

John Lawson, Mary Law, George Parsons, and two Stradivari violins

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2021

1. An Antonio Stradivari violin, label-dated '1687', is presented in Volume V of Jost Thöne's 2016 publication, *Antonius Stradiuarius*, pp. 154-161. The photographs of the violin (by Jan Röhrmann) show a two-piece back plate with medium-width flames which descend, very slightly, from the centre joint. The front plate, in two pieces, shows extremely narrow rings over much of its width, the rings only marginally widening at the bout edges. The varnish on the front plate is an attractive orange-brown, the back-plate varnish appearing very slightly dulled. The basic measurements of the violin (back plate) are 162, 105, 203, and 354.5 millimetres.¹
2. Another Antonio Stradivari violin, label-dated '1692', has seemingly vanished – unseen since approximately 1921.

The following account attempts to correct the misinformation which is currently found in reference books and internet sources – misinformation which tangles together these two violins.

JOHN LAWSON (John McIndoe Lawson)

John Lawson, born July 1873, was a classically-trained violinist, well known in the Liverpool area.

In a letter written in 1925 Alfred Hill (of W. E. Hill & Sons, London's premier violin dealers) states that around 1900 John Lawson was in possession of a Stradivari violin label-dated 1687 (see p.9 of this account). The identity of the person from whom Lawson bought the violin is unknown, likewise the date of purchase.

In the years around the turn of the century Lawson enjoyed a high profile in the musical life of Liverpool and its surrounding area. A few examples: in 1893 he performed solo violin items in a Grand Concert presented at Hope Hall; in January 1895 he performed in another Grand Concert (at Picton Lecture Hall) and in a concert at the Art Club; in November 1895 he performed in a Sunday Concert; in 1908 he organised and performed in his own concert in St. George's Hall.

On 12th January 1914 the *Liverpool Echo* reported:

LIVERPOOL SUNDAY CONCERT

An enjoyable orchestral concert of high merit was given by the Sunday Society in St. George's Hall last evening. The Sunday Society's Orchestra were responsible for the orchestral items, and, under the capable baton of Mr. John Lawson they capably rendered the various numbers from Weber's 'Oberon' overture and 'The Bohemian Girl'.

¹ Measurements taken from the DVD supplied with the *Antonius Stradiuarius* publication. These measurements point strongly towards the Stradivari mould marked with the letter 'S' being the source; the 'S' mould would produce violins with basic measurements of 161.2, 105.2, 202.2 and 353.3mm.

On 9th March 1914 Lawson and his wife (*née* Mintie Burstall) presented their annual concert at St. George's Hall in which Lawson's violin pupils participated; the concert was reviewed in the *Liverpool Daily Post*:

LAWSON-RAYNOR CONCERT

Brightness and variety are characteristics which rarely, if ever, are absent from the concerts given annually by Mr. John Lawson and Miss Marie Raynor [Mintie Burstall's stage name] and their students. Certainly the large audience that assembled in the Concert-room of St. George's Hall, on Saturday night, had every reason to be satisfied with the programme which the popular Liverpool violinist and his gifted wife had arranged for their entertainment. It was quite a feast of good things, embracing songs, violin and piano-forte soli, and orchestral pieces, all carefully selected and all executed in a manner that reflected credit on the young people most intimately concerned.

Mr. John Lawson submitted for the first time a violin solo which has been composed for him by Mr. Edward Watson, who presided at the piano during its performance. The composition is entitled "Variations of an Old English Theme" and is designed mainly with the object of subjecting the technique of the violinist to the severest of tests. Mr. Lawson was quite equal to the occasion, and played with a brilliancy of finger and bow work only equalled by his sureness of attack and purity of tone. Later in the evening he contributed very acceptably a couple of other items.

A distinct novelty was that for which Miss Marie Raynor accepted responsibility. She appeared in the dramatic scene "Bergliot" (Bjornson) with orchestral accompaniment by Grieg. [...] The orchestra, conducted by Mr. Lawson, and led by Miss Mabel Whipp, L.R.A.M., lent useful co-operation.

