

Alphonse Cary

Alphonse Cary gave his name to a music shop which was in business at No.s 45 – 48 Northbrook Street from c. 1872 until the 1960s. It was a family business.

Alphonse Cary senior was born in Belgium in about 1848 but is listed as a British subject on later census returns. He first appears in the Newbury Weekly News in 1869 as living in Thatcham and offering singing classes in the new catholic schoolroom in Speenhamland. He was also the organist at St Joseph's Catholic church. He had already established singing classes in Thatcham and Woolhampton and was described as a Professor of Music by the NWN. In 1871 he was listed on the census return as living at 8 Back Lane, Thatcham in very modest circumstances. During the 1870s, he composed various pieces of music and published sheet music which would continue to be a staple of his business for his lifetime. He also published instructions for piano lessons which included arrangements for small hands.

In **1872** he used the pages of the NWN to announce that he had "*removed to the above address*"; **The Music and Musical Instruments Warehouse at 45 Northbrook Street**. The advertisement announced that he had pianos and harmoniums for sale or hire; that he can tune and repair instruments and supply parts. Also, "*Artistes provided for balls, croquet parties etc.*" In December 1872 he announced that he had considerably enlarged his premises and thanked the nobility and gentry for their support.

From that date on, Cary advertised his business every week in the NWN and increasingly far beyond Newbury.

In 1874 he bought the piano tuning business of Mr William Wells of Speenhamland Broadway.

As early as 1875 he is described in the NWN as an "importer, maker and tuner of pianos and harmoniums". However, there is some doubt about whether he made these instruments from scratch or assembled and sold them under his name. He had strong connections to Germany, to Stuttgart and Dresden where Vogel pianos were made and was their agent (*D Pratley*). David Pratley is convinced that pipe organs were made in Park Street and that pianos and harmoniums may have been made in Kentish Town. Horace Durant, who worked for Cary in Newbury, is described on the 1881 census as a piano maker and tuner.

In 1888 the new organ he had provided for the rebuilt St Marys Greenham was dedicated. An article in the NWN states that the whole of the instrument was built at the Park Street works and that it had taken 8 months to complete. The organ was placed in a chamber on the north side of the chancel. In the evening, he and Mrs Cary were invited to an organ recital at Greenham Lodge by Mrs Baxendale. The newspaper also records

that he provided a new organ for the Primitive Methodist Chapel in Ramsbury and The Marlborough Times describes him as the “well known organ builder”.

Certainly, Cary advertised his business as having premises in Kentish Town which was the heart of the British piano making industry with firms like Collard and Collard. However, Cary’s premises in Newbury cannot be compared with the piano factories in Kentish Town.

The **1881 census** has him living at 44 Carnarvon Terrace (West Street). He was now married to Jane and had four children. He is described as a musical instrument dealer.

In 1882 Cary was advertising for tenders for a new music warehouse and premises at 47 and 48 Northbrook Street. The architect was James Money and Cary received estimates from several local builders including Samuel Elliot.

In August 1882 the NWN published the following article.

The bye-street leading out of Northbrook Street, hitherto known as Alton Place, is at present undergoing great improvement. The property was some time ago acquired by the Newbury Land Company and a portion of it, including two shops and premises adjacent in Northbrook Street, has been sold by them to Alphonse Cary, who having pulled down these houses, is erecting a new and commodious shop and warehouse on their site, which will afford increased accommodation for his pianoforte and musical instruments business.

The following illustration is of the showroom in 1883 and shows the windows on the Park Street side which have now gone. However, this is an advertisement and may well exaggerate the length of the premises.

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5, St. FRANCIS & St. LONDON.

ALPHONSE CARY,
NEWBURY.

PRINCIPAL SHOW ROOM (97 FEET LONG) ALPHONSE CARY'S NEW PREMISES, 47 & 48, NORTHBROOK STREET, NEWBURY.

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RAILWAY TIME TABLES
FOR NOVEMBER.

TIME TABLES—CONTINUED.
Table 5.—READING and NEWBURY to Main Line.

TIME TABLES—CONTINUED.

In 1886 the Park Street Concert Room added an ante room and gallery which could seat 40 people.

The **1891 census** places the family at 48 Northbrook Street. Alphonse is described as a music publisher and 2 of his sons were apprentices to their father.

