

ROBERT GOBLE

Taken from an article in The Thursley Chronicle 1991. By Mary Bennett.

Early in the last century John Goble, a wheelwright, moved to Thursley with his wife and little daughter and set up in trade from a cottage in the village street, with a large shed alongside which served as a workshop. Both Gobles came from Eartham, a few miles east of Chichester, a part of Sussex where working in wood was a traditional craft. For his trade John Goble also needed to equip himself to work in metal, and it is said that he liked to amaze his neighbours by various feats of strength or skill, including licking a length of red-hot iron. He was a wiry, nimble man, with well-marked features and a great capacity for enjoyment. He played the accordion at village dances and taught the local boys to play cricket by making them bowl at a feather until they could hit it. Mrs Goble was very different; patient, resolute, rather dumpy, a very private character. Their eldest son Robert who was born in 1903, was thought to take after his mother, the second son Arthur, some ten years younger to take after his father.

During the first Thursley years the Gobles did well enough. Farming was what Thursley and the neighbouring villages lived on, and the farm horse had not yet been superseded. Carts and wagons emerged from the workshop in the Street as required, but it was perhaps because things were beginning to take a turn for the worse that in 1914 Mrs. Goble accepted the post as caretaker in the Village Institute and the whole family moved across the road to the caretaker's quarters. With two rooms, previously used by the village nurse, for which they paid three shillings a week, they had two bedrooms (enough, since Ivy, their daughter, was soon to work away from home), kitchen, scullery and living-room; like the rest of the village they relied on a pump in the scullery, an earth closet for sanitation and candles and an oil lamp for light. Here, though, John and Harriet Goble were to remain until the Institute building was sold in 1959 and they moved up the lane to end their days under the wing of their younger son and his wife at Little Cowdray Farm.

It must be supposed that in the good years the expectation was that Bobbie, as Robert was always known, would work with his father when he left school and perhaps to some extent he did. He certainly grew up knowing all about wood, but there was not enough work to be had. John Goble's own trade had vanished and he had turned to doing odd pieces of carpentry or joinery in the village; as time went on he seemed to be giving more and more of his energies to the activities of the Institute, then a sort of social centre for the village, with billiards and whist drives and soft drinks. The local farmers were friends and gave Bobbie jobs of a sort. In his spare time he showed, in his slow, silent, thorough way, that he was not without enterprise: for his own family and for others also, he constructed the first wireless sets that any of them had ever seen and his "Cat's whiskers" did indeed transmit to their earphones the miraculous sounds that emerged from ether. He repaired and put into playing condition an old fiddle that had been lying about the house, and tried to teach himself how to play it. Still, the years after he left school, which he must have done at twelve or thirteen, cannot have been encouraging.

There was one remote possibility. In the autumn of 1917, when Bobbie was just fourteen, the Dolmetsch family took refuge from London air raids by renting a small house in Thursley that belonged to an old

friend of theirs. They did not stay long, for before the end of the year they had found and settled in Jesses, the house at the edge of Haslemere that was to become and remain their family base, but it was long enough for Arnold Dolmetsch to consult John Goble about possible sources of timber and for Bobbie to think that the work this extraordinary and magnetic little man was doing on ancient musical instruments was the sort of thing that he would like to be doing himself. Was it indeed this encounter that inspired him to try his hands on the old fiddle? However that may be, for the time being the matter went no further.

It was, however, the old fiddle that helped to open the road to the next stage. Next to the Gobles' original workshop and just across the way from the Institute, lived a Miss. Mary Stevenson, a retired Scottish headmistress and teacher of the violin. John Goble asked her whether she would give Bobbie one or two lessons on the instrument he had reconstructed. She was immediately impressed not only by his craftsmanship but also by his musicianship, and felt that he must immediately be stopped from "shovelling mangelworsels" and put in the way of more suitable work. (She was a close friend of my father's, and I clearly recall her excitement about this tongue-tied and clumsy-looking young man). Whether she herself sent him to the Dolmetsch's, whom she knew, or whether she supported an approach that he had already made there is no means of telling, but in any case he was almost immediately taken on.

It was, as it happened, a propitious moment. Dolmetsch was just embarking on the production of recorders. Now, when almost every school child has a blow at a recorder at one time or another, it is hard to believe that in 1919 when the bag containing Arnold Dolmetsch's own instruments was left on a platform at Waterloo Station and never recovered, it was impossible to find others in the whole country in playing condition. The result of the loss was that Dolmetsch started to experiment with making recorders himself, and by the summer of 1920 he had found an intonation that satisfied him. At about the same time he obtained funds (Marco Pallis) to start building a proper workshop at Jesses. To begin with two skilled craftsmen came to work on instruments with the members of the Dolmetsch family: in another two or three years, (for the exact date is uncertain) there was enough work to take on Bobbie as an assistant, with the turning of recorders as his special province: the voicing, the great man kept in his own hands. Dolmetsch recorders now started to flow out of Haslemere in a steady if modest stream.

The following years were a time of intense musical activity. The first Haslemere festival was held in 1925. Some musicologists had reservations and not all members of the general public were converted; my father, who went to concerts only when taken by my mother and who expected to hear Beethoven when he did, murmured at the end of a prolonged dose of harpsichord that he thought it a very good thing that the piano had been invented.