Following the start of the First World War the following concert was advertised in the *Liverpool Echo* for 4th December 1914:

Patriotic Orchestral Popular Concert
Conducted by Mr. Adrian C. Boult
[...]
Mr. John Lawson (Leader of the orchestra)

However, as the war years dragged on, John Lawson was more often to be found in the pit of the City Picture House, leading an ensemble providing musical accompaniments for silent films. The *Liverpool Echo* and the *Liverpool Daily Post* advertised these attractions:

CITY PICTURE HOUSE
Finest Cinema in Liverpool
Today's Exclusive Attraction

PERIWINKLE
Charming Photoplay, with an Intense Heart Appeal
Featuring the Star of Stars
MARY MILES MINTER

A DOMESTIC HOUND
(Two-Act "Fox" Comedy)

MUTT AND JEFF
(Humorous Cartoons)
Current Events and Official War Pictures
ORCHESTRA: Leader, Mr. John Lawson

CITY PICTURE-HOUSE
Lime Street – 2 till 10.30
Today's exclusive attraction
THE SUBMARINE EYE
A Thrilling and Tense Deep-Sea Drama
ORCHESTRA: Leader, Mr. John Lawson

The columns of the Liverpool newspapers were also full of advertisements for light-music entertainments – at the Birkenhead Hippodrome, the New Brighton Pier and Pavilion, the New Brighton Tivoli Theatre, Sun Hall, the Shakespeare Theatre, Crane Hall, *etc.* Many of these events featured John Lawson as 'leader' of the orchestra.²

On 24th September 1920, the *Liverpool Echo*, in its 'In the Limelight' column, reported that

[...] Mr John Lawson, leader of the City [Picture House] orchestra, completes his engagement there on Saturday night.³ Mr. Lawson has aimed at giving the people light music, and I know no better orchestra than that at the City house. I asked him what he proposed to do. He says: "I have a big clientele for teaching, and shall devote myself to that and to more solo work."

John Lawson committed suicide on the night of 20th-21st April 1921.

Liverpool Echo, Thursday 21st April 1921

NOTED VIOLINIST DROWNED

Mr. John Lawson's body in Sefton Park Lake

Mr. John Lawson, of New Brighton, the well-known violinist, was found drowned in the lake at Sefton Park this morning. His body was found floating about 8.30a.m., and was removed by the police to the mortuary. An inquest will be held tomorrow morning.

Mr. Lawson, who was 48 years of age and married, was very well known musically on Merseyside.

Mr. Lawson has been a prominent figure in the musical life of Liverpool during the last twenty years or so. As a violinist he excelled by reason of his uncommonly skilful technique, which made his solo performances always pleasing and oftentimes really brilliant. His services as a soloist were in frequent demand not only in Liverpool but in different parts of the country, notwithstanding that for many years past he had devoted most of his energies to teaching, and in this way had built up an extensive connection among students of the violin in Liverpool and district.

Prior to the war Mr. Lawson acted for many years as conductor of the Liverpool Sunday orchestra, and more recently he had been conductor of the orchestra at the City Picture House in Lime Street.

[see fn 2]

² In the City Picture House advertisements the term 'leader' is ambiguous; it could mean leading the ensemble/orchestra from the front desk of the violins, or standing on a podium and conducting. In the advertisement for the Patriotic Concert (previous page) there is a clear distinction between the conductor, Adrian Boult, and the front-desk leader of the orchestra, John Lawson.

³ An advertisement placed in the *Liverpool Echo* on 8th September 1916 announced:

In order to avoid confusion with other Picture Houses in Lime-street, this Favourite Resort will in future be known as THE CITY PICTURE HOUSE. [...]

Continuous programme 2 till 10.30. ORCHESTRA. Leader Mr JOHN LAWSON.

If The City Picture House came into existence in September 1916 and Lawson completed his engagement in September 1920 then his contract had lasted four years.

He had been a member of the Philharmonic Society Orchestra, and at one time played in the Hallé Band at Manchester – in fact, he has at one time or other been associated with most of the important orchestral organisations in and around Liverpool.

Mr. Lawson married a daughter of the late Mr. Burstall (organist of the Pro-Cathedral), a lady well known as an elocutionist under the name of Miss Marie Raynor.

Liverpool Echo, Friday 22nd April 1921

MUSICIAN'S LAST PATHETIC LETTER

Verdict of temporary insanity returned today

The Liverpool coroner registered a verdict of “Suicide during temporary insanity”, today, after inquiring into the death of John Lawson, the well-known Liverpool violinist, whose body was recovered from Sefton Park lake yesterday morning, with three bullet rounds in the head.⁴

William Lawson said his brother, John, was 48 years of age. During the war he had suffered professionally, and in consequence he undertook the duties of musical director at the City Picture House.⁵ The hard work and vitiated atmosphere broke down his health and he became a nervous wreck, suffering from neuritis and muscular rheumatism. On two occasions he was so ill that assistance was needed to get him home.

