

CHAPTER TEN
THE HILL FAMILY

The firm of W. E. Hill & Sons became the most influential and admired experts in the violin world in the 20th century, with a long family tradition in the craft to back up their authority. The internationally recognised certificates of authenticity which the firm issued came with references to Pepys' diary:¹²⁸ 'In ye morning came Mr. Hill, ye instrument maker, & I consulted him about ye altering my lute & my viall', and 'Early in ye morning Mr. Hill comes to string my theorbo, which we were about till past ten o'clock, with a great deal of pleasure'.¹²⁹

However, it remains one of the many enigmas of violin making in this country as to whether or not this 'Mr. Hill' was a direct antecedent of the present family. So far no proof of a connection has been found between him and the earliest member of the family known to have been a violin maker, the Joseph Hill born in 1715.

There is documentary evidence of a music shop in London run by a Joseph Hill in the Minories, near Aldgate, as early as 1731. An advertisement in *The Craftsman* (or *Country Journal*) of 6 March 1731, offers tickets for 'a Concert of Vocal & Instrumental Musick for the Benefit of James Jacobson' at 'Mr. Hill's Musick Shop in the Minories'.¹³⁰ The shop also sold music printed by Daniel Wright at the 'Golden Bass' in St. Paul's Churchyard.¹³¹ Joseph's son was also named Joseph, and he was formally apprenticed to John Gilbert, mathematical instrument maker in Hand and Pen Court, Great Tower Hill on 16 December 1747.¹³²

This turns out to be a false trail, however, as there is one document which makes it clear that the Hills of the Minories were distinct from the Joseph Hill who began work in Holborn in the middle of the 18th century. It states that on 3 July 1759, 'Joseph Hill, son of Joseph Hill of the Minories, Musical Instrument Maker, took up the Freedom of the City in the Company of Grocers'.¹³³ This cannot be the violin maker of the same name who founded the Hill dynasty, who was not only already working in his own right in 1753,¹³⁴ but in 1759 was forty-four years old, and married with two daughters¹³⁵ - an impossibility under the existing terms of apprenticeship. We are left with the surprising but not impossible conclusion that there were two separate music shops in London around 1760, both run by men named Joseph Hill.¹³⁶ The name is by no means

uncommon, and the two may well have been related, but it was the Joseph Hill in Holborn who was the 'onlie true beggetter' of the Hill family of luthiers and experts.

JOSEPH HILL I

(1715 - 84)

The father of Joseph Hill of Holborn and the Haymarket in London was also called Joseph, and was born about 1690 in Alvechurch, Worcestershire. Several generations of the Hill family have been traced in the parish, and nine children were born to the elder Joseph and his first wife Sarah,¹³⁷ whom he married there on 29 August 1713. He died at Worcester in 1741.¹³⁸

Joseph the younger was his eldest child, born in Alvechurch in 1715, and baptised on 9 October. Most authorities, notably the Hills themselves,¹³⁹ place him at the 'Harp & Hautboy' with Peter Wamsley as early as 1740, on the evidence of the close similarity of Hill's early work to that of Wamsley. However, Joseph was married on the 9 October 1742 to Mary Field in Alcester in Warwickshire, only a short distance south from the Hill family home in Alvechurch, and by 1746 the couple had two daughters, Mary and Ann, both christened at Alvechurch. This would imply that Hill was still living in Alvechurch in 1746. His father's will was proved on 25 July of this year, the terms of which could have either made him free, or compelled him to move away to start his own career. Whatever the case, it seems unlikely that Joseph would have had any contact with Peter Wamsley, who died in 1744. But as Wamsley's shop continued to trade after this date, it may nevertheless have provided him with his first employment as a violin maker.

One scrap of evidence - possibly unreliable - that a previous generation of the Hill family was already engaged in the instrument trade in London, is a label of 1741 belonging to a William Hill of Poland Street in present-day Soho. It is mentioned by Sandys and Forster¹⁴⁰ - this is the only known reference - and if the date is correct, the maker might perhaps have been Joseph's uncle William who was baptised in Alvechurch on 21 April 1688. Forster himself thought that William and Joseph were brothers. He compared the work to that of Edmund Aireton, who by tradition was employed by