

*Memoirs Of A Concertina-Playing Man:*

# REUBEN SHAW

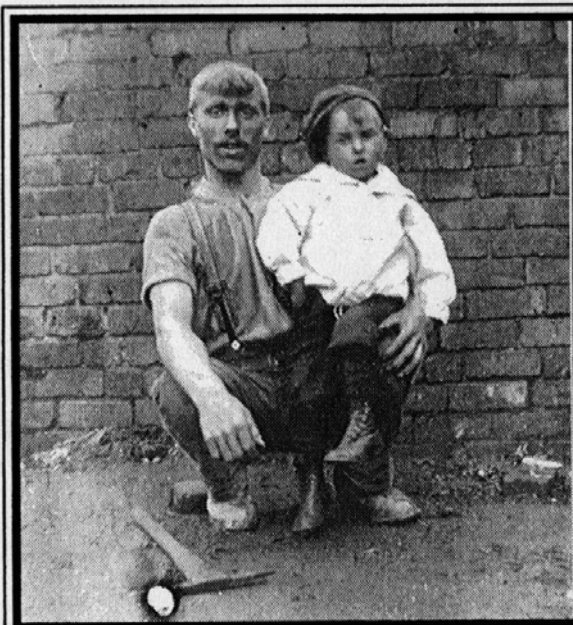
*As told to Phil Hopkinson  
with an introduction by David Cornell*

**T** WAS MY GREAT PLEASURE to meet Reuben Shaw at the 1993 West Country Concertina Players weekend at Kilve, England. I had looked forward to meeting in person a man whom I knew by name and reputation, but that pleasure was

quickly subsumed by the pleasure of his company: a player, a teacher, a link with the great British concertina tradition, and a fine story teller—although, as an American, I needed some help to follow a few of Reuben's dialect stories!

There is a phenomenon which I call "the genuine article". It is impossible to define but we all recognize it when we encounter it. We may learn the music, respect the traditions, study the history and keep it all alive through paraphrase and allusion, but we weren't there when it happened and we didn't help shape it. When Reuben picks up his concertina, you know you are in the presence of the genuine article.

Any duet player who has tried to play from a piano score knows that it just doesn't work; it produces a sort of aural mud. As is the case with all instruments, the best concertina music is arranged for the instrument itself. Reuben has a collection of over seven hundred pieces of music arranged for the duet concertina, most



Reuben Shaw with his Uncle Reuben:  
note the collier's pick  
(from a glass negative)

of it hand-written and much of it by his good friend and collaborator, the late Henry Stanley. Reuben is most generous with his collection; the arrangement of *La Golondrina* printed in this issue is from his collection. Although it does not demonstrate the capabilities of the big duets, rich harmonies over deep bass notes, doubled octaves, etc., it is easily accessible to all duet systems of 58 keys or greater. Try it; you will be reminded of another time and a great concertina tradition.



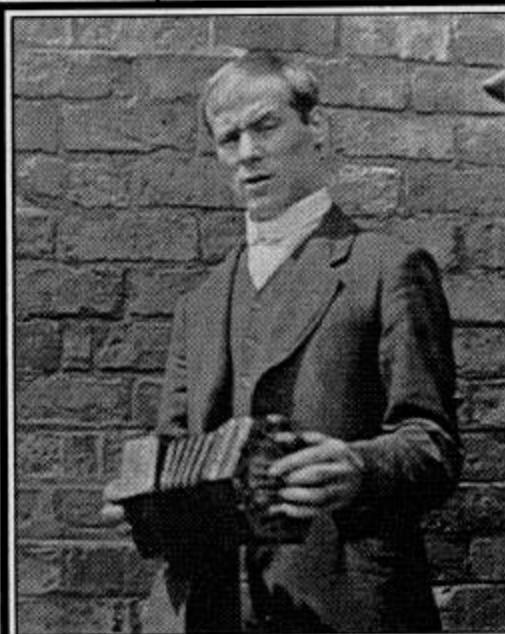
In Reuben's classes and recitals it is easy to sense his concern that the contributions of friends such as Alexander Prince and Henry

Stanley will be lost. Not to worry. The British concertina community seems to be well aware of the duet tradition. Phil Hopkinson is working with Reuben to catalogue his extensive collection of music and concertina history. More and more frequently the odd American wanders into the scene, and this issue of *Concertina & Squeezebox* will be a permanent reference point for both Reuben and the musical tradition he represents.

