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The Identities of the Viols in the Ashmolean Museum

MICHAEL FLEMING

The Ashmolean Museum, which is part of the University of Oxford, houses a small but world-class collection of musical instruments. This is generally known as the ‘Hill Collection’ because it predominantly comprises a gift made by the firm of W.E. Hill & Sons shortly before the Second World War. The Hills were among the top specialist violin dealers, and of world-leading renown for their expertise. As part of a major refurbishment of the museum in 2009, the musical instruments have been moved, and their display reorganised. Boyden’s catalogue¹ of the Hill Collection is long out of print, antiquated in many respects, and does not include the later accessions. Consequently a new catalogue is being prepared, research for which has generated this article.² A table of concordances between Boyden’s numbers and the new catalogue numbers is given at the end of this article, followed by illustrations of the viols.

Most of the instruments in the Hill Collection, including the ‘Messie’ by Antonio Stradivari, which is probably the most famous and valuable musical instrument in existence, are violins but there are also other items including bows, citterns, guitars, and seven viols. The history of the viols accessioned by the museum is rather complicated; it is not reported in Boyden and cannot be accommodated in the new catalogue. This article uses the miscellaneous documents that comprise what is now called the ‘Hill Archive’ in the Department of Western Art at the Ashmolean; they are currently stored in boxfiles, unindexed and unfoliated. The Ashmolean also houses the Hills’ extensive notes about English makers, which were made during approximately the first three quarters of the twentieth century and are arranged alphabetically in their original two binders, referred to here as ‘Hill, *English makers*’.

There are substantial mismatches between the viols identified in the original gift of instruments that the University of Oxford accepted and the instruments now present, but I have found no evidence that anyone at the University reacted to these discrepancies, or even noticed them.³ The official *Decree of Acceptance* of 1938⁴ identifies the following six ‘Viole Da Gamba’:

¹ D.D. Boyden, *Catalogue of The Hill Collection of Musical Instruments in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford (Oxford, 1969).

² The contributors to the new catalogue include Tim Baker, Stephen Barber, Carlo Chiesa, John Dilworth, John Milnes, Charles Mould, Jon Whiteley, Derek Wilson, and the present author. The catalogue will be published in 2011.

³ There was correspondence about discrepancies of items other than the viols, for example in a letter from K.T. Parker to A.P. Hill, dated 13 February 1946: ‘should I now take it that I am to expect only two instruments (viz. the inlaid Stradivarius and Alard Amati violins) and two bows, by François Tourte? If this is the case, there should still be the collection of bows, described in the decree of acceptance as “various specimens of the XVIII Century” to come?’. Parker (later Sir Karl) was Keeper of the Department of Fine Art (which became Western Art in the 1950s) at the Ashmolean, 1945-1962.

⁴ *Oxford University Gazette*, 15 June 1938, reporting proceedings of the previous day.

1. by Gasparo da Salo, *circa* 1580.
2. of Venetian work of the XVI Century.
3. by Gio. Paolo Maggini of Brescia, *c.* 1600.
4. by John Rose, Elizabethan period.
5. of English workmanship, Elizabethan period.
6. by Baker of Oxford, ex. Constable, R.A.

This *Decree* had been agreed by the Hills.⁵ The descriptions in it exactly match those of the viols in the list of instruments offered to the University in the Hills' letter of 11 October 1937. Their formal offer followed several years of correspondence and discussion about various possible combinations of instruments that might be given. For example, a letter of 1 June 1937 to Dr Lindsay (Vice-Chancellor of the university) mentions:

...two fine viole da gamba, one by Gasparo da Salò, the other by a Venetian maker; in addition to these, there are, at least, four fine examples of English viols, one a superb specimen by John Rose, an Elizabethan maker who worked in the palace at Bridewell, and a smaller type of the same period, also a third by Bowles⁶ who is referred to in Mace's book as being the greatest maker of viol's [sic] in his day – this is the only specimen of his work I have ever come across. ... In addition to the above, there is a most interesting viola da gamba by Baker of Oxon, of the year 1593 ? [sic] and a viol as well, both instruments particularly appropriate because of their association with your University town...⁷