Twelve months ago he resigned the position, and his health began to improve. He did not smoke or drink, but although always cheerful in disposition he was very highly strung. He had no financial or domestic anxieties.⁶

He left his house in St. James Road, New Brighton, on Wednesday evening, saying that he was going to post a letter, but he did not come back. Some time later Mrs. Lawson went into his bedroom and found that her husband had emptied his pockets.

THE MUSICIAN'S LETTER

Among his papers was found a letter, scribbled in pencil and addressed to “Dear Everybody.” It read:-

“I am sorry to bring this disgrace on you all but whatever I do now cannot make it any worse, and I shall the sooner be forgotten.

Like a fool I have missed the substance for the shadow. I had everything a man wanted – a wonderful wife, and talented children, and success for the taking. And I have thrown my chance away.

Goodbye all. I am not worth grieving over; but you are all very dear to me.

I am mad, though no one knows it. My nerve has gone. All my pupils but one will give me a good word throughout my career – 1893-1921.”⁷

⁴ Regrettably, the official transcript of the inquest into John Lawson's suicide is no longer in existence (this information provided to the present writer by Liverpool Record Office in September 2021).

⁵ In a brief report on the inquest which appeared in the *Lancashire Evening Post* on 23rd April 1921 the phrase which is used in the *Liverpool Echo*'s report – ‘During the war he had suffered professionally ...’ – is there presented as ‘It was stated that Lawson suffered financially during the war.’ ‘Suffered financially’ connects to the *Echo*'s ‘and in consequence he undertook the duties ...’ [see fn 3]. Had Lawson, during 1916, lost a lot of money through failed investments? (see also fn 6).

⁶ John Lawson made out his Last Will & Testament in May 1917, nine months after beginning his employment at The City Picture House; everything was to pass to his wife, Mintie, unless she should pre-decease him. In that situation, and upon his own death, his possessions – ‘this to include all money in the banks and money invested in the war’ – should be divided equally between the children. Lawson's probate document shows that at his death the Gross Value of his estate amounted to £1,100; the Net Value was £987.

⁷ Might Lawson's reference to ‘this disgrace’, and, it seems, one particular violin student who would not, if asked, ‘give him a good word’, indicate that there had been an inappropriate relationship with a pupil? Might such a relationship explain why Lawson took himself out of the public eye and disappeared into the darkened pit of the City Picture House?

Witness [assumed to be John's brother William] continuing said that Eric Lawson, the eldest son of the musician, had told him that before leaving the house his father came into his room and gave him his best violin, with the remark "You will make better use of this than ever I could." To his daughter he had given a diamond ring.⁸

OUTCOME OF HALLUCINATIONS

Witness had never known his brother to possess a revolver, and neither he nor Mrs. Lawson could offer any explanation for the notes he [John] had left. He [William] thought they were the outcome of hallucinations. [...]

In [Mr. Lawson's] overcoat pocket was found a piece of paper on which were scribbled the words: "When self-respect is gone, life is worthless."⁹ [...]

The post-mortem evidence was conclusive that the [head] wounds were self-inflicted.

Liverpool Echo on 25th April 1921:

THE VACANT CHAIR – TRIBUTE TO LATE MR. LAWSON

As a tribute to the late Mr. John Lawson, the well-known violinist, the orchestra of the New Brighton Pier Pavilion, of whom he was leader, played Chopin's "March funebre" at last night's concert. During the rendition the chair, formerly occupied by Mr. Lawson, remained vacant.¹⁰

At the Tivoli Theatre the large audience sang the hymn "Eternal Father Strong to Save."

Liverpool Echo, Tuesday 26th April 1921

LIVED FOR US: DIED FOR US

The large assembly of mourners, including many past pupils, who attended the funeral of the late Mr. John Lawson, the well-known Liverpool violinist, which took place this morning at the Rake Lane Cemetery, were deeply touched by the inscription on the wreath sent by the widow, the words of which were:- "Sweetheart, my heart goes out to you. You lived for us: you died for us; you were the perfect husband and father, and the memory of your beautiful, unselfish life will brighten the future for us."