David Cornell

**REUBEN SHAW** has been playing English and Duet concertinas at a top standard for fifty years. His memories of the concertina go back over seventy years. He still plays his Duet regularly—and superbly—despite failing eyesight.

I haven't attempted to write in Reuben's dialect; better men have tried and failed (D.H. Lawrence for one). The only exception to this is the use of "mi" which Reuben uses often for "my". When Reuben talks about his Duet he is referring to the McCann system instrument.—Phil Hopkinson



Reuben's father James Shaw  
(about 1920)

**T**HE FIRST RECOLLECTION that I have of the concertina was seventy-one years ago, at the age of nine. It was my job to put Alexander Prince records on to the gramophone and wind it up. Mi dad stood ready with a 48-key English. As soon as the record started I had to adjust the speed to get the record to a key that he could play in—he could only play in C, F and G. He would then try to accompany the record.

Mi uncle Reuben was a good English player. He had a Wheatstone *Æola* and together mi uncle Reuben and mi dad would go out into the fields to practise when they came home from the pit and had had a wash. They were both colliers (coalminers).

I started work at fourteen and had no interest in the instrument. I went to be a gravedigger in Ilkestone Cemetery and at sixteen all I lived for was cycling. When the Second World War broke out I was in France riding down the

Maginot Line.

In 1942 I became superintendant of Eastwood Cemetery (where D.H. Lawrence's parents are buried). The army wouldn't have me because of my bad left arm which was run over by a lorry when I was twelve. In the local paper I

saw an advertisement *Concertina for Sale—£5*. I don't know why I did it, but I bought it. It was a 48-key rosewood ended instrument. I then walked the three miles to Ilkestone to show it to mi dad:

"Look what I've gone and bought."

"What made you buy a concertina at your age?" he said. (I must have been over thirty then.)

He opened the box. "This is no concertina—thou wants an *Æola*!"

"What's one of them?"

He played the instrument and said, "Come on—we best go and see your uncle Reuben." They encouraged me a bit and eventually got me a decent *Æola*.

Around 1950 the magazine *Accordion World* had letters in it try-

ing to get a concertina movement going. Mr. Travers in Bridgewater was writing to me and we established a network that eventually became the International Concertina Association.

The Editor of *Accordion World* also suggested that I write to a Mr. Stanley in Birmingham, who was arranging music for the English and Duet concertinas.

I had just met Wilfred Pearse then, and I was going to him (taking lessons) with the English—but mi father kept saying "Now, if you want to learn a concertina properly thou should go on to a Duet." (I had been playing the English for about eight years at this point.)

"What's one of them?" I asked.

"You've heard Alexander Prince," he said, "he was a Nottingham chap—you should play like him."

Well I wrote to Wheatstones and got one for £30. [This



doesn't seem much—it was fifteen weeks' wages then to Reuben; and he had a wife & children! —Phil.] I had it for six months and decided that no living man could play it; and I wrote to Wheatstones and told them that. They said they would exchange the instrument for an Æola, which I accepted.

But Mr. Travers at Bridgewater kept writing to me and telling me that the Duet was *the* instrument, and that it could be mastered. Eventually I bought a 56-key instrument from him that my grandson now plays. However, I still couldn't find anyone to help me with the instrument.

Mi dad said to visit one Saturday morning early and we were going to Nottingham. We walked towards Trent Bridge and on to Glebe Street, where we knocked at a door. **William Sutherland**, Alexander Prince's brother (Prince was his stage name) answered the door. Mi dad said: "We want this young chap to take up the Duet—but he says it's impossible to master it." In the house were all of Prince's instruments in a glass case. Mr. Sutherland took out one and played *Colonel Bogey* (a march). Well—cold water ran down my back when I heard that. I had thought it was impossible to play it.

