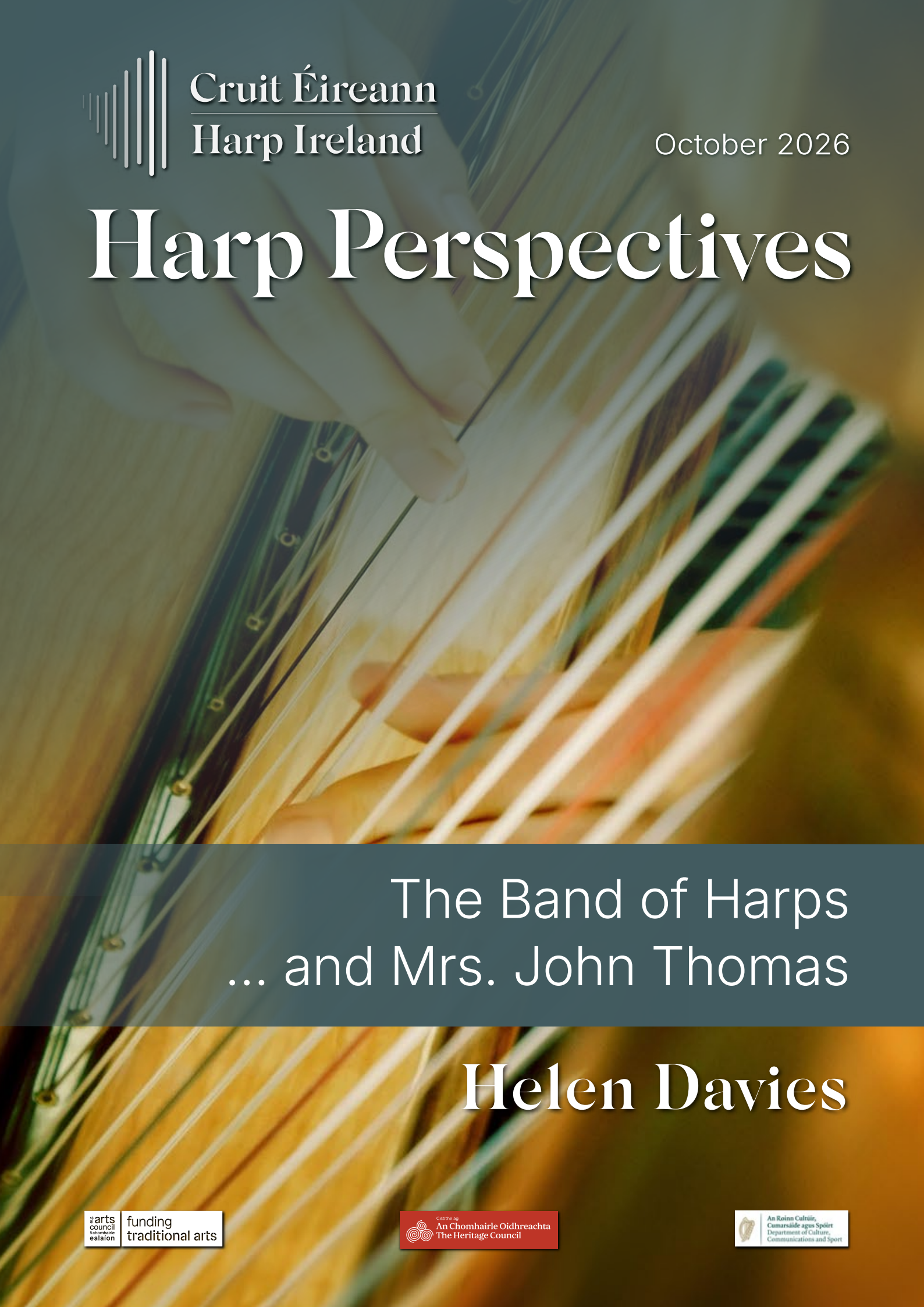


Cruit Éireann
Harp Ireland

October 2026

Harp Perspectives

The Band of Harps ... and Mrs. John Thomas

Helen Davies

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Welcome to *Harp Perspectives*, Cruit Éireann, Harp Ireland's online journal.
One of our strategic aims is to establish thought leadership across the harp sector by building up a body of thinking about the harp and harping through a historical and contemporary lens.

