

Musician of Note

**the recollections of John Edward Searle, born 1922 -
a resident of East Molesey for 75 years**

During the pre-war period in the 1930s, I spent my schooldays living with my parents in Broadstairs and Cliftonville, but when the Battle of Britain began in July 1940 and it became rather dangerous on the Kent coast, we moved to the relative safety of Surrey.

A year later, having survived the Blitz, I made an interesting musical acquaintance.

One summer Sunday afternoon, as I sat practising at my turn-of-the-century, eight-foot Erard grand piano in our drawing room, a tall, imposing, elderly gentleman, wearing a panama and flannels rang the doorbell. He introduced himself as Percy Godfrey, a composer of whom I had vaguely heard, who had also recently left the Kent coast and was now living with his sister, Ethel Weir, at *Sunningdale*, No. 25 Spencer Road. He said he had heard me playing when passing the house on his way to watch the cricket at Molesey Cricket Club - William Graburn, the cricketer, was a neighbour of his in Spencer Road and Secretary of the Club. My mother invited Mr. Godfrey in for a cup of tea and a chat with me and with my father, who had been a professional violinist and played with the Plymouth Symphony Orchestra in his youth and from then on, it became a regular arrangement that he would call in on Sunday afternoons for an hour or so in order to discuss music, comment upon my pianistic progress (or lack of) and show me his latest compositions, which I was expected to sight read, without preparation, from his hand-written manuscript! These visits continued for a number of years, during which I had the benefit of his expertise and learned about his life in general.

Percy Godfrey had been Master of Music at King's School, Canterbury for many years before retirement and had won a prize in a competition to write a March for the Coronation of Edward VII. The music was actually used during the ceremony itself and some forty years later he played me his piano arrangement of the work and gave me a copy. Percy composed prolifically and wrote for the piano, voice, choral and instrumental groups, as well as for full orchestra and he once did me the honour of copying, by hand, two piano compositions for me to play, the signed manuscripts of which I still have.

Apparently, during the 1920s, Percy Godfrey was often confused with the, then, conductor of the Bournemouth Concert Orchestra, Dan Godfrey, of the prominent musical family, who would sometimes include Percy's compositions in his concerts with Percy himself conducting them. Percy didn't seem to mind being associated with the better-known Dan, although they were not related in any way and it seems he was almost absorbed into the family!

After a few years of very rewarding meetings and musical advice from Percy Godfrey and as WW11 entered its final year, I had a telephone call from his sister, in February 1945, telling me that he had passed away suddenly in the house in Spencer Road. She asked me to call in to collect some items that he had wanted me to have, including some unpublished, signed and dated, manuscripts, which I still have in my possession. She also handed me a letter, in Percy's own handwriting, detailing that he had bequeathed me, in a codicil to his will, his Virgil Practice Clavier, an instrument I have to this day. It has proved very useful for silent practice purposes when sorting out demanding passages in preparation for the concerto and solo performances I gave in the locale during the 1940s and '50s. In fact, just a few months after Mr. Godfrey's death, I played Beethoven's *Emperor* Piano Concerto No. 5 (with organ accompaniment) at St. Saviour's Church in Sunbury-on-Thames, where his brother, John, had been vicar for many years.

WILLIAM PERCY GODFREY (1859 – 1945)

The composer, Percy Godfrey, was born on 16th August 1859, in Walton-on-Trent, Derbyshire, the eldest of nine children of William Godfrey and Elizabeth Lucy. His younger brother, Rev. John Talbot Godfrey, a Church of England vicar, married Rafella Boothby of the titled Derbyshire family and one of his sisters, Ethel Frances, married John Weir, a College Principal, in India.

Godfrey gained a B. Mus. from Durham University and an ARCM and studied composition with, amongst others, Ebenezer Prout and during the 1880s and '90s, he taught at various establishments, including Banisters Court School in Millbrook, Hants.

Interestingly, a second cousin of Rafella Talbot Godfrey, the Diplomat, Brooke Boothby (10th Baronet), was, at the time of the 1881 census, living at Bridge House in Bridge Road, East Molesey, with his widowed mother, Martha. His late father, Rev. Brooke William Robert Boothby (9th Baronet), had been Rector of Elmley, Worcestershire, and of Welwyn, Hertfordshire. Ashbourne Hall in Derbyshire, which had been the family seat for two hundred years, had been sold according to instructions in his will. Why the Boothby family came to East Molesey is unclear, but it was possibly a contributory factor in the Godfrey family choosing to live here during the war years and after.

In 1900, Percy Godfrey won the Lesley Alexander Prize for Piano Quintette, awarded by the Royal College of Music and by the time of the 1901 census he was Master of Music at King's School, Canterbury, a position he was to retain for some thirty years, until his retirement. He was unmarried at this time and living alone at 27 Palace Street, Canterbury.

In 1902, Percy Godfrey won the competition to write a *Coronation Prize March* to be played at the Coronation of Edward VII. The

prize was awarded by the Worshipful Company of Musicians and judged by Sir Walter Parratt, Sir Hubert Parry and Sir Frederick Bridge. This piece of music was subsequently arranged many times for various instruments and instrumental groups. One arrangement of the work was made for wind band by Charles Godfrey, the bandmaster, one of the well-known Godfrey musical dynasty (not related to Percy Godfrey) and a CD recording of this was released in 2014, along with other pieces, under the title, *The Crown Imperial*, played by the London Symphonic Concert Band, directed by Tom Higgins.

In 1907, Percy Godfrey married Elizabeth Sally Howell (née Clowes), known as Sally, the widow of the cricketer, Leonard Sidgwick Howell (1848 - 1895). She had a son, George Frederick, from her first marriage. The couple lived at *Brentwood*, South Canterbury whilst Percy was still teaching at King's School, but after retirement they moved to Folkestone, where Sally Godfrey died in 1935 at the age of 80.

In, *A History of the King's School, Canterbury* by C. E. Woodruff, MA, published in 1908, the following paragraph is of note:-

"Mr. Percy Godfrey, Mus. Bac., who has now for so many years been responsible for this branch of the work of the School, possesses in a most marked degree the power of inspiring an enthusiasm for music and a genuine love of it. The remarkably high standard to which the School music has now attained is due to the whole-souled enthusiasm which he has devoted to it. To him we are indebted for the account which we here print, but we feel that we cannot print it without a brief note as to the debt which the King's School owes to Mr Godfrey."

In 1927, during a BBC radio broadcast relayed from the Winter Gardens in Bournemouth, the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra, conducted by Sir Dan Godfrey, gave the first performance of one of Percy Godfrey's symphonies and in 1936 the BBC Orchestra played his *Hornpipe* from the suite, *Scenes of Old England*.

Percy Godfrey died on 30th January 1945, aged 85 and in his will he left various small bequests to family members and the Performing Rights of his music to his stepson, George, then living in South Africa. His published manuscripts numbered more than eighty. In a codicil to his will, he bequeathed his Virgil Practice Clavier to John Searle of East Molesey, Surrey.

Personal recollections by John Searle and biographical research by Rosemary Searle

October 2015

© *John and Rosemary Searle*

e-mail: jonro@searle38.freeseve.co.uk

References:-

GRO BMD indexes
Census Returns
Telephone Directories
Electoral Registers
Who's Who in Music
The Musical Directory
British Library Catalogue
BBC Genome
Burke's Peerage