

Allan Shiers

Born c.1955. Harp maker.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



Contents

1. Early Days
2. Teifi Harps Community Enterprise
3. Core Values
4. Interview with Allan Shiers
4. Examples of Teifi Harps

1. Early Days



Llandysul, West Wales.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Science Daily website at www.sciencedaily.com. The article, produced by Cardiff University, was published in October 2002.

A craftsman in rural Wales, UK, is developing a community business, which will create traditional harps, much more quickly and at a lower cost - thanks to engineering expertise.

Engineers in Cardiff University's award winning Manufacturing Engineering Centre (MEC) have designed a manufacturing system to mass-produce Concert and Celtic harps, without any loss of quality.

Mr Allan Shiers, founder of Harp Makers, in Llandysul, West Wales, currently produces one Concert harp and one Celtic harp per year, as well as carrying out repair work.

With grant aid from the business-support organization Help Wales and from Ceredigion County Council, he aims to create a new company, Telynau Teifi - a community business producing up to 125 Celtic harps and 15 Concert harps per year, selling at approximately 50% of the current price for hand made instruments.

More importantly the company will create highly skilled, well-paid jobs in an area that has seen its manufacturing infrastructure degenerate in the past.

To enable such a cost-effective increase in production, the MEC, based in the University's School of Engineering, carried out a manufacturing

analysis, identifying areas where the production process could be automated.

Additionally a change in the materials used in the harp has shortened the manufacturing time without compromising the sound quality. Indeed, a prototype Celtic harp was played by several experienced harpists and their reaction was very positive.

"Harpists have praised the prototype Celtic harp for producing a sound which is both precise and clear at the top of the register and warm and rich in the lower register," said Dr Andrew Thomas of the MEC.

"The relatively low cost means it will also make harp-playing accessible to more families," he added.

The research carried out by the MEC will support an application by Mr Shiers for European Union "Objective One" funding, the hope being that the new company, Telynau Teifi, will become fully operational within the next two years.

The MEC, based in the University's School of Engineering, is a Welsh Development Agency-recognised Centre of Excellence and holds the Queen's Anniversary Prize and Department of Trade and Industry First Prize for its work with industry.

It is part of the School's Electrical and Electronic Engineering Division, which received a "Five" rating in the latest UK assessment of research quality, denoting work of international and national excellence.

Earlier this year, the MEC made international headlines for developing anatomically precise artificial bodies, on which surgeons would practice keyhole surgery.



2. Teifi Harps Community Enterprise

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Teifi Harps website at www.teifiharps.com.



Allan Shiers working on a harp.

Making harps in Wales is a tradition which stretches back centuries. Our not-for-profit community enterprise was founded by harp maker Allan Shiers. Allan has been making harps for over 40 years and was an apprentice to the late renowned harp maker John Weston Thomas. Our workshop is located in a converted Victorian school by the River Teifi in Llandysul, West Wales and employs a small team of local, skilled staff who make our harps by hand.



Our aim is to secure the harp-making traditions of Wales for future generations, as well continually improving the sound and construction of the instrument. We combine traditional craftsmanship with innovative technology and modern materials such as titanium and carbon fibre. By marrying the old and the new we hope that our harps represent a step forward in craftsmanship whilst maintaining and supporting time-old traditions.

A Community Enterprise Business

Teifi Harps was set up as a not-for-profit Community Enterprise Business. Sometimes known as a ‘Social Enterprise’, our company is a little different from others. With the help of Ceredigion County Council and the European Union, Teifi Harps purchased an old school in Llandysul and equipped it to develop a range of harps. Our small team of harp makers and sales/office staff all live in the local area and every part of the harp (with the exception of the strings) is made in our workshop.



We involve the local community in many different ways. Our voluntary board of directors consists of local people who share their business knowledge and time with Teifi Harps and we receive advice from the economic development department of Ceredigion County Council. We also work with local schools by providing work experience for both pupils and teachers and provide recording facilities for their exams. We also provide members of the local Stroke Association with work-based rehabilitation.

3. Core Values



Harp maker regulating a concert harp.

The following chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Teifi Harps website at www.teifiharps.com.

Quality and Innovation

We strive to make our harps to the highest possible standard and with the best possible materials. We are constantly innovating and improving the sound and construction of our harps.

Community

We strive to support the harp community by providing information, knowledge and support for everyone from beginners to professional harpists. We also provide skilled employment for people in the local area.

Passing On Skills

Keeping harp making alive in Wales: Our Community Enterprise Business reinvests all profits to pass on skills and sustain the future of harp making in Wales.

4. Interview with Allan Shiers



Teifi Harps.

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Teifi Harps website at www.teifiharps.com. It was transcribed from a recording of a BBC Radio 3 broadcast in the Music Matters series.

Q. You founded Teifi Harps in 2004. Why was there a need for a harp centre in Wales? Given that the harp is so important to Wales, you would think there would be many people making harps in Wales.

A. You would have thought so, but it just hasn't happened. There are plenty of harpists, but the making has become a Cinderella area. The chap that taught me, John Weston Thomas (right), resurrected the craft after fifty years. And I have continued by forming what is called a not for profit community business. Which is why there are volunteers, and we have a voluntary board. It's more like a social firm. So the community itself owns the enterprise. We work here and facilitate it. My job is to pass on my forty years experience to the next generation.



Q. The room we are in now is the main workshop where you make the harps. There aren't many places in the world where there is music being made through the making of instruments and through the playing of those instruments just a little way along the corridor. Here is the place where all the frames and all the wood and all the paraphernalia are for making harps. What are the major elements we are looking at here?

A. You are quite right that having harp makers and harpists together is fantastic, because we can feed off each other and educate each other and learn from each other. The timber comes in; you can see the racks there. There is Western Red Cedar which is the sound board material. Black Walnut and Ash and Cherry and Beech - all different materials used in the making of the harp. And then there's the sound boxes. The sound board is the heart of the matter. You can see them on a rack there.

Q. They are not quite semi-circular, they are more like half ovals. And that is the cross section of the sound box, which narrows towards the top. And that's where the quality of the sound is made, where the sounds of the strings are amplified.

A. Yes, that's the acoustic chamber. And the heart of the matter is the quality of the sound board. So we go to special wood yards and we choose quarter sawn Western Red Cedar. I went to a yard recently, and out of three hundred logs I chose nine, because they were exactly what we wanted.

Q. What are you looking for?

A. You are looking for uniformity in the annual rings. Quarter sawn, so the radial rings are 90 degrees to the front. So you have to have the log cut in a special way. Of course not all logs are like that, hence the nine logs out of three hundred or so. And you spend a day searching. But unless you do that right you don't get the quality of the sound. So see how uniform the grain is on these boards.

Q. And almost completely straight.

A. Yes, and if you look at the annual rings. And you can hear it is sort of lively in my hand. Cedar is a fantastic carrier of sound. So that's the heart of the matter. That's the diaphragm that gives it the quality. If you don't get that right you're chasing the wind. Start off with that, then amplify it properly, then the frame, the tension, the quality of the strings. All those things stack up to make a good or a bad instrument. And you have to be wise enough to know the difference, really.

5. Examples of Teifi Harps

This chapter was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Teifi Harps website at www.teifiharps.com.

Siff Saff Harp

34 String Student Lever Harp



‘Siff Saff’ is Welsh for the Chiff Chaff that we hear singing in the Teifi valley here in West Wales. The Siff Saff 34-string folk lever harp is our ‘student’ model harp. Designed by listening to your feedback and building upon previous models, this harp is ideal for beginners whilst also being suitable for more experienced players. It amplifies beautifully for gigging harpists who would like a lighter weight harp to travel with!

