

The History of George Lowden and his Guitars

In the late 1980's George Lowden accepted an invitation to visit the main Lowden dealer for Switzerland, Servette Music in Geneva. Upon his arrival, co-proprietor Yves Imer thanked George for coming, because some of the Lowden customers he was to meet had not realised he actually existed – they thought “George Lowden” was merely the figment of some marketing man's imagination - a leprechaun, in fact! This served to enlighten George to the principle that an ‘information vacuum’ will always be filled – sometimes benignly, sometimes bizarrely. So, for the record, here is the complete story of George Lowden and his guitars.

1951 George Lowden was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

1961 In the summer of this year, at the age of ten, George began what was to be a lifelong pursuit to build guitars, which would inspire players with their sound, feel and looks. “ My friend Alan French and I made two " guitars" with the help of his dad, who was a boat builder in Groomsport, County Down. The "guitars" had fishing line for strings, bent over nails for frets, and a square soundbox!! “

1969 At eighteen, George remained driven towards learning the art of guitar building and made a further attempt. “I had another go and made an electric guitar- more recognisable as a guitar, but barely so! I fancied myself as Ireland's answer to Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix... (painful adolescent memory....)”

1973 “After a fair bit of prayer (I needed all the help I could get!) I decided to make guitars professionally. Armed with some wood, basic woodworking tools and an excellent booklet by English Luthier John Bailey, I began the journey.”

Over the next two years he taught himself how to use woodworking tools and learned how to make guitars, mostly by trial and error. He began thinking about body shapes, internal bracing patterns, side profiles, construction options, varnishing techniques, and design options for stabilising the acoustic guitar while still allowing it to breathe... This was a challenging and exciting time.

“I learned everything the hard way. I had no one to teach me how to avoid the obvious pitfalls. I tried new shapes, bracing designs and many other ideas and gradually emerged from the ‘hard school’ of self taught guitar making.”

Prior to this time, George had been influenced by guitars that were beyond his financial reach, like the Gibson J 200, Gibson 335 as well as one or two Gretsch models. He knew where his tastes lay and tried to include some of this in the first Lowden guitars.

“Of course the three dimensional ‘actuals’ frequently didn't turn out like the shape in my head and so I kept re-designing for the first four years.”

Throughout these years of experimentation, George became increasingly aware of the physics involved in the production of sound in the acoustic guitar.

“I began to think about air movement inside the soundbox, soundwaves being generated by the energy from the bridge and strings, how to spread this energy over as large an area of the top as possible, how to discipline the top vibrations as evenly as possible taking into account the extra stiffness provided by the proximity of struts to each other, as well as the stiffness created by the guitar sides. I thought about how to reduce ‘drag’ inside the soundbox, about how to ‘focus’ the energy of the vibrating soundboard,

about how to provide extra stability over and above the traditional steel string design, so that neck re-sets would be unnecessary and sustain would be increased”

The Lowden guitar was on its way...

TAKINGFORM

George then embarked on a series of experiments aimed at increasing structural stability. At first he tried a neck block extension under the fingerboard and then finally designed what has now become known as A-frame bracing. This consists of two structural struts extending either side of the soundhole, up through the transverse strut, under the fingerboard and finally, butt jointed against the neck wood itself inside the dovetail neck joint. He also worked hard to create simple elegance in the cosmetic design.

All of these thoughts (as well as continued prayers to THE designer of the trees and the laws of physics!) and more led to Lowden's innovative soundboard bracing design, including the “dolphin” strut profiles (which are top and side voiced for optimum weight & stiffness), the bridge design, the finish inside the soundbox, as well as the methods of assembly chosen and the blends of differing woods...

1976/79 The first guitars with A-frame bracing and the dolphin voicing profiles were made in 1976 and in many ways have established the Lowden guitar's distinctive and unique sound. The Lowden guitar was born.