Their museum numbers, which all include '1939', show that the seven viols now present were accessioned at the same time. Of the Italian viols, only the first two of the instruments in the list above are identifiable among those now present (Ash.03 and Ash.02 – see table below for the numbering used in the two catalogues). At least one Maggini bass viol has been recorded (while with W.E. Hill & Sons in 1981).⁸ In the absence of indications to the contrary, it seems that the Hills chose to keep the Maggini viol and substitute two other Italian viols: the cornerless treble (Ash.01, by Giovanni Maria), and the seventh viol in Boyden's catalogue, an instrument labelled 'Antonius, & Hieronymus Fr.Amati ... 1611' (Ash.04). No reason for this substitution is known, and there is no evidence that anyone at Oxford objected to it. It may be that two instruments were given instead of one to make the divergence from the original list of instruments acceptable, but no evidence to support this

⁵ Oxford University Registry, correspondence file UR 6/AM/1B (1-3), item 38, Acts., 6 June 1938, 8.

⁶ Spelt 'Boles' in a letter of 11 February that year (Mace uses 'Bolles'). This instrument would be of outstanding importance but, sadly, no other trace of it has been found.

⁷ For Baker see below; none of the known instruments are dated 1593, which would be too early to be the work of any known instrument maker named Baker. What was meant by the distinction made here between 'viola da gamba' and 'viol' is not clear – perhaps the latter indicates a treble (which may have been considered to be playable *a braccio*) or a tenor.

⁸ Information provided by John Pringle, who saw it there, for *Violist* – the database of all extant antique viols started by Peter Tourin before 1979, now maintained and expanded by Thomas G. MacCracken, who has supplied helpful information for this article. The Maggini has a plain-cornered shape, as have Ash.06 and Ash.07, but external wooden liners on the ribs in the manner of the more violin-shaped Ash.02 and Ash.03. Its present location is unknown.

speculation is known. The new catalogue agrees with the Hills and Boyden about who made most of these viols, but it abandons the designation of Ash.02 as 'Venetian' and questions Boyden's description of three of the first four as basses (e.g. *viola bastarda* is a possible intended use).

The other three viols in the Ashmolean are English and their identities are more complicated. The description of viol no.5 in the *Decree*, 'English workmanship, Elizabethan period', could be applied with reasonable justification to each of Ash.05, Ash.06 and Ash.07. Viol no.4 in the list is almost certainly the festooned bass (Ash.05); it was considered to be by John Rose at least by 1940 when Alfred Hill described it as such in a letter to E.T. Leeds,⁹ and possibly as early as the time of its purchase by Alfred Hill in 1929 or shortly thereafter. But if no.5 in the *Decree* is Ash.06, why was it not described using the information on its label as 'by John Rose, 1598'? For early English viols, there are few exemplars of each maker's work, so an authentic label provides a rare and welcome basis for attribution. A label provides a stronger basis for attribution than the circumstantial evidence adduced for Ash.05, and is very unlikely to be omitted from any instrument description. In a letter to Gerald Taylor¹⁰ about the armorial decoration painted on the belly of Ash.05, Winifred Hall (who was investigating its heraldry with the assistance of A. Colin Cole, the Portcullis Pursuivant of Arms at the College of Arms) writes: 'I'm wondering whether the date (1590) on the label can be confirmed'. Perhaps Miss Hall had misunderstood a comment that the viol was *estimated* to have been made around 1590, but as this correspondence was entirely devoted to unravelling in meticulous detail the meaning and implications of the heraldry, such a casual approach to evidence seems improbable. No John Rose label bearing the date 1590 is in now the public domain, so if it existed and survives, it must be performing some unknown function in a private collection, leaving the rest of the world poorer.

Even more uncertainty surrounds viol no.6 in the *Decree*, as just two viols by [John] Baker of Oxford are recorded in *Viollist*. One is a bass that has belonged to the Victoria & Albert Museum since 1882; the other, a large treble (belly length 410 mm), is now in Japan but in 1966 was with the Dolmetsches - its location *circa* 1938 is unknown. Was this the viol once intended for the Ashmolean, or was that instrument by another 'Baker of Oxford' (possibly William, see below) that is now lost; was the attribution mere casual speculation, or was it based on a label that was felt to be more usefully deployed in another instrument? The Hills had records of two Baker bass viols from Oxford.¹¹ They knew of one by 'Mr' Baker of Oxford; this was in the famous sale in December 1714 of music and instruments belonging to Thomas Britton, the 'Small Coal Man'. The other bass viol was by William Baker; this

⁹ Ashmolean, Hill Archive. Letter dated 2 January 1940. Leeds was the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum 1928-45. The question of who made Ash.5 is discussed in M. Fleming, 'Viol-Making in England c1580-1660', Ph.D. thesis, (The Open University, 2001), i. 180-187 and 221-224.

