

Consigned to the October Fine Sale

An English Violin by John Betts, London circa 1800

The Ex-Hill: A Fine English Viola by Arthur and John Betts,
London circa 1840

A Fine English Cello by John Betts, London circa 1790

BROMPTON'S
FINE & RARE INSTRUMENTS



An English Violin by John
Betts, London circa 1800

Unlabelled

Branded below the button:

Betts Royal Exchange London

Branded to the lower rib: Betts

Length of back: 355mm









The Ex-Hill

A Fine English Viola by
Arthur and John Betts,
London circa 1840

Unlabelled

Branded below the button:

BETTS's Royal Exchange London

Branded to the lower rib:

BETTS's London

Length of back: 378mm

This viola, formerly in the private collection of the Hills, remains in remarkable condition, still retaining its original neck and fingerboard

Sold with the certificate of

W.E. Hill & Sons, Great Missenden, 1987









A Fine English Cello by John
Betts, London circa 1790

Bearing an original label

Stamped to the upper back:
Betts Royal Exchange London

Stamped on the lower rib:
J. Betts London

Length of back: 740mm

This cello is in an exceptional state of
preservation









John Betts was the most significant figure in the London violin trade in the first half of the eighteenth century. In equal parts maker, trader and connoisseur, he may be regarded as an English Vuillaume in some ways, and also a precursor of the Hills. Betts' influence in shaping the trade and craft of violin making in England cannot be overestimated.

He was born in Stamford, Lincolnshire in 1752, but came to London in about 1765, where he was apprenticed to Richard Duke, whose business he eventually took over. In 1781 he established his own business in Holborn, moving it to the Royal Exchange, the site of the stock market, in the following year. The shop was at first identified by the sign 'At the Violin & German Flute', but later became no.2, following the introduction of street numbering.

He was clearly an able maker himself, and probably also a player, but his entrepreneurial spirit led him to manage a large workshop employing the leading craftsmen of the period including members of the Fendt, Hill, Panormo and Furber families. Over twenty staff were employed in the shop at various times. The source of his success was his trade in Cremonese and Stainer instruments coming into London in this period, brought by Italian musicians employed in the flourishing Italian Opera and the King's Theatre, including Domenico Dragonetti, Nicolas Mori, Paolo Spagnoletti, and most famously, G.B. Viotti. Another significant route was through British merchants coming from Spain and Portugal, in several cases primarily involved in the wine trade. Betts' status as the leading authority was officially acknowledged when he was appointed official valuer of instruments for the Customs Office. Another factor in Betts's success was the growing number of collectors, not only wealthy aristocrats, but newly rich industrialists and financiers of the nineteenth century. In these various

ways a large number of great Italian instruments by the Amatis, Guarneris and Stradivari passed through his hands, and Betts' personal expertise and the skill of his workmen in copying these masterpieces steered English violin making away from the generic Stainer copies produced in the previous century. When John Betts died in 1823, the shop passed into the hands of his nephew Charles Vernon and his younger brother Arthur, also born in Stamford, in 1775. Arthur Betts was a successful musician in his own right, a pupil of Viotti himself. The Betts shop, now trading as 'J.Betts & Co', continued producing sophisticated copies of Cremonese work, and trading at the highest level, until a dispute over the celebrated 'Betts' Stradivari of 1704 fractured the business, which resumed under the sole direction of Arthur. Following his death in 1847, his sons Arthur II and John II continued trading as A & J Betts, until the final dissolution of the company in 1867.

When faced with Betts work, the chief difficulty is in deciding which of the craftsmen employed by the shop were involved. John Betts' own work is fairly distinctive, and the origins of his style can be traced to his experience in the Duke shop, but his work is quite robust, and favours Amati and early Stradivari models. In this case, we have three particularly fine examples, all branded with the Betts name, and superficially quite different in appearance.

The famous 'Betts' brand, which features on all these instruments, is worth consideration. It appears in several guises, at first as 'I.Betts' (the 'J' for John latinised as 'I'), and is made up from three separate stamps, the name at the top usually surmounting the semi-circular 'Royal Exchange' with 'London' beneath, but the alignment of the three is inconsistent. It is also significant that the name brand changes to 'Betts's', the plural 'S' indicating the change from John senior's direction to the various partnerships which followed.

The Cello is from a relatively early period, with the 'I.Betts' brand, consistent with his business card and label of circa 1790-1810, stamped on the upper back and the lower rib. The authentic and very detailed printed label within gives details of the shop's stock and services. Typically, the cello is made on a loosely Amatis model, with a good back length of just over 29", ideal for modern requirements. Betts was an early adapter of this shortened model, similar in proportion to the Stradivari 'B' form, and the Stradivari influence can be seen here in the broad, affirmative corner shapes and the broadly curving low arching with a broad edge channel. It is effectively an idealised 1685 period Stradivari, but made on the improved proportions of the later 'Golden Period'. The varnish has a good, even texture and golden-brown colour, not an obviously artificially aged or shaded finish. The head is quite plain, without blackened chamfers, and slightly rounded shoulders, and the core of the distinctive purfling is made from a decorative wood with flecks running diagonally across it.

The violin seems to be of a later date, again branded on the upper back and lower rib, but the Betts name has the additional possessive 's'. It is a very characteristic example, possibly showing the influence of Panormo within the workshop, and varnished with quite a thinly textured dark varnish, which was almost certainly shaded and aged in application. Again, the inspiration for the model appears to be a 1685 period Stradivari, although the head is slightly awkward in its proportions, with the typical Betts deep, stocky pegbox. The one-piece back is marked on the lower edge with a narrow rounded gouge cut to indicate the central alignment for the ribs.

This same mark and also the same brand is found on the viola, the most spectacularly well-preserved of this group. In most other ways, it seems a very different piece of work to either the cello or the violin. The Hill certificate accompanying it attributes it to John and Arthur Betts in the period 1840, and states that it was for some years in the collection of the Hill family. The viola retains its original neck, attached with a wooden pin driven in at an angle from the face of the neck, under the wedge-shaped ebony fingerboard, and emerging through the upper block on the interior. In its pure state, many other aspects of the workmanship, characteristic of the Betts shop over the whole period of its existence, are quite clear. Pricks marks trace the central eye of the volute and the centre line of the fluting, and the ribs are joined centrally, the seam clearly visible at the end of the corners, unlike the delicately lapped joints of Cremonese work. What is strikingly different here to the other two instruments is the even coating of clear, more brightly tinted orange-brown varnish, which seems to have a harder, and certainly durable and polished finish.

Given the almost century-long activity of the Betts family at the head of English violin-making and the list of distinguished craftsmen they employed, it is perhaps surprising that there is any consistency at all amongst the many, many instruments they produced. The common features they do share however suggest a careful oversight and shared techniques, and most importantly a clear understanding of the qualities required in a fine stringed instrument.

Consigned to Brompton's October Fine Sale

Arrange a Private Viewing

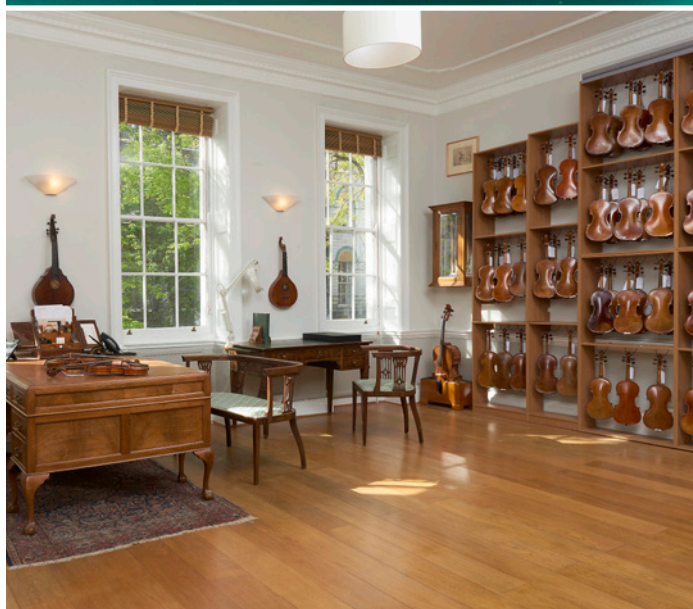
If you have any queries or would like to arrange a private viewing of this instrument, please contact us on

+44 (0)20 7670 2932

or send an email to info@bromptons.co

Arrange a Video Call Viewing

Brompton's are also providing an online video viewing facility if you are unable to view in person. Please [click here](#) to arrange a video call.



BROMPTON'S
FINE & RARE INSTRUMENTS

Brompton's Auctioneers, 33 Percy Street, London, W1T 2DF
+44 (0)20 7670 2932 info@bromptons.co www.bromptons.co