Harp Perspectives is a conversation about harping and features key informants, harpers and non-harpers, sharing their authentic views and ideas. We believe that this combination of scholarly research and personal insights will highlight the harping legacy inherited from our tradition bearers and help forge a contemporary harping identity, secure in its understanding of its origin and how it wishes to evolve.

In our October edition of *Harp Perspectives*, Helen Davies offers us a fascinating insight into the life and times of the Irish harpist Joan Frances Denny (1849 - 1926) from Tralee, who married her teacher, the renowned Welsh harpist John Thomas.

Our thanks to each of our contributors for their willingness to add their voices. Their contributions will no doubt enrich and inform our thinking.

Aibhlín McCrann
Editor
October 2026

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The Band of Harps and Mrs John Thomas

Helen Davies

A glimpse into the life and times of the Irish harpist Joan Frances Denny (1849 - 1926) from Tralee. She married her teacher, the renowned Welsh harpist John Thomas (1826 - 1913) and after their marriage was a regular member of his harp ensemble, the Band of Harps.

Joan Frances Denny was born in Tralee in 1849 and was baptised in Tralee Church on 29th July that year. Her father was William Denny, youngest son of the 3rd Baronet, Edward Denny and her mother was Marianne Trueman, originally from Exeter in Devon, England.



Joan Frances Denny
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

The Denny family was one of the most powerful and historic families in Kerry. The Dennys, the Blennerhassets and the Herberts were the three main families to be given land in Kerry as part of the Munster Plantations, and it was these families who ruled Tralee until the close of the 19th century.

Joan's father William Denny was born in 1811. He was a Justice of the Peace, Deputy Lieutenant and Provost of Tralee. He married Marianne Trueman in 1832 and they had two daughters and four sons born between 1839 and 1849 – Joan was the youngest child.

Tralee at that time was a modern, new town. Writing in 1854, the historian Archbishop Rowan said:

> "If ever there was a new town, Tralee is one. There are in it men old enough to remember the building of almost every house now standing. Everything in it is new. There is a new courthouse – and a new jail – and the new barracks and the new poor house – new houses, new scouts hall – new shops on all sides of the streets – new plate glass in all their windows – new flagway underfoot – new lights (gaslight) overhead, the new canal – and we soon hope to see the new railway station."



Joan Frances Denny
(National Portrait Gallery, London)

It must have been an exciting, vibrant place in which to grow up. Add to that the fact that the famous author Charlotte Bronte visited the Dennys on her honeymoon in 1854 – it all must have made quite an impression on the young Joan.

But Joan's mother died in 1860 when Joan was only 11 and her father died in 1871. She may well have spent time with different branches of her family in England and she had certainly met her harp teacher John Thomas by 1870, as she was one of the subscribers to a volume of his arrangements of Welsh melodies, listed as "Miss Denny, from Kerry, Ireland". (John Thomas taught at the Royal Academy of Music in London and it is known that Joan was a pupil there at that time, but exact dates have not been ascertained). She is recorded in the 1881 UK census as a visitor with the Woodham family in Hampshire and is listed as an annuitant, which would indicate that she was of independent means.

Very few facts about Joan's early life have come to light, but she spent a considerable amount of time between 1878 and 1883 travelling in Europe with "Aunt J and Maggie and Marion". Joan's travel journals, together with many of her drawings and paintings, are held in the National Library of Wales. These journals give a fine insight into the travels of these Victorian ladies and a good glimpse of Joan's character!

The first journal begins on August 20th 1878 as the party started their journey to visit Belgium, parts of Germany and Switzerland. They went to church in Heidelberg "where an Irishman read the lessons with such a brogue…"

Moving on from Heidelberg they crossed the Bodensee Lake in very rainy weather:

> "Aunt J was seated majestically on her old white steed, with an umbrella defiantly held over her head and Marion, I or Maggie bringing up the rear on our brown steed … we were picturesque anyhow, notwithstanding our troubles. It POURED and in time we were drenched, boots soaking, stockings wet half way up – but what was this to travellers like us, our spirits were still good … We came to a small chalet, and I took off my stockings and boots and petticoat and had a second drying match, but it was almost useless and rather unwise as I might not have got into my boots again – but I did, though they were so saturated it was not much use. Stockings and petticoat were dry anyhow. Lunched barefooted. I felt a credit to my native land – sitting down with a gentleman and his wife – barefooted and no petticoat!"