¹⁰ Taylor was Keeper of the Department of Western Art at the Ashmolean at the time of this letter, dated 6 August 1963.

¹¹ There is also a bass viol by a Francis Baker, 1696 (Brussels, Musée des instruments de musique 487) but his address was St Paul's Churchyard, London.

they had seen and described, and their description includes the claim that it had belonged to Constable the painter:

A small viol of miniature double-bass shape the top of back canted. Length of body 23 inches but sides of same depth as a full sized 'cello, viz. 4½ inches, but at top of back owing to the cant 3¼ inches bare. Labelled William, Baker Oxon, 1682. Neat work of usual Urquhart characteristics. Double purfled oil varnish of the usual brown colour. The original head has gone and it is therefore impossible for us to say how many strings it had, but probably six. It must have been a small form of knee viol. The instrument belonged to Constable the painter, and was sold at the sale of his effects.¹²

The extant work of William Baker (c1645-1685)¹³ comprises at least five instruments, mainly violins, though at least one has been described as a viol.¹⁴ This could be the 1682 instrument as described by the Hills above, but there are several reasons to think otherwise: (i) it is common for more than one instrument by a maker to bear the same year date; (ii) the two descriptions of the label are not identical; (iii) body length reported by Hill is about 10% shorter; (iv) their description 'miniature double-bass shape' probably indicates plain bout corners with no reverse curve (unlike the viol), otherwise they would surely have written 'cello-shape'. 'Baker of Oxford' is quite an obscure designation, so assigning it to an otherwise anonymous instrument or to the Hill gift viol (which is associated with the label of another maker) would be a startling choice. The association with Constable could have an origin in some sort of documentary evidence but is more likely to be a confused family tradition that has developed into received opinion. There are numerous examples of old instruments with strong connections to particular artists. For example, Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) was an extremely good viol player who owned at least five antique viols by top makers, among other instruments, though no viols were among the instruments in the auction of his effects.¹⁵ However, music does not seem to have been significant in the life of John Constable (1776-1837), and I have seen no evidence that he ever played or owned a viol, let alone one by 'Baker of Oxford', or even that he used one as a studio prop. At present it seems most likely that some vague knowledge of Gainsborough's instruments was found appealing, then adopted, repeated, and through a process of 'Chinese whispers' developed into this claim about Constable.

¹² Hill, *English Makers*.

¹³ William Baker was referred to as 'Mr Baker' in some documents. It is possible that he made Britton's viol – the two men were close contemporaries. See P. Trevelyan, 'A Quartet of String Instruments by William Baker of Oxford (circa 1645-1585)', *Galpin Society Journal*, 49 (1996), 65-76 and M. Fleming, 'Instrument-Making in Oxford', *Galpin Society Journal*, 57 (2004), 246-251.

¹⁴ M. Herzog, 'The *Quinton* and Other Viols with Violin Traits', Ph.D. thesis (Bar-Ilan University, 2003), ii, GB8. Some earlier Oxford viol makers are known solely from documentary evidence, and two eighteenth-century instruments, one of which is a bass viol (undated), bear the label of William Cross of Oxford. 'Instrument-Making in Oxford', op cit.

¹⁵ The sale (Christie's, London, 2 June 1792) included two lutes, an Amati violin and a viola.

The Hill documents kept in the Ashmolean might be expected to clarify the identities of the viols but unfortunately they have the opposite effect as they bring further complications. In correspondence between Gerald Taylor and Desmond Hill in 1955-1956, one of the viols in the Ashmolean is repeatedly referred to as the 'Shaw' viol. This probably refers to John Shaw of London (*d* 1692) although there may have been other viol makers with that common name. The earliest information we have about Shaw is from a label in a violin, which the Hills report as:¹⁶

John Shaw at the Goulden Harp
and Hoboy nere the Maypole in the
Strand. 1656.

Shaw was appointed 'Instrument maker in ordinary to his Majesty' in February 1687/8, making and mending musical instruments, and supplying (possibly making) strings and bows for them. He was also paid for the supply of music and 'other service'. Shaw's place at Court was surrendered on 7 November 1689, though he was paid in 1691 for instrument repairs done for the court as late as 1690.¹⁷ His Court place was taken by John Walsh on 24 June 1692.