But to a child as I then was, a Dolmetsch concert seemed like a splendid and romantic fancy-dress party. There were false starts; strings broke, people in more-or-less Elizabethan costume produced unfamiliar sounds from unfamiliar instruments, or sang or danced, while the gnome-like figure of Arnold Dolmetsch, with his flowing robes and long white hair, played, expounded, admonished, exhorted, making everyone feel that they were taking part in an occasion of the utmost significance. Bob Goble, as far as I know, was let off miming or dancing galliards, though a 1926 photograph shows him playing the cello in

the background while other members of the Dolmetsch team did so. But he cannot have failed to share in the excitement of a movement that was gaining momentum all the time and did in fact start to change the way people listened to music.

By 1928 there was enough interest in Dolmetsch's work to make it possible to raise a capital sum adequate to both keep the Dolmetsch family's activities going - workshop and festival - and to fund a couple of scholarships, one for a craftsman and one for a musician, that could enable the holder to come and work at Haslemere. The music scholarship went to a gifted and dynamic girl from Liverpool, Elizabeth, or Betty Brown. Betty, the daughter of the headmaster of Liverpool Collegiate School, had been torn between a career in painting or in music and had now opted for the latter. She was primarily a keyboard player, and she was anxious to explore the resources of early music. It seems likely that her thoughts were turned to Haslemere by a central, though at this time largely unknown, figure in the early music world, Marco Pallis. Pallis was of Greek origin, but from a family now also rooted in the Liverpool area; unlike other members of the Dolmetsch inner circle he had both private means and a sure sense of where money could be put to best use: it was he who had funded the workshop at Jesses. Whatever the original connection he and Betty became life-long friends, and this meant that he became a life-long friend of Bob Goble also. For in 1930 these two were married.

A prophet is never the easiest person to work for, and not everyone got on with Dolmetsch. Bob was a peaceable man himself, and he avoided the dramas in which some became embroiled. All the same, by the later thirties it seemed both to him and to Betty that it was time that they were on their own. Prospects at Jesses were limited and they now had two little boys to provide for: Andrea, called after Marco's elder brother (a goldsmith, whose tools he was to inherit) born in 1931 and Paul, born two years later. They set up in their Haslemere house, Bob making recorders and furniture; he also made a harpsichord for Betty, using a plucking mechanism that he had invented and was to patent; it was ingenious and it worked, but it was not in the long run practical and he did not take it further. Since his workshop was in the attic and the harpsichord was large it was necessary to cut away the rafters of the room below when it was time to bring it down.

Meanwhile Betty was establishing herself as a player of the bass viol. She played in Marco Pallis's English Consort, both in London and in the United States, and it must have seemed that the way ahead, if hard, was at least straight.

But at this point war broke out. Bob went to work in a Gosport boatyard, making motor torpedo boats, and then at the branch of the admiralty that was based at Haslemere, where he made apparatus for radar research. When the war was over everything had to be started again.

At this point Bob and Betty made a bold move. Houses were again cheap, and they found one at Headington on the outskirts of Oxford, with a garage large enough for six cars - or for a proper workshop. They bought it in 1947. The next year, Andrea, now sixteen, decided to leave school and work with his father. The firm of Robert Goble & Son came into being, making recorders (though after the first five years these were dropped), spinets, clavichords and above all harpsichords.

The tide was with them. The battle for early music was being won and the harpsichord was once more in popular favour. But the instrument as made in the seventeenth or eighteenth century presented the player with certain difficulties in the twentieth. Two or three hundred years ago houses had been cold and damp and ensembles, whether of instruments or of voices, had been small. Could a harpsichord be made to stand up to central heating or the Albert Hall without losing its essential tone. The Gobles thought that it might. With patience, ingenuity and meticulous craftsmanship they produced their first eight-foot concert model in 1952. It was a success. Orders for this and other models came in. Further improvements were made. Goble harpsichord were played by noted musicians and by students in music schools; they were exported to Australia, Holland and the United States. They did not break down or emit unmusical clicks or need incessant tuning. The workforce remained small - seven at its highest - and, since each instrument from the biggest harpsichord to the smallest clavichord needed individual treatment and much work by hand, production could never be fast. Even so, in the first quarter century the workshop on Headington Hill had sent off something like 700 keyboard instruments and its name was known all over the musical world.

In about 1970 it seemed that a change of direction would be necessary. The spread of the early music movement had led to many more people making early instruments, and it had also led to a return to much smaller ensembles. "Authenticity" of sound was now demanded, and this meant relinquishing the search for improvement and returning to the exact baroque models. But this was to be Andrea's problem, Bob and Betty might fairly rest on their laurels, it had been very much a family achievement all along the line, and at the beginning, when "sale or return" recorders came back from music shops, it had been a hard struggle. Betty had provided inspiration and drive, and added her own artistic skills; it was she who had decorated the soundboards when decoration was required. Bob had provided the steady tenacity, the craftsmanship and the practical ingenuity that made things work. Both had put in a high degree of musicianship. It had seemed a surprising partnership at the beginning, but it could scarcely have been more effective.

Betty kept her own career going until the mid seventies (her own and the century's), teaching and occasionally playing in London concerts. She died in 1981. Bob outlived her by ten years. He visited his younger son (a painter) in the United States and his brother's family at Thursley, remained a central and increasingly patriarchal figure among his children and grandchildren at Headington and, until he was smitten with illness, worked a little in the workshop, now operating on a smaller scale but with continuity assured by the addition of Andrea's sons. He died in 1991.

Mary Bennett, late Principal of St. Hilda's College Oxford was born in Thursley, Surrey and a life long friend of the Goble family.