



East Hoathly & District Preservation Society

Talking Machines

Presented by David Homewood.

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Our speakers are invariably passionate about the topics on which they speak and David is no exception. His interest in “talking machines” stemmed from the time, aged 5 or 6, when an aunt gave him a portable gramophone that she no longer wanted. His interest in it soon outshone that for his model railway, which was abandoned.

It was Thomas Edison, who, in 1877, developed the phonograph after coming up with the idea of adapting the mouthpiece of a telephone (invented the previous year by A. Bell) to record and replay sound waves via a stylus to and from a recording medium. The term gramophone generally relates to the later disc format of recording. Early results used tin foil on cylinders, which suffered from the drawback of not being removable from the supporting medium intact, to be followed by hard wax cylinders, which could be replaced comparatively easily. The first recording was the now famous phrase, “Mary had a little lamb, its fleece as white as snow, ha, ha, ha!”

Early phonographs were sent around universities to demonstrate their capability and whilst most accepted it as a wonderful piece of new technology, there were those who refused to accept its methodology and ascribed it to trickery. The initial market was for business use, to be followed by versions for public events, such as fairgrounds, and then domestic models after the Great War. Their peak came around 1925, before gradually succumbing to advances in radio technology.

Based on the book “Phonographs and how to make one”, published in the 1880s, David made his own model. Although functional, he didn’t play it as it is apparently quite tricky to setup correctly. However, he did play a 1902 model, costing the princely sum of £15 new, with Florrie Ford singing “The Bull & Bush”.

As for his own collection, however, the main spring on David’s first machine broke after a while and so his father bought a second gramophone player to keep him happy. Inevitably, that led to a third one being bought for the grand sum of 30/- (£1.50 for those unfamiliar with LSD) and the interest snowballed from there. He now has about 100 players from various periods, confined to a bedroom and garden sheds.

David then went on to tell the tales of how the trademark “His Master’s Voice” came into being, how the opera singer Enrico Caruso became the first million selling record artist – playing a 1915 edition of one of his songs, how phonographs gave way to the gramophone and little snippets such as the origin of the word “album”. Other machines were also played, including a replica of a Gramophone Co style 5 machine, with 1899 music from the British Army. We were also treated to a pocket phonograph, which could be described as the forerunner of the Sony Walkman.

Gramophones only stopped being made in the late 1950s, with the last 78 record being pressed in 1960, some 80 years after their invention. How much of today’s music technology will last half that time?