

THE HILL DYNASTY

17th Feby. 1660.

"and in ye morning came Mr. Hill ye Instrument Maker and I consulted with him about ye altering my lute and my violl".

Pepys' Diary.

23rd May 1789

My Amati wanted gluing so took it to Hill's for necessary repairs.

From a diary by Thomas Lewin.

JOSEPH HILL, ONE OF THE EARLIER MEMBERS OF THE HILL FAMILY, was working in Piccadilly in 1742 and then in the Haymarket in 1762 at the Sign of the Harp and Flute. All did not fare well however as everything went up in flames on the night of June 17th 1789 when the Opera House next door caught fire.

Henry Hill, the famous viola player played the solo part in Berlioz's *Harold en Italie* on the occasion of its first performance in London in 1848. 1852 brought thanks from Messrs. Sainton, Cooper & Piatti for his help in establishing the Quartett Association but he didn't get any thanks for bringing the Opera House Orchestra out on strike for fairer wages!

William Ebsworth Hill and his four sons went into partnership and opened premises in that most fashionable of thoroughfares – Bond Street, Mayfair, in 1888, and then moved across the road in 1895 to 140 New Bond Street, where the firm was to remain for nearly eighty years, gathering along the way virtually every Royal Warrant in Europe.

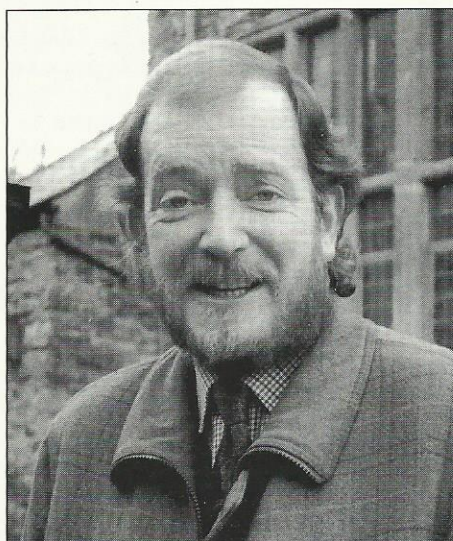
Arthur and Alfred set out to continue their father's aims and ambitions so workshops were set up in the west of London to make the finest instruments, cases and accessories available.

This was carried out to such a degree that not one item was allowed out of the workshops unless personally inspected by Alfred. Not exactly cost effective but a guarantee of the finest work available!

Apart from overseeing the everyday work of running the shop and workshops, Arthur and Alfred were keen collectors – from books to furniture via porcelain and even Bosun's whistles (which are to be found in the V & A today).

Arthur was a keen diarist, almost a latter day Pepys, and his records of both business and personal matters from the eighteen nineties to the nineteen thirties afford a fascinating

By Assistant David Hill



David Hill Esq.

insight to the fashions, foibles and feelings of the period. He became Master of our Company in 1911 and subsequently Treasurer.

Perusal of his diaries, due to be published this year, indicate his passion for his Guild and the lengths he went to in search of information. Every barrow boy in London offered anything musical would take it to Mr. Hill in Bond Street where he would receive a fair price. Rare were the days when tit bits weren't offered!

He was extensively involved in arranging the instrument section of the South Kensington Loan Collection in 1885 and really went to town for the Tercentenary Loan Exhibition in 1904 at Fishmongers Hall. Although living in an extremely rapidly changing society Arthur found time to go back in history and loved delving and sifting through old books, manuscripts and papers. Most of the history of the Company, as presented to the then Clerk H.A.F. Crewdson was gleaned in this fashion, relentlessly pursuing some idea to prove, or otherwise, its value – whilst his brother Alfred was searching the highways and byways of Europe for instruments and knowledge which culminated in the books on Stradivari and Guarneri, published in 1902 and 1931 respectively. Whilst all this was taking place, the shop in Bond Street was host to the world's finest violins and players. The diaries run names past us on every page! As they had access to superb violins Arthur and Alfred began to notice that instruments sold in the nineties in new condition although perhaps a hundred years old already, were showing sign of stress so they decided to set aside fine examples

of instruments to go into a Museum one day. That day happened in 1939 and the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford was the recipient of an unique collection including one violin by Antonio Stradivari dated 1716 which looks as if it were made yesterday. Some latter day experts cannot believe it is genuine because of its fantastic condition but there is no point in building a collection if full of restored or altered exhibits.

My grandfather and father then ran the business, continuing the traditions of yesteryear. My father was instrumental in setting up the International Society of Violin Makers the European makers' market place for knowledge and expertise, recently expanded to include the Americas! I joined the firm in 1969 and was fortunate enough, in two ways, to be taken under my grandfather's wing. Firstly because he was a very good maker and had an exceptional eye for a fiddle and secondly because it meant I spent the summer months perched in his rooftop workshop overlooking the Solent! There exists a violin, made in 1974 which was varnished by him in that summer. If you look very carefully at the back you will see a tiny flake of blue – blue paint chipped off the woodwork as the house was being repainted! I doubt the present owner of that violin knows that looking under the varnish of her violin will raise eyes in years to come!

As my father was already a member of the Livery I was admitted by patronage in 1973 along with my brother-in-law, who subsequently joined the firm, joining a three generation family of makers and musicians comprising the grandfather, father and brother.

Invited to join the Court in 1993 during a particularly interesting part of the Company's history I was privileged to share a bench with Past Master Willis at the Livery Exhibition in Guildhall in 1994 where we demonstrated our arts. My long lasting memory of the occasion being the cleaners' comments on finding the shavings I had been producing trodden all round Guildhall – every day for three days!

I now run my business from the relative calm and peace of the Misbourne Valley. Indeed the river runs past the window as I write, thirty miles from London in the heart of the Chilterns famed for beech woods some of which are quietly being replaced by trees more suitable for violin making – who knows who may want them in the centuries to come!