Joan's travel journals cover tours made in 1878, 1879/1880 and 1883. The ladies visited Belgium, the Swiss Alps, Germany, the Italian lakes and Austria. Much of their time seems to have been spent visiting churches and museums, and Joan kept a minute record of all that they saw and experienced. She was not always entranced by the churches or the people, but wrote with a pithy humour throughout. In one place "the hotel was very rough, the beds good, but it smells AWFUL and the food was only passable". In another place they "had some soup with an egg in it … nasty!". She wrote with the eye of an artist. In Italy "… the scenery was magnificent in all directions, great rocky mountains rising up and in the distance the snow covered Marmolata. The various lights and shades were SO beautiful.".

There are no specific references in the journals to any concerts attended, but in Lyon the party visited "Madame Fourdes for a regular French dinner and music in

the evening. I played and the son sang and a very handsome son-in-law came in the evening but he spoke no English. The best looking Frenchman I ever saw …".

The last entry in the 1883 journal reads: "September 29th – left Brussels at 7, Calais at 12:30, good lunch on board. Very rough but not ill. Got to Dover in good time and reached town (London) late in torrents of rain and so ends 5 weeks of touring on the Continent of JFD from August 29th to September 29th".

And her harp teacher John Thomas had become a widower in 1880.



John Thomas (National Portrait Gallery, London)

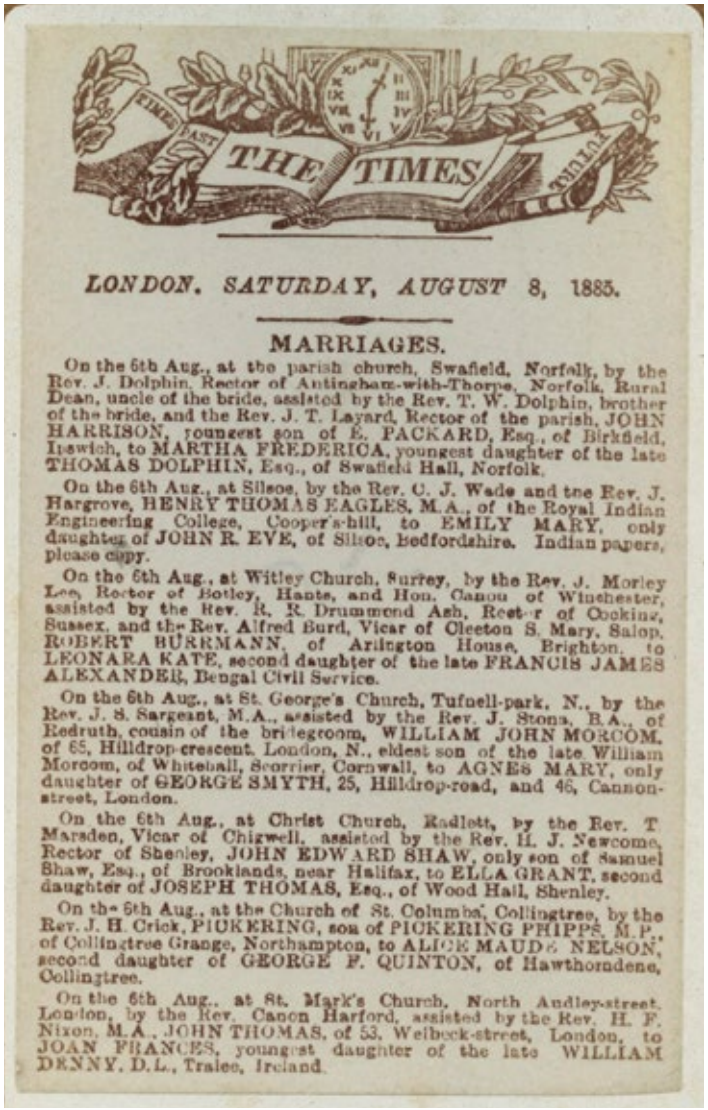
John Thomas – Pencerdd Gwalia (Chief Musician of Wales), harpist to Queen Victoria and later King Edward V11, international concert artist, composer, arranger, professor at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

He was born on March 1st (St. David's Day) 1826 in Bridgend, South Wales. His father was a tailor and keen amateur musician and young John showed prodigious talent on the harp (a traditional Welsh triple harp) from an early age. After winning a new harp at the Abergavenny Eisteddfod in 1838 at the age of 12, he was invited to London and it was here that the brilliant mathematician Lady Ada Lovelace – herself an accomplished harpist – heard him play and offered to pay for three quarters of his education at the Royal Academy of Music in London if his family could find the other quarter. He studied there for six

years (learning to speak English instead of his native Welsh and changing from the Welsh triple harp to the double-action pedal harps made by the Erard family).