Mi dad said, "What did I tell thee?" It was marvelous. "You can't play that on the English, it's up to thee now to learn."

"Well, why didn't you and mi uncle Reuben learn it?" I asked.

He said, "We tried, lad, we tried but we couldna. But we want you to."

Prince's brother helped me with the instrument but

eventually I had to stop going to him because his wife didn't like having visitors. But he helped me as much as he could, because, as he said, there was no one else playing the instrument at all properly. He visited me three times in Eastwood as well.

Eventually I wrote and went with the Duet to Mr. Stanley in Birmingham. It was a four hours journey, walking then on buses and trains. When I got there he would have a piece of music ready prepared for me. It cost me two shillings and sixpence for a small piece [*roughly 13 new pence; in the old currency (abandoned in 1969) a pound held 20 shillings and was worth about \$5.00. The US equivalent of 2/6 or half-crown would be about 75¢—Ed.*] four shillings [20p, or \$1.00] for a large piece. I was earning £2-4/- [\$11US] a week then so that was a lot of money to me. I played then for two hours and then came home.

Gradually, by having properly arranged music,

I started to make sense of the instrument. Wilfred Pearse was also arranging me music but it was based on the piano



**REUBEN SHAW**

Age 34

With 58-key McCann Duet Concertina

arrangements, which are wrong for the duet, and the left hand just finishes up vamping—there's no proper harmony or counterpoint. I was pretty useless until I got Stanley's arranged music—but all the time I played with Wilf Pearse every week, except on occasions he gave me too hard a piece of music, and then I used to make excuses for not going to him—but I stuck at it.

The first time that I "played out" (performed in public) was in a local factory canteen with Wilf. There were 450 people

and various functions. At this time I memorised all the music, but now I don't go out often enough to worry about it. But if my music was suitable for the folk club circuit, then I would do it.

I went eight or nine times in all to see Mr. Stanley. Wilf also came with me and we met Mr. **John Gibson** there. Mr. Stanley got on well with Wilfred and admired his style on the English. When Mr. Stanley died I was ill and couldn't get to his funeral, but Wilf went down and found that Mr.



Photograph by Peter Trimming

**Reuben Shaw's Duet Group at Kilve, 1993  
(l-r) John Wild, Peter Woodger, Reuben, Phil Hopkinson**

present to hear us and the Eastwood Male Voice Choir. I cannot remember the first tune we were to play, but the second was the *Lost Chord* by Sullivan. Wilfred has told me, "we are not taking any music—you've got to learn it all". Well the choir came off and we stood up to play. My hands felt like bananas! I saw all the people there, and the local Mayor and Aldermen. I thought, "Oh dear—what have I let myself in for?" After the performance the Choirmaster, who knew Wilfred, came over and said "I wish that I could get my choir to put into the *Lost Chord* what you two just did. It was wonderful."

After that we played out quite a lot at local chapels, churches

Stanley had left him his music. After that Wilf used to copy out pieces for me. In turn when Wilf died he left me Stanley's music: over 680 solos for the concertina (mainly Duet) from marches and foxtrots to Verdi and Vivaldi!

Music has given me a great deal of pleasure over the years and I have had a wide variety of players visit me from England, Australia and America. Some years ago I had the pleasure of meeting **Richard Carlin** who spent the day at my home. I was very flattered that when Richard made his record *The English Concertina* that he included Wilfred and me on it. [*Playing Cavalleria rusticana by Pietro Mascagni, 1863-1945. —Ed.*] Apart from the track that



Richard made of **Harry Minting** and himself, Wilf and I were the only live players—everybody else was taken from old records. And when he made the record, Richard had heard all the players in the country—they passed him on, one to the other, and he recorded a lot of people.

When we were playing together Wilfred and I were asked to play on BBC TV. Wilf didn't believe me when I told him; he said, "There's always one (fool)." I said, "no, it's right, they're writing to us" and they did. We played for a bit, and they gave us an £8 fee. After the first one we did other programmes; one was on "improving the image of the concertina" which we did to show that good, serious music can be played on the instrument, (when everyone) felt that it was being used by clowns.