In 1894 the Reading Standard reported that a considerable alteration had been made to the shop front of the music warehouse, a considerable improvement to its appearance. *"The shop front is now imposing in character."*

The shop, warehouse and concert hall were prominent features of Northbrook Street for a long time.

When Newbury Girls School opened in the Technical Institute in Northbrook Street in 1904, they rented the concert hall at Alphonse Cary's, on the opposite side of Northbrook Street, for dancing and gymnastics. They had the room for two days a week at the cost of seven shillings. The hall was still used in the 1930s for weddings and big parties.

Cary seems to have been a talented musician. He composed several pieces of music for which the sheet music has survived. The Electric Polka 1879 was one of the best known and had a very dramatic cover.



He played the organ at St Joseph's catholic church, taught piano and played at public occasions. Cary took an active part in the musical life of the town and was the musical director and conductor of the "Great Amateur Star Christy's Minstrels" in 1870. He was later involved in the Amateur Orchestral Union. In January 1881 he provided the music for the Craven Club Hunt Ball when the band they had booked were unable to reach

Newbury because of the snow. He often provided a grand piano for musical occasions in the town.

He also advertised tickets and programmes for musical events in Newbury and London. He attracted performers to Newbury who were very well known at the time, like Miss Ethel Barnes and Miss Marie Olson. The concerts took place in the Town Hall.

He was a clever entrepreneur and was very quick to take advantage of new ideas. The goods he sold could appeal to a wide range of incomes. In 1879 he was advertising bigger pianos, concertinas, violins, organs, bicycle bugles, musical boxes from 3s 9d upwards and postman's horns. Later adverts often focus on violin strings; a special Cary design. Cary's had a team of piano tuners who travelled around the villages to look after domestic instruments and church and chapel organs.

In 1879 his customers could pay 1/3 of the cost of their purchases down and pay the balance in 12 monthly instalments. By 1881 he was offering a 3 year credit system. He took advantage of rising literacy and the growth of local newspaper circulation by advertising in newspapers as far afield as Tynemouth and Hartlepool, always describing his business as "Cary's of Newbury". The success of his sheet music publishing business tied in perfectly with the rise in ownership of pianos by the middle and better off working-class homes. A clever marketing idea was to set up a circulating musical library. A payment of 25 shillings paid for a year's membership and the subscriber could borrow 6 pieces at a time.

Always an innovator, by 1899 he was advertising the Edison Bell Phonograph and was giving polyphon automatic musical boxes away free of charge to hotel owners. I think these probably took a coin in the box to make them operate as Cary also offered a % of the takings. Another new line in 1899 was large amplifying horns for exhibition and outdoor purposes.

By 1901 Cary senior had retired and the Newbury business was passed on to Alphonse's second son **Edward Oswald**, usually referred to as Oswald. In 1901 he was aged 26, unmarried and living at 48 & 49 Northbrook Street. He is described as a musical instrument dealer.

Oswald carried on the business until c.1924. "Oswald Cary succeeded his father in the business and carried it on until about 1924, when he sold it to a Reading firm." [NWN, Jan. 5, 1950 p. 8]. (David Pratley)

He seems to have lived the life of a footloose bachelor, fined on several occasions for negligent driving or speeding. By 1939 Oswald (piano dealer retired) was living at 6 Essex Street aged 75, still unmarried and looked after by his housekeeper, Louisa Brown.

The shop continued to be an important part of Northbrook Street and retained the name Alphonse Cary until 1963 when Kelly's Directory lists it for the last time as selling

records and musical instruments, radios and televisions. In the 1964 edition the shop is listed as P. A. Baker's.



The premises survive and are now used as a Dogs Trust shop. The 1882 / 1894 frontage is unchanged but neglected. A drawing from the late 1800s shows the showroom windows going round the corner into Park Street whereas today they are blocked up. The drawing is accurate but its size is exaggerated by the tiny size of the figures in front of it.



Architects Drawing of Alphonse Cary's Shop No 47 / 48 Northbrook Street Newbury in the late 1800s

On the north side of Park Street there is a row of two storey brick-built properties which are now the constituency MP 's office and still have a warehouse door on the first floor and a metal bracket. David Pratley, whose father worked there from 1927 until the 1950s, recalls that the upper floor was a workshop, with interior walls removed, while downstairs was the storeroom for pianos in for repair.



Many thanks to David Pratley for suggesting that Alphonse Cary should be remembered and for doing such extensive research into his life.

Val Pollitt

March 2025