When W.E. Hill & Sons valued all the Ashmolean instruments in 1959,¹⁸ the viols were named and valued as follows:

[Brothers Amati] gamba	£1,000 ¹⁹
Small J. Rose Gamba	£500
Larger " " "	£1,000
Shaw "	£250
Gio. Maria Treble Viol	£500
Venetian Gamba	£500
Gasparo da Salo Gamba	£750

So, unless it has been substituted since 1959 (which would be extremely unlikely as the instruments were already on display by then), the Richard Blunt viol (Ash.07) is the same instrument that was formerly described as having been made by Shaw. This implies that there was no label in the viol at that time, as an extremely strong reason would be needed to justify describing it as by Shaw if it was labelled as by another maker. Ash.07 bears no strong resemblance to instruments that bear Shaw's label,²⁰ so no good reason for assigning it to this maker is apparent. On 2 July 1914 the Hills described an instrument labelled 'Richard Blunt / Dwelling in London / in Fetter Lane / 1605' thus: 'MS label in a six stringed Gamba with carved head (man's face) no fluting, but cheeks and back of head stippled with a leaf design. ... which is the original shewn us by Miss Oliphant, 56 Holmwood Road, Brixton Hill', and a

¹⁶ Hill, *English Makers*. The Hills considered another violin with a similar label (dated 1674) to be the work of Thomas Urquhart.

¹⁷ *RECM*, ii, 17, 125, 140 etc. Shaw's will of 15 June 1692 was proved 22 December 1692.

¹⁸ Ashmolean, Hill Archive. A.P. Hill to Gerald Taylor, 18 June 1959.

¹⁹ On the same occasion the Brothers Amati viola was valued at £3,000.

²⁰ A 1673 bass viol by Shaw was sold by W.E. Hill & Sons at Sotheby's, London in 1991; they had acquired it in February 1925. The only other known Shaw viol is in Switzerland.

manuscript addition says 'later ours C.642 and in Ashmolean Collection'.²¹ This confirms that Ash.07 is the Blunt viol, but leaves intact the potent mysteries of why it was attributed to Shaw in the 1950s, the relevance of Baker of Oxford, and why Ash.06 was not always described as by John Rose, 1598.

A document of 1963,²² in which Boyden sets out his proposed numbering of the instruments for his catalogue, describes the viols as follows:

1. Treble viol – Giovanni Maria of Brescia – early 16th
2. Bass viol – Gasparo da Salò – late 16th
3. Bass viol – Venetian – 16th c.
4. Bass viol (decorated) – John Rose – 1590
5. Bass viol (smaller) – John Rose – 1598
6. Bass viol (smaller) – John Shaw (Richard Blanke?) – c.1605
7. Viol with cello features – A. & H. Amati – 1611

So in the 1960s when Boyden was writing his catalogue, Ash.06 was settled as by John Rose 1598, Ash.05 was associated with the year 1590, and the attribution of Ash.07 was hovering between John Shaw and Richard Blanke. This was just one stage in the bizarre twentieth-century history of the latter instrument: in 1914 it was known by the name on its label (Blunt); by 1938 it was attributed to Baker (perhaps because labels that had been removed from several viols could no longer be matched to the correct instruments); then by 1955 it was again re-attributed, this time to Shaw; and by 1963 it was reverting once more to Blunt (in the guise of 'Blanke?'), despite the continuing absence of its label.

Thurston Dart's annotated checklist of the Ashmolean instruments was written and published in 1954, when all the Hill instruments were already on display in the museum.²³ In his article Dart asked for further input because 'A fuller catalogue is in preparation' but although he corresponded with Gerald Taylor in 1955 about the production of such a catalogue, he never completed one. The level of detail in Dart's transcription of the label of Ash.07 as 'Richard Blanke bewling (?) on London in ffetter lane 1605' implies he had inspected it, but does not mean it was in the instrument at the time. Boyden's comment in the 1969 catalogue, that no evidence to support reading the name as 'Blanke' is known, is still true.²⁴ He could also have commented that the label may have been barely legible, or that Dart's palaeography seemed questionable, as the third word should almost certainly be read as 'dwelling'. In the typescript for a lecture that Boyden gave at the Ashmolean in 1963 he describes Ash.05 as 'Bass viola da gamba by John Rose of Bridewell, 1590. No label'; no caveat or

²¹ Hill, *English Makers*. I thank Thomas G. MacCracken for advance sight of his forthcoming article for the Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society, 'Addison or Blunt: Who Made Canon Galpin's Lyra Viol?' in which he cites a 10 July 1914 entry in the diary of Alfred Hill that confirms the existence of a manuscript label dated 1605.