MARY LAW

The exact date of Mary Law's birth is unknown but her existence was officially registered in the second quarter (April-May-June) of 1888; the place of birth is listed as Camberwell (London).

The 1891 census in England shows that the Law family lived at 103 Queens Road, Peckham (in the Civil Parish of Camberwell). Mary's father was Edward Gibbon Law, aged 33 in 1891, a timber merchant. Mary's mother was Jane (Margerison), aged 32. The first-born child was a daughter, Elsie Kate, who was four years old at the time of the census. Mary (no other given names) is listed as being three years old.

⁸ John and Mintie Lawson had two sons and two daughters: Eric (b.1906) and Colin (b.1908), Dorothy (b.1910) and Irene (b.1911). In Lawson's Will there is no mention of a violin, or a diamond ring, or, indeed, any specific item.

⁹ cf. footnote 7.

¹⁰ Thus, in this case, 'leader' was a front-desk rôle.

The 1901 census shows a changed situation: the family is now living at 19 Conyers Road in Streatham (on the outskirts of south London) and the head of the family is now stated to be Jane Law, aged 42, 'kept by husband' (which suggests that Edward, for unknown reasons, had left the family home but was continuing to provide financial support for the remaining women). Jane's sister, Kate Mary Margerison (Mary's spinster aunt, aged 45) has joined the household. Mary's older sister, Elsie Kate, is still at home, as is Mary (aged 13).

On 4th April 1908 the *Norwood News* enthused over Mary's talent for playing the violin, and added:

In Streatham, where she resides, Miss Law's musical prowess has already rendered her a popular exponent of high-class violin skill, and in May last we recorded the phenomenal success she gained at Mrs. T. A. Fryer's concert in the Town Hall. So that, though the lady is only 18 years old, she is already a musician of whom greater triumphs may be confidently predicted.

In September 1908 the *Norwood News* printed a lengthy article:

MISS MARY LAW AND ROYALTY

Miss Law was the solo violinist at the first Sunday concert of the season at Queen's Hall last week, where she had a great reception. But she is particularly delighted because quite recently she had the honour of playing at a private party before H.R.H. the Duchess of Albany, to whom, at the Duchess's special request, she was afterwards presented. H.R.H. was very complimentary, and asked the hostess for another violin solo after the programme was finished.

Further, Miss Law tells me she is engaged later on in the year to play at Munich and Rotterdam, so that our young violinist is getting known and appreciated. It is always a great delight to follow the careers of young artistes who have made their start in life in our own neighbourhood, and amongst that number we all hope and expect that that of Miss Law's will be a happy and fortunate one.

The following year Mary performed for Queen Alexandra, an event that was reported by the *Norwood News* on 27th February 1909:

[...] On being presented to her Majesty, Miss Law was assured by the Queen that she had much enjoyed the fair violinist's playing and begged Miss Law to play again. Afterwards, her Majesty graciously said Miss Law's playing had so much "soul" in it that it made her "feel" the melody and the charm of it.

The identity of the violin on which Mary was performing at this time is unknown.

In the 1911 census the address for the Law family has changed once again: 48 Streatham Hill. Mary's name appears first on the census form, aged 23, single, her Personal Occupation defined as 'Violinist', her freelance status indicated as 'Own Account'.

A short biography of Mary appeared in a 1915 publication:

LAW, Mary, violinist; b. London 1889 [...]. Trained for musical profession at G.S.M. [Guildhall School of Music] under Johannes Wolff and Max Mossel, and afterwards with Emile Sauret in London and Chicago.¹¹ Made her *début* at Queen's Hall in 1900,¹² and has since toured extensively in United Kingdom, besides being under contract to play at Tivoli Theatre of Varieties, London, till 1916. Gave a recital at Bechstein Hall, May 1912.¹³

¹¹ Johannes Wolff taught at GSM between 1896 and 1898; Max Mossel taught at GSM from 1910; Emile Sauret taught at the Musical College, Chicago, from 1903 until 1908.

¹² It has not been possible to locate a copy of the concert programme.

¹³ H Saxe Wyndham and Geoffrey L'Epine, *Who's who in music: a biographical record of contemporary musicians*.

