899 to 1930. (Fox Films made a film of it in 1933).

The opening item was a “first” for the West of England Group; not a gramophone disc, but a Symphonion one. In 1900, musical boxes were more common in homes than new, expensive Gramophones. The tune was a Boer-War standard, “Goodbye Dolly Gray” (instrumental).

We continued with (shellac) discs, on an HMV 157 with 5a sound-box. Light-opera star Alice Nielsen sang “Annie Laurie” pleasantly on a 1910 Columbia. From 1911, we heard “Oh you beautiful doll”, played enthusiastically by the Royal Military Band, which clearly appreciated ragtime. Whereas the following “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” on a Bell Disc, was sung by Stanley Kirkby in a defiantly Scottish accent – clearly unaware that Irving Berlin was American. Kirkby did not exactly swing it.

1912 was notorious for the sinking of the Titanic, which was an impressive scene in the production of “Cavalcade” at Drury Lane – the only London theatre large enough to stage it. On a Regal disc, Ernest Gray sang the haunting “Stand to your post”.

With 1914 came the outbreak of war. Accomplished musical-comedy composer Paul Rubens – *carpe diem* - rushed out “Your King and your country need you” as a recruiting song, here sung by Maggie Teyte on Columbia. Almost as timely was Winner’s “Departure of a troopship” with sound effects and snatches of “Soldiers of the Queen”. Next we heard the ever-popular “It’s a long way to Tipperary” by the King’s Military Band on Regal. In a more wistful tone, we heard “Till the boys come home” beautifully sung by “Herbert Payne” (Ernest Pike) on Zonophone.

Next, we had a 1924 French HMV of Jan Garber’s Orchestra playing “Hinky-dinky parlez-vous” – a sprightly novelty item which went into double-time near the end. Even livelier – frantic, even – was Jack Hylton’s version of “Happy days are here again” on a 1930 HMV. (In 1929, he had provided a quarter of HMV’s total record output).

Only two of the songs in “Cavalcade” were composed by Coward himself; one of these was “Twentieth-century blues”, sung here by Al Bowlly.

After a magnificent tea provide by Valerie, we listened to members’ records. These included medleys on Broadcast and Columbia, and the enchanting “Xylophone Rag” on a 1922 Little Wonder.

Thus ended a novel and enjoyable programme, for which we heartily thank Dennis and Valerie.