With **Herbert Hague**, Wilfred and I formed a band that we called the Derwent Trio, and we played to many people—once we did a whole wedding for **Keith Kendrick**. [*Contemporary folksinger, Anglo and English player —Ed.*]

Wilfred and I twice won the ICA cup for two concertinas or more; once with *Cavalleria rusticana* and once with the *Dream of Olwen*. I can remember the adjudicator saying "Now these two gentlemen, they've practised and practised and practised and then gone back and done some more practise. The

net result is that I cannot fault in any way their music or their performance." Which shows you can't beat practise. I think I've always made up for in enthusiasm what I've lacked in expertise.

Some of the playing that I've heard has amused me. Once I heard the Liverpool Concertina Band; I looked at them

they were all playing Duet concertinas. They all played the same note in unison—I was disgusted. Later some of them came to see me to see how I played, and I tried to help them. I think that because they were a street band they just wanted to make a lot of noise.

Many people want to play the Duet but get put off by the complexity of the instrument. But the McCann is logical when you understand the system; but you have to work at it.

Mr. John Gibson was the finest player that I ever heard live—but when Mr. Stanley died he never played again. Alexander Prince was undoubtedly the best ever (he died in

1928) and by all accounts far better than **Perci Honri**. Honri had more stagecraft and show; but Prince just allowed his music to do it all for him. Then there was **Maurice Harvey** who caught Poliomyelitis when he was young and would have been the premier Duet player that everyone copied. He had great potential until polio caught him. Another fine McCann player from up north is **Donald Pullen**.

The shame today is with the English players. They all seem to be single note players yet there is such a wealth of music to be got from that instrument in thirds, fifths, sixths, eighths and tenths, and a good English player can get well around the keyboard by

playing the melody and accompaniment as opposed to straightforward vamping. It may be that players will come along and get back to this first class style of playing—there's a lot of music the English can play.

As for the Duet, I've found that the people I have met, with one or two exceptions, all tend to use the left hand as a



Passing the torch: Reuben Shaw and his son Reuben, 1950

vamping accompaniment. They don't play the music as written by the composer—there are no changing harmonies, no counterpoint, it's just a left hand thump-thump—you might as well have an accordion! Part of the problem is that the aspiring Duet player generally does not have the arrangements for the duet; they just pump away using a vamp or piano copy. Now on the Duet, left hand chordal work copied from a piano score will overwhelm the right hand melody, whereas good Duet arrangements such as Stanley's ensure that at no time does this happen. There is marvelous counterpoint in Stanley's work and it should be seen by aspiring duet players.

I've only met about half a dozen really top class Duet players and now most of them have gone by the board. But—I keep hoping that in my later years someone's going to come along and entertain me playing the Duet as it ought to be played!

*[Marvelous stuff—profound thanks to Reuben for sharing his story with us. We are always pleased to profile notable exponents of various types of free reeds, and Reuben is*

*about as notable as it gets when it comes to the McCann system Duet; after this issue, you Duet players won't be able to accuse C&S of English and Anglo favoritism! For that matter, David Cornell, who has kindly supplied an example of Reuben's music for this issue, has also promised to introduce us to a little-known variation of the McCann system; the "Uniform" or "Chidley" instrument developed by Wheatstones in the late 1950's. Watch for his article in an upcoming issue.*

*I am pleased to report that some of Reuben's superb playing will be included on the next C&S Readers' Tape—the sound quality is quite good, too! For those who can't wait, we print here Reuben's version of La Golondrina.*

*Phil Hopkinson is from Nottingham. He is an engineer, an avid mountain climber, and of course, a devotee of the concertina; he regularly plays duets (on English) with Reuben Shaw. David Cornell hails from New Jersey; a computer consultant, avid yachtsman, and an enthusiastic Duet player himself. David bought his first Duet from the late Harry Minting at Wheatstone's in the early 1960's.]*

Photograph by Peter Trimming



Phil Hopkinson and Reuben at Kilve, 1993