It comes with detachable legs, canvas carry case and a tuning key all included in the price, meaning that the Siff Saff package has everything you need to get started, making it an excellent initial investment. All parts of the Siff Saff (with the exception of the strings and Camac levers) are

designed and made by us in our workshop which means we can ensure a high quality instrument which is built to last.

The Siff Saff comes fully fitted with Camac levers and is strung with with lever gauge Silkgut strings. Silkgut is a composite material specially designed by Bow Brand to have a similar sound to gut, but being a synthetic material it is slightly easier on the fingers, making it perfect for beginners! The strings are also less susceptible to changes in temperature and atmospheric pressure and moisture, meaning that they stay in tune for longer than gut strings strings – again, we finds this can be helpful for beginners and children who are still gaining confidence in caring for their harps. It’s also a great option for the vegetarians and vegans out there!

Telor Harp

34 String Fold Lever Harp



‘Telor’ is the Welsh word for the Warbler. The origins of the Telor folk harp lie in the recognition of the need for a more lightweight instrument of the type traditionally favoured by folk and Celtic harpists. At just 10kgs with titanium tuning pins, the Telor is easy to transport and responsive to play. This harp is available in a range of hardwoods which are hand

selected by us at our specialist wood yard (please use the swatch selector above to view each type). All of the parts of the Telor harp (with the exception of the strings) are designed and made by us in our workshop which enables us to ensure a high quality instrument which sounds great and is built to last.

The Telor comes with a choice of stringing options so that harpists can tailor the instrument to their personal preference. Standard-gauge gut strings offer body and higher tension whilst lever-gauge gut string are brighter and lower in tension. We also offer a number of different types of synthetic string if preferred – please enquire for more information.

Like all our professional model folk harps, the Telor features our own unique Teifi Semitone Levers. Made in our workshop and the product of many years research and development, these semitone levers are made from solid brass, aluminium and hardened steel and are designed give clear, defined semitone notes which do not differ appreciably from open strings. Unlike semitone levers on other harps, Teifi levers are based on the concert harp principle of double forks – this ensures minimum wear on the harp strings, as well as a positive clear sound when engaged. They are colour coded, smooth to use and easily adjustable for pitch and different string gauges. Teifi levers are also very suitable for playing contemporary music such as jazz due to their easy action, which makes note bending and quick chromatic changes quick and smooth.

Eos Harp

36 String Concert Gauge Lever Harp

Eos is the Welsh word for ‘Nightingale’. The genesis of this 36-string folk harp came from a collaboration with the harpist of the BBC National Orchestra of Wales over 30 years ago. The aim was to make a harp similar in sound to the middle range of a full-size concert harp. It has the same tension and spacing as a concert harp and has a rewardingly responsive full sound. It is ideal for for harpists and teachers who would like the rich tone of a concert harp within a folk instrument. All parts of this harp are designed and made by us in our workshop (with the exception of the strings) which enables us to ensure a high quality instrument which is made to last.

The Eos features our own Teifi Semitone Levers. These unique levers are the result of many years of research and development. Made from solid brass, aluminium and hardened steel, they are designed give clear, defined semitone notes which do not differ appreciably from the sound of the open strings. Unlike other semitone levers which tend to wear strings down and can cause them to displace, Teifi levers are based on the ‘double fork’

mechanism of a concert harp, ensuring that they do not wear the harp strings and give a positive clear sound when engaged.

Teifi levers are colour coded, incredibly smooth to use and easily adjustable for pitch and differing string gauges. They are also suited for jazz due to the easy action which can be used for lever slides and quick chromatic notes. The tuning pins on the Eos are made from titanium which means that they do not corrode in the neck, as well as reducing the overall weight of the harp. They have a coloured band denoting red for 'C' and black for 'F' as an aid to tuning.

The Eos comes with the option of having a carved scroll at the top of neck (at an extra cost). This is a design unique to Welsh harps which has its origins in the Triple Harp – an instrument which is only found in Wales. Our chief harp maker Allan Shiers learned to carve these as an apprentice with the late John Weston Thomas and has since incorporated it into the Eos.