“What is now called the O 25 had arrived, along with another three models all of the same shape, bracing and simple cosmetics. I was happy with the voicing of the bracing, craftsmanship, general design and most of all, tone, of these guitars.”

HELP ALONG THE WAY

“ It was at this stage, as I began to work my way through other problems (for example how to make this a commercially viable project, whilst being based in a troubled part of the world) that I also began to receive help with specific information about where I could source various tools and woods and even construction techniques, from Stephen Delft and Chris Eccleshall (both excellent London based luthiers) They were very patient and helpful during my ‘learn as you go’ period! I always remember this today when I am asked for help from other aspiring luthiers.”

George's friend Alastair Burke, who had just received his South American rosewood and cedar “O38”, showed his guitar to the main acoustic guitar shop in Paris, Folk Quincampoix. George had no idea he was doing this until the shock phone call for an immediate order of six guitars with the request for four more every month!!! Sales began to explode, and George tried to expand the business to cope with the demand over the next few years. This proved difficult however, due to commercial inexperience and the exceedingly high interest rates prevailing at the time.

That first Irish studio/workshop, in 6a High Street, Bangor employed 4 trainee guitar makers, Colin ‘Dusty’ Miller, Frank Kernaghan, Sam Irwin and Michael Hull. It produced approximately 100 guitars during this period, which can be identified by small blue rectangular labels.

SAMURAI STEEL AND THE JAPANESE WORK ETHIC

1980 Yves Imer and Rene Hagmann of Servette Music in Geneva had always been very supportive towards George since they first discovered his guitars in 1978. In 1980, Yves Imer approached George and asked if he could source a small and expert company to make his guitars under license, so they would be more widely available.

“Thus began a five-year period when my guitars were made in Japan by a small, dedicated band of luthiers near Nagoya. I visited the S. Yairi workshop regularly and gave the designs, checked quality, and learned about Japanese craftsmanship and their serious approach to work! I found the folk I worked with to be honourable and courteous, and I had the greatest of respect for their hard work and excellent guitars. I learned a lot about production and tools, they in turn were delighted to be able to make original design guitars to this quality level.”

“In particular, I learned, what was to me, a new type of workmanship, which can only be achieved when working fast. Until that time I thought a lot of time was needed to work to a high standard. However, in fact I saw and practiced how to achieve the same or better results very quickly, through a level of concentration I had not previously experienced. It was then that the Japanese folk took me to a tiny store in Nagoya where I was able to buy Japanese hand tools with their laminated steel and fantastic cutting edges which were a complete revelation to me”.

LOWDEN GUITARS INTERNATIONAL: BRINGING IT ALL BACK TO IRELAND

1985 As a result of a rampant fashion for all things electronic in music, sales of acoustic instruments slumped worldwide and the owners of the Japanese factory decided to consolidate by closing their workshops and moving production of Lowden guitars to a larger factory where other brands were made. George was concerned about this proposal and decided to try setting up a new factory in Ireland. By way of very little capital (raising it then was more difficult than it is now) and through the help of investors (David & Frances Jebb), George managed to rent an empty shell of a building in Bangor, Co. Down and began to employ and train new craftsmen from scratch. Setting up a guitar factory in Ireland where previously there had been no such thing, was an illuminating and challenging experience to say the least. George became a salesman, guitar maker, trainer, businessman, all rolled into one.

1986 Micky Uchida, (a Pierre Bensusan fan and guitar maker himself from Japan) arrived in Ireland to stay with the Lowden family, having asked George if he could come to work for him. Micky had been trained in classical guitar building but was interested in learning about steel strings. A short time after his arrival in Ireland with his wife Izumi, George offered Micky the factory manager's position after observing his obvious talent as a craftsman and luthier.

“We worked closely together from that time onwards. Micky concentrated on filling in any area of the factory which needed it and sharing the burden of training and quality control, while I concentrated on productivity, jig design and general management. Izumi actually carried out final assembly and set up of the guitars as well. The only disadvantage to this business set-up phase was that I had no time left for guitar making myself, except to help out in particular departments which needed it from time to time.”

Lowden Guitars of this period were labelled with a slightly smaller version of the current oval label and approximately 500-600 guitars were made in each of the first 3 years then approximately 1000 per year thereafter.

A NEW CHAPTER

1988 The market was still quite flat for acoustic guitars and worldwide prices were about half (in real terms) what they are now; “David Magagna (former vice president of CF Martin and the then USA distributor for Lowden) told me ‘ in the late sixties I could have gone into a large NY store, shown a guitar (not a Martin by the way!) and the owner would have said to me, that's the worst guitar I've seen for quite a while... I'll take fifty! While in the eighties I would have gone into the store and shown a truly

great guitar and the owner would have said to me, that's the best guitar I've seen for years, but I can't buy one until I get rid of all these acoustics on my walls'!"

Eventually in November, the fledgling Irish company ran out of funds. Those were difficult times, with no one interested in investing (except 2 venture capital companies who offered a small amount of money in exchange for a total 66% of the equity - an offer George turned down!). George was uncomfortable continuing with an under-funded business unable to meet its commitments, and decided to close it down. On being informed of this, the Company's bank asked George to agree to a Receivership as they believed that the Company could be sold with George's agreement for future co-operation.

A group of local people put together a consortium, headed by Andy Kidd, (a record producer) to buy the assets out of Receivership. They called their company The Lowden Guitar Company and moved production to Newtownards Co Down. George Lowden signed a licensing agreement with this new company. The agreement ensured that he retained personal ownership of the Lowden designs and trademark, and enabled him to provide quality control and new designs while remaining independent from the company. The model range at that time was much more limited than it is now, but the beginnings of a dealership network had already been established in parts of Europe and the USA.

INTERLUDE FRANCAIS

1989 George moved with his wife and children to France and worked as an independent luthier designing and building his new range of classical guitars as well as his steel strings. He had initially developed his classical design previously whilst on a Winston Churchill Travelling Scholarship (– to which he was introduced by veteran Irish musicians' & craftspersons' champion David Hammond from the BBC Belfast . The scholarship took George to Switzerland where Lowden dealer & concert guitarist Werner Ernst provided a temporary workshop in his home , and tested the first 3 prototypes.) During this period he was building between 10 and 15 instruments each year for individual musicians who commissioned a guitar. He still maintains his own personal building – though being more 'hands-on' than ever with the workshops, he now builds around 6 per year & his waiting list is presently in excess of 4 years!)

At the same time, he also designed new models for The Lowden Guitar Company, and checked quality on periodic visits back to Ireland..... but never quite learned to speak French!

MORE DEVELOPMENTS

1990 to '98 "I returned to Ireland and continued to build my own acoustics and classic custom guitars for individual clients. I also continued to work with the company designing new guitars, helping with training and quality control. It was during this period that the only real significant change to the fundamental design took place: Ernie McMillen who was the longest standing guitar craftsman in the factory at that time, being the very first person I employed back in 1985, approached me with an idea to alter the way the top bracing was carved to make it more suitable for a factory set up. His idea was to take the existing bracing design and replace dolphin like curved bracing profiles, with straight line tapered top carving in order to try and make the bracing more consistent and quicker to produce. The position and dimensions of the struts remained the same. I asked Ernie to make up some test tops and then I experimented with exact specifications for the carving and tapering. After I had completed the development work and was satisfied with the voicing, the alteration was introduced. All guitars (built in

the Newtownards factory) except one or two specials and the 25th Anniversary guitars had this top voiced system from then on”

This change provided a more consistent and faster factory method to bracing the guitars.

“I brace my own guitars individually according to the overall design concept of the instrument. The original “dolphin profile” Lowden system requires considerable judgment and careful work in order to achieve best results. It is possible to overdo it, seeing the design is a little more 'on the edge' but when good it is really good! In the factory though, the adapted system was a better choice at least until such time as a working method could be devised which creates totally consistent strut profiles with all those parabolic curves!.....”

1991 Micky decided to return to Japan to start his own luthier business. “At one point Micky and I talked about doing a joint exhibition of our work in Japan and eventually we may do that for old times sake!”

'92 to '95 In order to provide additional 'hands on' help, Andy Kidd invited George to set up his own workshop within the Lowden Factory, to be on hand everyday for troubleshooting and training.

'96 to '98 George moved his workshop out to his new home in Bangor and worked most days from there, but visited the factory virtually every week to use some larger machines and do lacquering work in their spray booth. During these two years George remained available to help with troubleshooting and new staff training. He also trained his eldest son Daniel in classical guitar building.

NEW DESIGNS

'91 to '98 The Small body, Jazz and Premier Range...

“During these years I designed some new models to increase the range available. Nick Webb of Acoustic Alchemy (sadly, Nick passed away a few years ago after a brave battle with cancer) approached me and asked me to design a small bodied guitar which he wanted to compliment his "O" series mahogany / cedar guitar. I set about designing a body shape with back and top profiles designed to increase bass without making the trebles thin or 'boxy'. The soundbox profile of the 'S' series and the voicing of the bracing have this purpose in mind. I made the first proto-type myself with the original parabolic bracing tuned to suit the smaller body. The back and sides were walnut and the top was cedar.”

“When the day arrived and I tuned the finished guitar up for the first time, I was completely 'zonked' by the sound!!! I didn't want to let it go. Even though I am a poor player, this guitar would have persuaded even me to spend a lot of time learning to play better. This was perhaps the only time I can ever remember being so taken with a particular guitar's sound that I was in another world for a while! Unfortunately Nick was literally waiting for the guitar in a studio in Germany and it had to go and be played properly! The 'S' series was now born!”

Some time later George added to the range of new designs by introducing the 'Jazz' nylon string electric acoustic. “The challenge for me was to design a new nylon string guitar in such a way that it would sound wonderful on stage played electrically. From my experience in building and designing my concert classic guitars, the whole instrument has to be so sensitive to be able to respond fully to the nylon strings, that when it is amplified there can be very severe problems with feedback and the whole soundboard vibrating in sympathy with the PA system! There are ways to dampen this of course, but a

better way is to design a nylon string guitar dedicated to stage playing at volume. An 'acoustic' nylon string guitar (eg; a concert guitar) should be played naturally without significant amplification and for this purpose nothing is better than a good concert guitar. However for stage work at volume, perhaps with a band, a completely different type of guitar is needed, and the Lowden Jazz is the first such Lowden nylon string guitar designed for that purpose. Developments in pick up technology and amplification mean that this design is continually being developed and new designs are on the way."

In order to satisfy an increasing demand for more ornate instruments, Andy then asked George to design a series of guitars with more inlays, as the 'Standard' guitars were too plain for some folks' taste. Thus was born the 'Premier', or "35" series with George Lowden's version of "flash". This series has been the most successful of all the Lowden designs with their beautifully figured exotic woods and tastefully designed inlays combined with the best selected grades of soundboard tonewoods.

ANOTHER CHAPTER: CHANGE OF OWNERSHIP

1998 The acoustic guitar market had begun to flourish again during the 90's, but the company, significantly hampered by under-investment, had not been able to achieve its potential (great guitars are only part of the recipe). In November 1998, keen to participate in a progressive plan to develop the business further, George Lowden, along with Steve McIlwrath and Alastair McIlveen set up a new holding company to buy a controlling interest in the Lowden Guitar Company. George's vision was "that the company should become as good as the guitars themselves..."

LOWDEN'S 25th ANNIVERSARY

In November 1998, a visitor to the factory showed up guitar case in hand with the Lowden guitar serial No.1. The very first guitar George designed and built. This was an excellent reminder of how far the Lowden Guitar had come. As a celebration of this long journey, George designed the 25th anniversary limited edition model. "My aim with the design and build details was to make available in reasonable numbers, a guitar which was as close as possible to the guitars which I am only able to build personally for a very few players each year under my full name. I therefore included as many as I could of the construction, voicing and cosmetic details, found in my own guitars in this limited edition of 101 instruments."

THE MILLENIUM TWINS

By this time, the community of Lowden enthusiasts had grown considerably and players were not only attracted by Lowden's distinctive tone, great looks and attention to detail, but also by the fact that they were not mass produced. Requests increased for 'special edition' Lowdens and in order to fulfil this demand George designed the Millennium Twins. "As a luthier, I find that designing a few 'special' guitars does stretch my creative abilities and I enjoy that challenge. I believe this does help to develop the art of guitar making in a much wider sense as well. I introduced the limited edition Millennium twins with their matching sets of figured walnut back and sides and adjacent sets of redwood tops sourced from trees, which had fallen naturally."

2003 the License with the Lowden Guitar Co was ended and production of Lowden guitars at the Newtownards factory ceased at the end of December 2003.

A BRAND NEW ERA

2004 Lowden guitars are now built by our family – owned company, George Lowden Guitars Ltd. They are built under George's direct supervision in new 'studio' (atelier) style workshops located close to our home in Downpatrick, Co Down. Ireland. The integrity and passion – recently described as "Olympic

guitar making” - which goes into each and every Lowden guitar, has never been stronger, and we are very proud of our team.

We celebrated our 30th Anniversary with a limited edition pearwood guitar, which proved phenomenally popular. It is difficult to find pearwood in wide enough form to accommodate a guitar back so the series was genuinely limited and sold out incredibly quickly. As the new workshops got ‘up to speed’, the full Lowden range was brought on line again.....but with some surprises in store!

“I consider it fundamental to the integrity and future of the Lowden guitar that I continue to build guitars personally. By keeping my hands on the wood and designing new guitars for individual musicians, inspiration and the creative edge are constantly challenged”

“In November 2002 I created a new small-bodied guitar which is about classical size, (but not shape) which I am very excited about.”

“The new S shape is more ‘curvy’ than before, more feminine. That was my main aim, just to make it very attractive as a shape, but as always in design, other things come along as well. Peter Woolnough asked me about building a shorter scale and of course in terms of the overall scale of the guitar itself, a shorter string scale made sense. Many years ago I had used a 630mm scale and therefore I re-designed the new S to be voiced for the shorter scale. This has made the new guitar more comfortable to play, especially for those with smaller hands, and has not compromised the tone in any way at all. This is as a result of the voicing choices within the construction details.”

George has also further developed his original F series design (this is the mid sized Lowden) as he always felt he had not “finished with it”. The new version of the ‘F’ and the new ‘S’ are part of our current range, along with the re-designed Jazz model. Devotees of the ‘O’ (=original Lowden body shape) will be relieved to know it remains unchanged. George has no plans to alter that one! All models feature the original ‘dolphin’ hand carved bracing.

The ‘new era’ of production is signified by a new rectangular interior label, each of which is personally signed by George. Every guitar is also accompanied by an individual provenance document in addition to the warranty booklet.

AND TODAY

2006/7 The ‘50’ SERIES was introduced in 2006 to answer the demand for customisation and to offer the choice from our Reserve Selection of Master Grade tonewoods.

January 2007 saw the launch of the Richard Thompson and Alex de Grassi Signature Models – both ‘F’ cutaway models in stunning wood combinations. George is currently working on new designs for 2008.

We have ‘grown’ our workshop space by 30% - which is as far as we can physically go on this site. George is also training 3 Apprentices for the first time in many years, including our son Aaron. Our eldest son Daniel, is our Final Assembly specialist, and deputy to his father.

We have so many ideas and plans currently ‘in a holding pattern’ just waiting their opportunity to land, but our first priority will always be maintaining the quality of our guitars, and each business development will be introduced strictly in accordance with that.

Its not over...