²² Ashmolean, Hill Archive. Typescript by Boyden dated 13 July 1963.

²³ T. Dart, 'The Instruments in the Ashmolean Museum', *Galpin Society Journal*, 7 (1954), 7-10.

²⁴ Suggested by the museum; possibly Dart recalled the composer Edward Blanke (fl 1582-94), or the continental virginal maker Jasper Blanckart who came to London in 1566?

circa is attached to the date.²⁵ Later in this lecture, Boyden's typescript demonstrates again the confusion about Ash.07: 'attributed to John Shaw about 1605 (DART: a lyra viol by Richard Blake)', followed by a manuscript addition: 'No label'. Boyden also writes 'A true tenor is lacking in the collection, but one can see a tenor by Baker - from a chest of viols made in Oxford - in the window of Hill's London shop. (No Label)'.²⁶ This helps with the Baker question as the Baker viol now in Japan is a size of viol (belly length 410 mm) that Boyden would describe as a tenor.²⁷ It does not resemble any of the Blunt viols. The fact that Ash.07 was attributed to Blunt despite the absence of a label suggests the label was removed while the instrument was with the Hills; that distinguished firm is far from unique in being believed often to have removed (and not replaced) labels from instruments for study or other purposes. The potential positive result of such an act is support for developing expertise within the firm, but the negative is the deprivation of the rest of the world, both through compromising the evidence inherent in the object, and also because the expertise so acquired is often personal and ephemeral.

Reference pictures of all the viols in the Ashmolean Museum conclude this article. Full descriptions and illustrations of the viols will be provided in the new catalogue, which will be published in 2011. The following table gives concordances between the new catalogue and Boyden's catalogue.

New Catalogue (2011)		Boyden Catalogue (1969)	
<i>number</i>	<i>designation</i>	<i>number</i>	<i>designation</i>
Ash.01	Giovanni Maria	Boyden 1	Giovanni Maria
Ash.02	probably Italian	Boyden 3	Venetian
Ash.03	Gasparo da Salò	Boyden 2	Gasparo da Salò
Ash.04	A & H Amati	Boyden 7	A & H Amati
Ash.05	English	Boyden 4	attr. John Rose
Ash.06	John Rose	Boyden 5	John Rose
Ash.07	Richard Blunt	Boyden 6	Richard Blunt

²⁵ Boyden also notes that 'Another bass viol by Rose is in Hills shop in London, an instrument more regular in form but similarly decorated'. This may possibly refer to a viol now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1989.44), but the decoration is not really similar, and I see no good reason to accept the attribution of this viol to John Rose.

²⁶ Hill, *English Makers*, notes two bass viols by William Baker, but no tenors or trebles.

²⁷ At that time (for example, N. Dolmetsch, 'Of the Sizes of Viols', *Galpin Society Journal*, 17 (1964), p. 27), it was considered that English viols were significantly smaller than is indicated in contemporary documents. This view is still held quite widely, but for a more up-to-date assessment see M. Fleming, 'How long is a piece of string? Understanding seventeenth-century descriptions of instruments', *Cheyls*, 31 (2003), 18-35.



Ash.01. Boyden 1 - Treble Viol by Giovanni Maria of Brescia (c1530-c1600).

Belly length 358mm

Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.02. Boyden 3 - Viol (Bass?) probably Italian, late sixteenth century
Belly length 596mm

Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.03. Boyden 2 - Viol (Bass?) by Gasparo da Salò (1540-1609).
Belly length 645mm

Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.04. Boyden 7 - Viol (Bass?) by Antonio and Girolamo Amati, 1611.
Belly length 628mm

Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.05. Boyden 4 - Bass Viol, English maker, possibly John Rose, probably third quarter of sixteenth century. Belly length 704mm.
Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.06. Boyden 5 - Tenor Viol by John Rose, 1598. Belly length 551mm.
Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.



Ash.07. Boyden 6 - Tenor Viol by Richard Blunt, 1605. Belly length 555mm.
Photo: Tucker Densley, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford.