

History of sound recording from the earliest efforts to c 1900

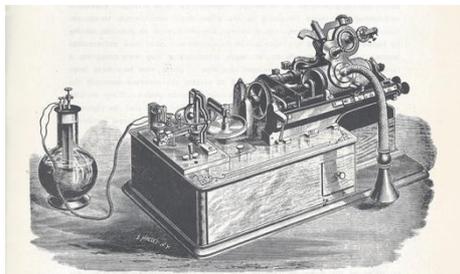
by Martyn Dowell



A report on the lecture from the SAS Christmas meeting in December 2019, which was followed by a buffet supper with wine, and enjoyed by some 48 members and friends. Martyn gave us a fascinating account of 19th century attempts to develop methods of sound recording, which included many larger-than-life characters and intense rivalries, a sample of whom are mentioned here.

Frenchman Edouard Leon Scott de Martinville patented the Phonautograph in 1859, making recordings using a trumpet and diaphragm on darkened paper. Never intended to be reproduced, surviving examples can now be laser scanned, audible but very unclear. Thomas Edison patented his Phonograph in 1877, using tinfoil as the medium, but results were inadequate for commercial use. When he heard that Bell and Tainter were developing their Graphophone, he completely redesigned his machine, having to share patents with them.

The entrepreneur Jesse Lippincott undertook to market both machines, and founded the Edison Bell company in Britain. He developed the Phonogram service to deliver recorded cylinders by post, and



The Phonograph

later founded the Columbia Graphophone Company, but he died in 1894. Meanwhile Edison had hired George Gourard as his agent in London. He recorded many famous people of the time (including Arthur Sullivan) but without British patents in place, Edison would not allow him to sell any machines, so they parted company. Martyn demonstrated the phonograph sound by playing a home-made recording of the song *No Place like Home* on his 1903 Edison model.

A former sewing machine salesman, James E Hough had started selling phonographs made (illegally) in Europe with such success that the Edison Bell company, still unable to sell their own machines in Britain, joined forces with Hough who soon became the biggest man in the business. He had seen the coming demand for pre-recorded records, and began production on a large scale. In the USA meanwhile, German émigré Emile Berliner, inventor of the carbon microphone for telephone use, developed his Gramophone based on mass production of disc records to be played on budget machines. First his brothers in Germany started trial (toy) production, and in 1898 the American and British Gramophone Companies were set up, using the 'recording angel' trademark. Prominent in the British company were the recording engineers Fred Gaisberg and Sinckler Darby from America.

The later more famous trademark painting *His Master's Voice* was by Francis Barraud, originally featuring a dog listening to a phonograph.



He offered it to Hough who turned him away so he offered it to the Gramophone Co. Barraud was persuaded to change the phonograph to a gramophone (as pictured) – and the rest as they say is history... The two trademarks are reproduced at the top of this article. On his 1905 gramophone Martyn played a 10" record of the *King Song* from Sullivan's **Pirates of Penzance**, still producing a clear signal.

Finally, mention was made of Danish inventor Valdemar Poulsen who in 1898 invented a reel-to-reel wire recorder. Without electronic amplification, however, recording electrically was unsuccessful. It is interesting to reflect on the 19th century struggles to reproduce sound, which in the 20th century became a process of continual search for better quality recordings, culminating in the vinyl LP and the compact disc – but using digital sound recording.