

Puccini and Stephens' Blue-Black Ink what do they have in common?



MELANIE WYNYARD

One afternoon at Stephens House, I got a call over the radio saying that there was a man in the café courtyard who had "something for me". I expected to be handed the usual ink bottle, but the man handed me a piece of paper which was a photocopy of

an extract from a book which read: 'Constantly chain-smoking and relieving his sore throat with cups of coffee he worked away at La Bohème. He was painstaking and meticulous and it took three years and nine months to complete. He relied on Ricordi for a free supply of score paper and Stephen's blue-black ink (54)'.

I must admit that I laughed. There have been several claims over the years about Stephens' Ink, many of which have turned out to have no evidence at all or have simply been hearsay stated as fact. I returned to my office and put the piece aside. I also have to confess to not getting the man's name.

Eventually the page resurfaced from the pile of paperwork on my desk. It was a copy of page 984 from *The Lives and Times of the Great Composers* by Michael Stein. Was it possible that there was some truth in this? So, a copy of Stein's book was duly acquired but the

reference was, in fact, to yet another book: *Monsieur Butterfly* by Stanley Jackson which was out of print. I managed to source a copy from Ebay and scoured it from page to page, finally coming across a reference to Puccini who "still demanded free supplies of score paper and his favorite Stephen's (sic) blue-black ink." That sentence gave no further references to explore and, without a cast-iron provenance, Puccini's preference for Stephens' ink was still just hearsay.

Giacomo Puccini started composing around 1880 by which time, thanks to Henry Stephens' efforts, the blue-black indelible ink was indeed available throughout Europe, so it was possible that the composer would have used and liked the ink. More research was obviously needed. This led to research not on Puccini but on his publisher and furnisher of said ink: Guilio Ricordi. An exhaustive search finally unearthed a letter written by

Puccini to Ricordi on 31 July 1898 when Puccini was working on *Tosca*. The letter says: "I shall send on some material which I have already orchestrated, but I beg you not to look at it, as the calligraphy has deteriorated. I cannot understand it, but as I grow older I lose that neatness of hand which was so conspicuous a gift in me! Could you please send me on a bottle – not very large – of the usual Stephens' Blue-black."

Eureka! And a big thank you to the man with the photocoppy.

We have decided to celebrate the work of Puccini and, of course, Stephens' Ink with an evening of Puccini's music. The Voice finalist Nadia Eide will join tenor Robin Whitehouse in performing arias and duets from *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Madam Butterfly* and more, set against the backdrop of Henry Stephens home on Wednesday 6th July at 7.30pm in the gardens at Stephens House.

To book tickets please go to: <https://tinyurl.com/jkbh8a6c>.

Who were the first residents of Hampstead Garden Suburb?

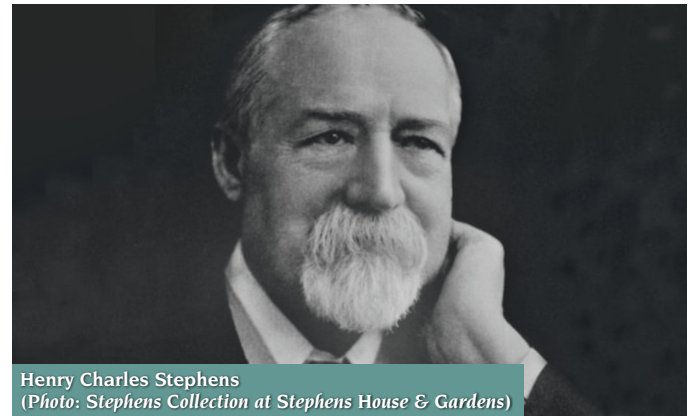
JUDY SMITH

Wouldn't you like to find out who lived in your house before you did?

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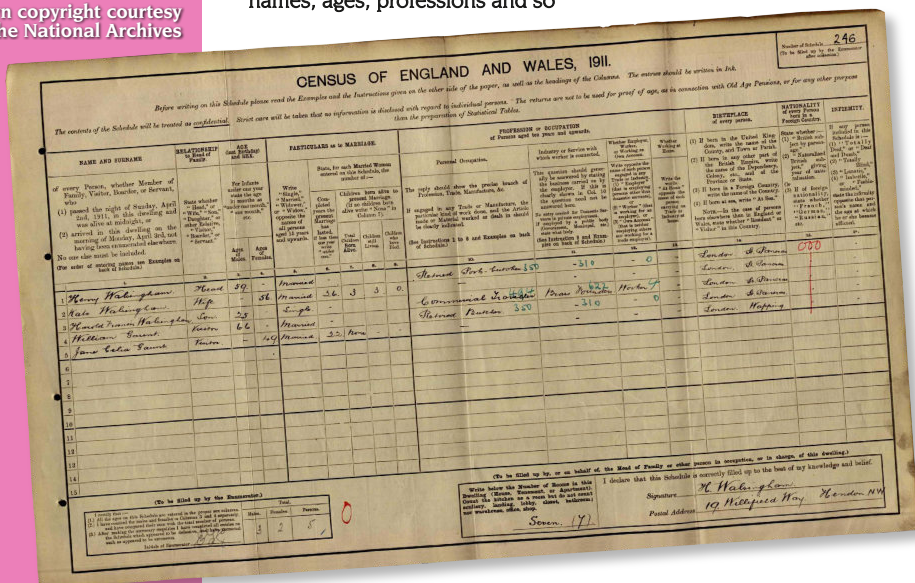
much more of the people who lived in your house. So go to hgsheritage.org.uk/Detail/collections/c1911-0 to visit the online Museum and find out about the original inhabitants of your house.

HGS Heritage is very grateful to Bruce Mackay for all his hard work in loading literally hundreds of 1911 Census Forms into the Museum for all of us to enjoy.



Henry Charles Stephens (Photo: Stephens Collection at Stephens House & Gardens)

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