The *Times* review of Mary's 1912 recital at Bechstein Hall (subsequently Wigmore Hall) was carefully enthusiastic:

Miss Mary Law and Mr Norman Wilks, who gave a violin and pianoforte recital on Saturday afternoon in the Bechstein Hall, were heard separately in various solos and together in Beethoven's Sonata in F major and Schumann's in D minor. The players proved to have a close understanding of each other as well as of the music, so that the result in the concerted works was a thoroughly well-balanced *ensemble*. Miss Law's tone was a little thin on the E string, but elsewhere it was clear and round in quality, her phrasing was accurate, and her technique was such as to justify her choice of two movements of Wieniawski's Concerto in D minor for her solo. In the Sonata by Beethoven both she and Mr. Wilks played with a refreshing directness and absence of sentimentality; the only place where a little more freedom might have been an advantage was in the Rondo, where the rhythm in the main subject was made rather too unyielding. [...]

The *Surrey Advertiser* reported (14th February 1914) that Mary had performed at a Chamber of Trade dinner:

Miss Mary Law, a young violinist of considerable artistic ability, played with much success Hubay's "Zephir" and Schubert's "The Bee", for which she was encored, Sarasate's "Zigeunerweisen" and Kreisler's "Caprice Viennois" and was subsequently presented with a lovely bouquet [...].

In November 1914 the *Surrey Advertiser* announced Mary Law's appearance at the Theatre Royal, Guildford: 'the Celebrated Violinist, and her Genuine Strad.'

Mary's theatre performances were spread across the whole of the United Kingdom, including locations as far apart as Portsmouth, Sheffield, Burton on Trent, London, Mansfield, Plymouth, Liverpool, etc. Her agents – Norris & Clayton, Ltd., of Charing Cross Road, London – took a half-page space in *The Era* (22nd November 1916) to publicise Mary's recent performance at the London Coliseum, with review extracts culled from *The Times*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Sunday Times*, and *The Referee*. To present-day eyes the reviews read as damning with faint praise but perhaps that is a 21st-century reaction to the language used:

The programme included amongst its musicians Miss Mary Law, an effective and accomplished violinist.

[...] Miss Mary Law, a clever young violinist [...] her neat, tasteful and fluent playing proved thoroughly to the liking of [the] patrons.

[...] Miss Mary Law, a clever young violinist [...] her fluent and resourceful technique and musicianly interpretations gained warm favour.

Miss Mary Law, the young English violinist [...] scored a pronounced success.

In February 1915 Mary was performing at the Tivoli Theatre, New Brighton, Liverpool; in February 1917 she was at the Winter Gardens, Liverpool; in June and July 1917 at the Palladium, Southport; in December 1917 at the Birkenhead Hippodrome; and in April and May 1918 at the Liverpool Olympia.

With Mary Law being in Liverpool so frequently during 1917 and 1918 the possibility exists that she and John Lawson knew each other, especially since both were light-music specialists. If the latter was sliding towards depression – if his violin playing was already compromised by neuritis and muscular rheumatism – if he had 'suffered financially' in 1916, and, as a result, had to sign a gruelling four-year contract with The City Picture House – then perhaps he offered to sell Mary his unwanted 1687 Stradivari violin because he needed the money.¹⁴

¹⁴ See the letter from George Hart to G H L Parsons dated 6th April 1918 (p. 11 of this account).

However, evidence which seems to point away from such a sale is provided by John Lawson's son, Eric, to whom John gave 'his best violin' (according to the reporter for the *Liverpool Echo* at the inquest), but 'his best violin' implies that Lawson owned more than one instrument, and, given the unknown context in which the accolade of 'best' was being awarded, the identity of the gifted violin cannot be established with certainty.

The marriage between Mary Law and Hugh Sewell Kingdon (1882-1940) took place on 24th July 1915 at St. Leonard's church in Streatham. Hugh Sewell is described as a 'business manager', Mary as a 'violinist' (and now residing at yet another address in Streatham: 13 Becmead Avenue).

Mary travelled to Australia in late 1915 for a concert tour; the *Melbourne Argus* newspaper printed this notice in their 23rd November 1915 issue:

Just Arrived, Direct from London, Under Special Engagement, and First Appearance in Australia of Miss MARY LAW, The Notable English Violinist. Miss Law has been honoured with Royal Commands galore, and can claim the distinction of having played before most Members of the Royal Family.

According to *The Musical Times* (issue dated 1st April, 1917, p. 177) Mary's journey to Australia was part of a 'world tour'; by mid-1916 she was back in London where her son, Hugh Gervase, was conceived.

