



City of Westminster

Cabinet Member Report

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| Decision Maker: | Cabinet Member for Sports, Culture & Community |
| Date: | 16 August 2019 |
| Classification: | For general release |
| Title: | Commemorative Green Plaque for Britain's first Gramophone Recording Studio at 31-32 Maiden Lane WC2E 7JS |
| Wards Affected: | St. James's |
| Key Decision: | No |
| Financial Summary: | The Green Plaque Scheme is funded by sponsorship, which has been secured for this plaque |
| Report of: | Richie Gibson, Head of City Events, Promotions and Filming |

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 In 1898 the UK's first gramophone recording studio was opened at 31 Maiden Lane by the Gramophone Company. Although the company relocated to a larger property in City Road in 1902, the importance of the original premises in Maiden Lane cannot be overlooked. The recording studio opened in the latter years of Queen Victoria's reign and was run by recording pioneers with limited resources. Three decades later the company changed their name to E.M.I. and opened a new studio, the internationally famous Abbey Road Studios.
- 1.2 The Abbey Road Studios already has a Westminster Green Plaque which commemorates the composer Sir Edward Elgar, who recorded here in 1931.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That the nomination for a commemorative Green Plaque for Britain's first gramophone recording studio at 31/32 Maiden Lane, WC2E 7JS, is approved.

3. Reasons for decision

- 3.1 As a nation we are proud to have some of the most successful recording artists in the world that make a huge contribution to the UK economy. This huge industry can be traced back to a makeshift recording studio in a rundown hotel in Maiden Lane where opera singers and music hall artists (the pop singers of the day) were recorded for the mass enjoyment of the whole nation and beyond.

4. Policy context

- 4.1 Green Plaques scheme aims to highlight and improve awareness of Westminster's diverse cultural heritage and social history, provide information for visitors and to create a sense of pride in neighbourhoods.

5. Background

- 5.1 Early attempts to design a consumer sound or music playing machine began in 1877 when Thomas Edison invented his tin-foil phonograph, which played recorded sounds from round cylinders that could only be played once. This was followed by Alexander Graham Bell's graphophone, which used wax cylinders that could be played many times. However, each cylinder had to be recorded separately, making the mass reproduction of the same music or sounds impossible.
- 5.2 In November 1887, Emile Berliner, a German immigrant working in Washington DC, patented a successful system for sound recording. He moved from cylinders to start recording on flat discs or records. Some of Berliner's other inventions include a radial aircraft engine, a helicopter and acoustical tiles.
- 5.3 The first records were made of glass then zinc was used and eventually plastic. A spiral groove with sound information was etched into the flat record which was rotated on the gramophone. The arm of the gramophone held a needle that read the grooves in the record by vibration and transmitted the information to the gramophone speaker. Berliner's discs were the first sound recordings that could be mass-produced by creating master recordings from which moulds were made. From each mould, hundreds of discs were pressed.
- 5.4 The Gramophone Company
- 5.4.1 Berliner founded The Gramophone Company to mass manufacture his sound discs as well as the gramophone that played them. To help promote his gramophone he persuaded popular artists to record their music using his system.
- 5.4.2 Berliner later sold the licensing rights to his patent for the gramophone, and method of making records, to the Victor Talking Machine Company (RCA), which later made the gramophone a successful product in the United States.

5.4.3 Meanwhile, Berliner founded the Berliner Gram-o-phone Company in Canada, the Deutsche Grammophon in Germany and the UK based Gramophone Co. Ltd.

5.4.4 The UK Gramophone Company was founded by William Owen and his partner/investor Trevor Williams in 1897 as the UK partner of Emile Berliner's United States Gramophone Company, which had been founded in 1892. In December 1900, Owen gained the manufacturing rights for the Lambert Typewriter Company, as an insurance product in case the Gramophone flopped, and for a few years the company was renamed "Gramophone & Typewriter Ltd". However, the Lambert typewriter failed to bring in much revenue and production was stopped in 1904. At this point Owen seemed to lose interest in the business. He remained on the board for two more years and then left The Gramophone Company altogether in 1906 to return to the United States.

5.4.5 In February 1909, to distinguish them from the earlier records which featured a recording angel label, the company introduced the famous trade mark known as His Master's Voice, generally referred to as HMV. The original painting featured an Edison cylinder phonograph and in 1899 Owen had purchased the painting from the artist, Francis Barraud, and asked him to replace the Edison with a gramophone machine. In 1910, by the time the company's trademarks were registered, they had built and opened a new recording studio in Hayes, Middlesex.

5.5 31-32 Maiden Lane, The former Coburn Hotel

5.5.1 In July 1897 William Owen resigned from his post with the National Gramophone Company in the United States and sailed to Britain. His job, as agent for Emile Berliner, was to generate some interest and find investors to set up the company in England. Owen was an excellent salesman, having refined his selling talents during his law degree at Amherst College. He was also a gambler who enjoyed the high stakes of starting up new ventures and living the high life that could be achieved if successful.

5.5.2 After many months of fruitless meetings in London, Owen gave his young solicitor, Trevor Williams, a gramophone to take home for the evening. Williams was convinced, when on a trip to New York, he met Berliner and witnessed for himself the popularity of the fledgling recording industry in the USA. When he returned to London, Williams, along with three of his friends, arranged for a bank guarantee of £5,000. This was just enough to kick-start the company.

5.5.3 On 23rd February 1898, Owen and Williams registered the small, private Gramophone Company. Trevor Williams had overall control and Owen was his general manager. Gramophones would be assembled in London from components supplied from the USA. The company would make its own recordings, but the actual records would be pressed at a factory in Hanover, owned by Emile Berliner's brother. Trevor Williams knew that the American taste

in music would not be a big seller in the Victorian salons, so recording specific musicians that would appeal to the tastes of Victorian Britain, was essential.

- 5.5.4 At the time Williams and Owen had no way of conducting the recording sessions for themselves, as Berliner had not been prepared to share the details of his record making process with the two business men. Instead Berliner sent his trusted young sound engineer, Fred Gaisberg, to London, to start making recordings for the European market.
 - 5.5.5 July 1898, as the Gramophone Company was being formed, recording engineer Fred Gaisberg arrived at Liverpool Docks and made his way to London. Before he made any recordings he needed to find the correct location to make the master discs and to purchase the necessary materials and chemicals.
 - 5.5.6 Gaisberg chose to locate his improvised studio on Maiden Lane, in the dingy smoking room of the dilapidated Coburn Hotel. By the end of the first week in August all the necessary materials had been purchased and the studio was set ready for recording. The recording machine stood on a high stand, from which projected a long thin trumpet shaped horn into which the artist sang. Close by was stood an upright piano, on a high, moveable platform, so the sound could be captured by the horn. The original recordings were then sent to Hanover for mass manufacture.
 - 5.5.7 The location had some advantages: it was near to Covent Garden Opera House and London's theatres and music halls, where the brightest and best singers could be easily found. It was also very close to Rules Restaurant, where opera stars would relax after a performance. Here, Gaisberg would buy champagne for the artists, before persuading them to come back to his studio to record songs and arias. The recording machine was always on standby to receive these talented visitors. One of the first ever recordings was the Welsh National Anthem, *Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau*, sung by Trevor Williams' niece, Madge Breese.
 - 5.5.8 Rules Restaurant became an important hub for the fledgling company. Here both artists and recording staff would congregate to prepare for, and wind down after, recording sessions.
- 5.4 Fred Gaisberg, 1873-1951
- 5.4.1 The young Gaisberg was already a pioneer of early recording and a piano accompanist for the Berliner Gram-o-phone Company when, in 1898, he joined the Gramophone Company in England as its first recording engineer. Among the first recordings were several by Syria Lamonte, an Australian soprano working at Rules Restaurant at the time. Her version of 'Coming Through The Rye' was one of the first recordings issued. In 1902 Gaisberg travelled to Milan to record the tenor, Enrico Caruso and the recordings became a sensation. Gaisberg's brother worked with him and together they recorded such international stars as Adelina

Patti, Nellie Melba and Beniamino Gigli. Gaisberg was the only record producer to record a castrato singer, Alessandro Moreschi of the Sistine Chapel Choir, and the first to produce recordings in India and Japan. He made a number of trips to pre-Revolutionary Russia to help develop one of recorded music's largest early markets.

5.4.2 By 1921 Gaisberg was artistic director of HMV's newly formed International Artistes' Department, remaining director when HMV and Columbia merged in 1931 to become Electric and Musical Industries (EMI). Under his supervision, Elgar recorded his symphonies and concertos and other major works. Refusing offers of a directorship at HMV, Gaisburg retired in 1939 but continued as a consultant with EMI. One of his last projects, in the early 1930s, was to conceive, and supervise the construction of a major facility for classical music recording, Abbey Road Studios.

5.5 Electric and Musical Industries Ltd

5.5.1 Electric and Musical Industries Ltd was formed in March 1931 by the merger of the Columbia Graphophone Company and the Gramophone Company - with its 'HMV' record label. Two companies that both had a history extending back to the origins of recorded sound. The new company produced recording and playback equipment as well as sound recordings.

5.5.2 The company's gramophone manufacturing led to 40 years of success which also included larger-scale electronics and electrical engineering.

6. **Financial implications**

6.1 The cost of production, installation and administration will be covered by the sponsor, James Hall and the EMI Heritage Trust. There is no cost to Westminster City Council.

7. **Legal implications**

7.1 Listed Building Consent is not required for 31-32 Maiden Lane.

8. **Consultation**

8.1 The building owners support the nomination and have contributed to the plaque sponsorship. Ward Members have been consulted and no objections have been raised.

If you have any queries about this report please contact Claire Appleby on 020 7641 3388 or cappleby@westminster.gov.uk.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Location plan of 31-32 Maiden Lane at 1:1250 scale.

Appendix 2

Photo montage showing proposed location of the Maiden Lane recording studios Green Plaque at 31-32 Maiden Lane.

Appendix 3

Wording and layout of the proposed Green Plaque.

For completion by the **Cabinet Member for Sports, Culture & Community**

Declaration of Interest

I have <no interest to declare / to declare an interest> in respect of this report

Signed: _____ Date: _____

NAME: **Councillor Iain Bott** _____

State nature of interest if any

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(N.B: If you have an interest you should seek advice as to whether it is appropriate to make a decision in relation to this matter)

For the reasons set out above, I agree the recommendation(s) in the report entitled **Commemorative Green Plaque for Britain’s first Gramophone Recording Studio at 31-32 Maiden Lane WC2E 7JS**

Signed

Cabinet Member for Sports, Culture & Community

Date

If you have any additional comments which you would want actioned in connection with your decision you should discuss this with the report author and then set out your comment below before the report and this pro-forma is returned to the Secretariat for processing.

Additional comment:
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If you do not wish to approve the recommendations, or wish to make an alternative decision, it is important that you consult the report author, the Head of Legal and Democratic Services, Strategic Director Finance and Performance and, if there are resources implications, the Strategic Director of Resources (or their representatives) so that (1) you can be made aware of any further relevant considerations that you should take into account before making the decision and (2) your reasons for the decision can be properly identified and recorded, as required by law.

Note to Cabinet Member: Your decision will now be published and copied to the Members of the relevant Policy & Scrutiny Committee. If the decision falls within the criteria for call-in, it will not be implemented until five working days have elapsed from publication to allow the Policy and Scrutiny Committee to decide whether it wishes to call the matter in.