After his studies he established himself in London and regularly toured Europe, becoming more and more successful. He succeeded his own teacher John Balsir Chatterton at the Royal Academy. Pupils flocked to study with him and there were high standards to meet.

He was extremely busy and did not marry until he was 51, when he married his 22 year old pupil Alice Keate in 1878. Alice sadly died in 1880, six weeks after the birth of their son Llewellyn.



THE TIMES

LONDON, SATURDAY, AUGUST 8, 1885.

MARRIAGES.

On the 6th Aug., at the parish church, Swafield, Norfolk, by the Rev. J. Dolphin, Rector of Antingham-with-Thorpe, Norfolk, Rural Dean, uncle of the bride, assisted by the Rev. T. W. Dolphin, brother of the bride, and the Rev. J. T. Layard, Rector of the parish, JOHN HARRISON, youngest son of E. PACKARD, Esq., of Birkfield, Ipswich, to MARTHA FREDERICA, youngest daughter of the late THOMAS DOLPHIN, Esq., of Swafield Hall, Norfolk.

On the 6th Aug., at Silsoe, by the Rev. C. J. Wade and the Rev. J. Hargrove, HENRY THOMAS EAGLES, M.A., of the Royal Indian Engineering College, Cooper's-hill, to EMILY MARY, only daughter of JOHN R. EVE, of Silsoe, Bedfordshire. Indian papers, please copy.

On the 6th Aug., at Witley Church, Surrey, by the Rev. J. Morley Lee, Rector of Botley, Hants, and Hon. Canon of Winchester, assisted by the Rev. R. R. Drummond Ash, Rector of Cocking, Sussex, and the Rev. Alfred Burd, Vicar of Cleeton S. Mary, Salop, ROBERT BURRMANN, of Arlington House, Brighton, to LEONARA KATE, second daughter of the late FRANCIS JAMES ALEXANDER, Bengal Civil Service.

On the 6th Aug., at St. George's Church, Tufnell-park, N., by the Rev. J. S. Sargeant, M.A., assisted by the Rev. J. Stone, B.A., of Redruth, cousin of the bridegroom, WILLIAM JOHN MORCOM, of 65, Hilldrop-crescent, London, N., eldest son of the late William Morcom, of Whitehall, Scorrier, Cornwall, to AGNES MARY, only daughter of GEORGE SMYTH, 25, Hilldrop-road, and 46, Cannon-street, London.

On the 6th Aug., at Christ Church, Radlett, by the Rev. T. Marsden, Vicar of Chigwell, assisted by the Rev. H. J. Newcome, Rector of Shenley, JOHN EDWARD SHAW, only son of Samuel Shaw, Esq., of Brooklands, near Halifax, to ELLA GRANT, second daughter of JOSEPH THOMAS, Esq., of Wood Hall, Shenley.

On the 6th Aug., at the Church of St. Columba, Collingtree, by the Rev. J. H. Crick, PICKERING, son of PICKERING PHIPPS, M.P., of Collingtree Grange, Northampton, to ALICE MAUDE NELSON, second daughter of GEORGE F. QUINTON, of Hawthorndene, Collingtree.

On the 6th Aug., at St. Mark's Church, North Audley-street, London, by the Rev. Canon Harford, assisted by the Rev. H. F. Nixon, M.A., JOHN THOMAS, of 53, Welbeck-street, London, to JOAN FRANCES, youngest daughter of the late WILLIAM DENNY, D.L., Tralee, Ireland.

Marriage announcement for John Thomas and Joan Frances Thomas (née Denny), *The Times*, London, Sat, August 8, 1885 (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Amongst his former pupils was Joan Frances Denny and she and John Thomas were married in 1885. They had three children, Arthur Thomas, Ada Myfanwy and Gwilym Ifor.

Since Joan Frances Denny first met her husband when he was her teacher, it is interesting to look at contemporary comments about his teaching and his own attitude to practise when at the Royal Academy:

"The Countess Lovelace adopted me, artistically speaking ... I remained a student there for six years ... I worked very hard ... much harder, I am afraid, than students do now. One of my fellow students, the late Charles Fowler from Torquay, used to get up at four o'clock in

the morning to practise. I followed his example, and both of us, covered with a blanket – for the rooms were bitterly cold – used to be at work at that matutinal hour ..."

One of his private pupils and good friend, Mrs. Lucy of Charlecote Park, gives an insight into his teaching:

> "Mrs. Lucy, you bring such a fine tone. I am delighted, but I am sorry to tell you that you hold your hand badly with your thumb down instead of up. You must unlearn what you have been taught and I will make you a really fine player ... Mr. Thomas kept me to scales and exercises for the first year and I did learn his way, and before I was very much older was able to play many a difficult duet with him. I would get up an hour earlier to have a good practise before breakfast, and I used to go to sleep trying to hold my thumbs up."

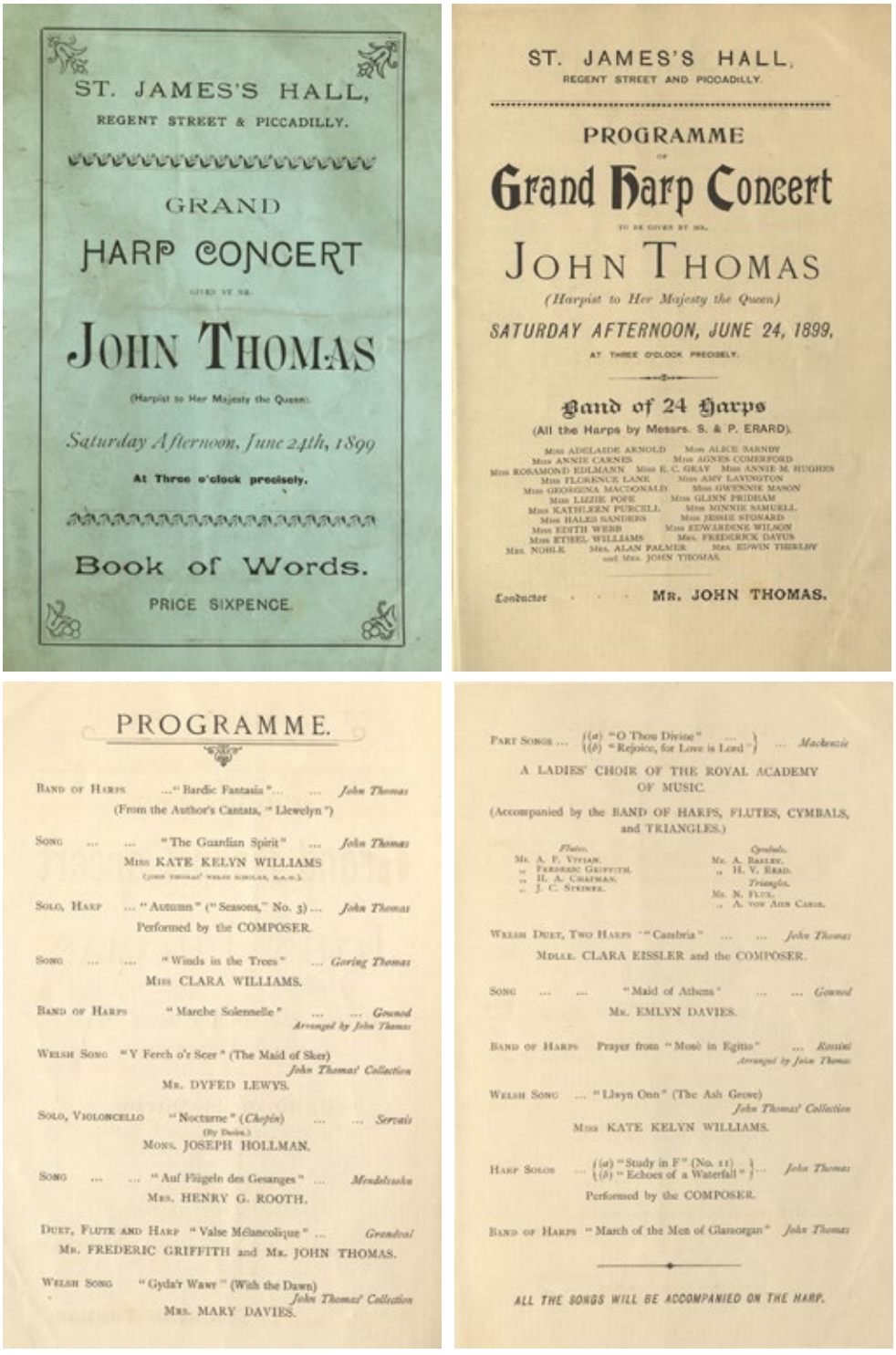
His good friend and fellow student Walter McFarren wrote:

> "An admirable student, he developed into an equally admirable Professor; the most modest of boys, he is now the most modest of men ... no others approached John Thomas in the technical skill,beauty of phrasing and refinement of style, which have raised him to the very head of his branch of the musical profession in this country."

Even though his lived in London for the rest of his life, he was immensely proud of being Welsh. He published four volumes of Welsh melodies arranged for solo harp and many duets – either for 2 harps or for harp and piano based on Welsh folk tunes. These and many other of his compositions are still extremely popular with present day harpists.

On 4th July 1862 he began his series of Grand Concerts of Welsh Music at St. James's Hall in Picadilly. This was the premiere of the Band of Harps – 20 of his students – accompanying a choir of 400 voices. This concert concept became an annual event and continued for 42 years until 1904. Throughout the years of these concerts the Band of Harps was made up of John Thomas's students, and did not have the same pupils every year – although after their marriage, the name Mrs. John Thomas appears regularly as a member of the ensemble. So, unlike many of her contemporary Victorian women, Joan Frances Denny did not give up performing after marriage. The ensemble usually played arrangements of Welsh melodies and were also used to accompany a large choir – and as can be seen from the 1899 programme,other instruments such as flutes,

cymbals and triangles were also added for effect. The aim of these concerts was to show the London audience the richness and depth of Welsh music and John Thomas himself arranged the music. The sight and sound of 20 or more young students (usually women) dressed in white and playing Erard harps in perfect unison produced a strong, beautiful and "heavenly" effect.



ST. JAMES'S HALL,
REGENT STREET & PICCADILLY.

GRAND
HARP CONCERT
GIVEN BY MR.
JOHN THOMAS
(Harpist to Her Majesty the Queen).

Saturday Afternoon, June 24th, 1899
At Three o'clock precisely.

Book of Words.
PRICE SIXPENCE.

ST. JAMES'S HALL,
REGENT STREET AND PICCADILLY.

PROGRAMME
OF
Grand Harp Concert
TO BE GIVEN BY MR.
JOHN THOMAS
(Harpist to Her Majesty the Queen)
SATURDAY AFTERNOON, JUNE 24, 1899,
AT THREE O'CLOCK PRECISELY.

Band of 24 Harps
(All the Harps by Messrs. S. & P. ERARD).

Miss ADELAIDE ARNOLD Miss ALICE BARNBY
Miss ANNIE CASNES Miss AGNES COMERFORD
Miss ROSAMOND EDLMANN Miss E. C. GRAY Miss ANNIE M. HUGHES
Miss FLORENCE LANE Miss AMY LAVINGTON
Miss GEORGINA MACDONALD Miss GWENNIE MASON
Miss LIZZIE POPE Miss GLIXIN PRIDHAM
Miss KATHLEEN PURCELL Miss MINNIE SAMUELL
Miss HALES SANDERS Miss JESSIE STOWARD
Miss EDITH WEBB Miss EDWARDENE WILSON
Miss ETHEL WILLIAMS Mrs. FREDERICK DAVIS
Mrs. NOBLE Mrs. ALAN PALMER Mrs. EDWIN THERLOW
and Mrs. JOHN THOMAS.

Conductor . . . MR. JOHN THOMAS.

PROGRAMME.

BAND OF HARPS ..."Bardic Fantasia"... ... *John Thomas*
(From the Author's Cantata, "Llewelyn")

SONG ... ... "The Guardian Spirit" ... *John Thomas*
MISS KATE KELVN WILLIAMS
(John Thomas' Welsh Scholar, R.A.M.).

SOLO, HARP ... "Autumn" ("Seasons," No. 3) ... *John Thomas*
Performed by the COMPOSER.

SONG ... ... "Winds in the Trees" ... *Goring Thomas*
MISS CLARA WILLIAMS.

BAND OF HARPS "Marche Solennelle" ... ... *Gounod*
Arranged by John Thomas

WELSH SONG "Y Ferch o'r Scer" (The Maid of Sker)
John Thomas' Collection
MR. DYFED LEWYS.

SOLO, VIOLONCELLO "Nocturne" (*Chopin*) ... ... *Servais*
(By Desire.)
MONS. JOSEPH HOLLMAN.

SONG ... ... "Auf Flügeln des Gesanges" ... *Mendelssohn*
MRS. HENRY G. ROOTH.

DUET, FLUTE AND HARP "Valse Mélancolique" ... *Grandval*
MR. FREDERIC GRIFFITH and MR. JOHN THOMAS.

WELSH SONG "Gyda'r Wawr" (With the Dawn)
John Thomas' Collection
MRS. MARY DAVIES.

PART SONGS ... {(*a*) "O Thou Divine" ... / (*b*) "Rejoice, for Love is Lord"} ... *Mackenzie*
A LADIES' CHOIR OF THE ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC.
(Accompanied by the BAND OF HARPS, FLUTES, CYMBALS, and TRIANGLES.)

Flutes.
MR. A. F. VIVIAN.
" FREDERIC GRIFFITH.
" H. A. CHAPMAN.
" J. C. STRINER.

Cymbals.
MR. A. BARLEY.
" H. V. READ.
Triangles.
MR. N. FLUX.
" A. VON ASH CARR.

WELSH DUET, TWO HARPS "Cambria" ... ... *John Thomas*
MDLLE. CLARA EISSLER and the COMPOSER.

SONG ... ... "Maid of Athens" ... ... *Gounod*
MR. EMLYN DAVIES.

BAND OF HARPS Prayer from "Mosè in Egitto" ... *Rossini*
Arranged by John Thomas

WELSH SONG ... "Llwyn Onn" (The Ash Grove)
John Thomas' Collection
MISS KATE KELVN WILLIAMS.

HARP SOLOS ... {(*a*) "Study in F" (No. 11) / (*b*) "Echoes of a Waterfall"} ... *John Thomas*
Performed by the COMPOSER.

BAND OF HARPS "March of the Men of Glamorgan" *John Thomas*

ALL THE SONGS WILL BE ACCOMPANIED ON THE HARP.

Book of words / programme (Images reproduced with permission of the Royal College of Music, London)

It was not only in these Grand Concerts that John Thomas featured a harp ensemble. In 1887 he composed a piece to celebrate Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee entitled 'Cambria's Homage to our Empress Queen' for male voice choir and 13 harps. He also travelled to America for the International Eisteddfod Days in Chicago in September 1893, where he conducted a performance of his oratorio 'Prince Llewellyn' with a chorus of 1.000 voices accompanied by 20 harps from the Chicago Harp School and the Max Bendix Exposition Orchestra.

John Thomas died ("entered into rest" as it says poetically on his gravestone in West Hampstead Cemetery) on 19th March 1913. Joan Frances Denny survived him by another 13 years and died in 1926.

After John Thomas' death the fashion for these Bands of Harps dwindled, but harp ensembles have come to life again in more recent years. When Wales celebrated the Millennium, a call went out to form a harp orchestra of 100 players for a special performance. All players had to have been born in Wales and the number was easily found, reinforcing the popularity of Wales' national instrument.

In Ireland, Janet Harbison formally launched her iconic Belfast Harp Orchestra in 1992. More recently, Music Generation and Cruit Éireann|Harp Ireland have provided possibilities for the formation of harp ensembles throughout the country.

So it can be said that the spirit of the Band of Harps lives on, thanks in no small way to John Thomas … and Mrs John Thomas – Joan Frances Denny from Tralee.



Joan Frances Denny (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Helen Davies

Helen Davies studied harp with Ann Griffiths in her native Wales and her career has been diverse and eclectic. She has held orchestral posts in Ireland (RTÉ Concert Orchestra) and Sweden (Gothenburg Opera). During her years in Ireland she taught at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and was also one of the founders of Cairde na Cruite's annual festival An Chúirt Chruitireachta, International Festival for Irish Harp.

Helen Davies relocated to Denmark in 1989 where she has pursued an active freelance career and performed world wide. Her interest in the history of the harp has led to scholarly research in 18th and 19th century harpists and their music; her current field of research is centred on the history of the harp in the nordic countries.