In November 1916 Mary sat for four photographic portraits, made by Bassano Ltd., Royal Photographers, of Old Bond Street, London. The four portraits are now held at the National Portrait Gallery.¹⁵ In all four photographs Mary is shown holding a violin; given the date when the photographs were made it is assumed that the violin is the 1692 Stradivari which George Henry Lewis Parsons had bought and then loaned to Mary in 1910 (see next page). In the third photograph (NPG x124371), in which Mary sits facing the camera with the violin resting its treble-side ribs on her right thigh, there seems to be a curious 'scooped' distortion of the wood on the bass side of the peg box (where the G-string peg and the tip of the E-string peg are situated); was this just a trick of the studio lights? In the fourth photograph (NPG x124372) Mary is standing, cradling the violin with her right arm. The treble side of the violin's back-plate upper bout can be seen, and, unless this is another trick of the studio lights, the varnish on the treble side seems to have been worn away. These four photographs may be the only visual evidence for the now-disappeared 1692 violin. The images do not suggest, in any way, that the violin in Mary's hands is the 1687 instrument which is photographed with great accuracy in Jost Thöne's *Antonius Stradiuarius*, Vol. 5 (this being the violin which belonged to John Lawson).

Between 1913 and 1918 Mary recorded violin recitals on 78rpm discs for Zonophone, including two discs for the company's 'Celebrity' label. These recordings feature piano-and-violin arrangements of melodies from popular operas. In September 1917 His Master's Voice gramophone company advertised a new recording with Mary performing a *Moment musical* by Schubert, a *Mazurka* by Wieniawski, and the first movement of De Beriot's *Concerto*, Op. 76.

The 'Court Circular' of *The Times* newspaper for 1st April 1919 reported that 'Mrs. H. S. Kingdon (Miss Mary Law) is in a critical condition from pneumonia following influenza.' The newspaper's report was

¹⁵ NPG x124369/70/71/72.

slightly behind reality in that Mary had died the previous day: 31st March. Her son, Hugh Gervase, aged 2 years and 9 months, died a few days later, on 6th April, of septic pneumonia.

A very brief obituary appeared in *The Musical Times* (issue dated 1st May 1919, p. 235):

MARY LAW, the violinist, who, while earning her chief successes in the music-halls, endeavoured to raise the taste of her audience to the level of good music.

At the time of her death Mary's address was at 204 Ashley Gardens, London, SW1. Since Mary died *intestate* Letters of Administration were issued to her husband, Hugh Sewell Kingdon, on 4th November 1919. Mary's probate document shows that the Gross Value of her Estate amounted to £2,440; the Net Value amounted to £1,275.

NB: Mary is never referred to as 'Marie' (possibly to avoid confusion with the violinist Marie Hall, 1884-1956).

The 'Bello', 'Marie Law' violin by Antonio Stradivari

'It bears an original label dated 1687'¹⁶

Jost Thöne's historian refers to a letter written in 1925 by Alfred Hill (of W. E. Hill & Sons) in which Alfred apparently states that this 1687 Stradivari violin

[...] was in the possession of the violinist Lawson (1873-1920 [1921]) in around 1900. Following Lawson's death it was purchased by a dealer, who passed it on to an amateur violinist. The latter then lent the violin to Marie Law (1889-1919), and it came into the possession of Robert A. Bower following her death.¹⁷

NB:

1. John Lawson's ownership of a 1687 Stradivari violin is thus firmly dated to the early years of the twentieth century; the subsequent chronology of ownership is nonsensical given that Lawson died in April 1921, two years after Mary Law had died.
2. If Lawson did not sell his 1687 violin to Mary Law (see p.7 of this account) but passed it – his 'best' violin – to his son Eric on the evening of his suicide, then perhaps the violin (likewise the daughter's diamond ring) subsequently had to be sold to raise money for the family's day-to-day living expenses. In this scenario the name of the purchasing dealer is unknown.
3. Alternatively, given that John Lawson had seemingly hidden his physical and mental decline from his family – (a) 'I am mad, though no one knows it'; (b) neither John's brother nor his wife 'could offer any explanation for the notes he had left' – perhaps no-one in the family realised that the violin which John took with him to the City Picture House from 1916 onwards was not the 1687 Stradivari violin which he had used previously.
4. It was George Henry Lewis Parsons who loaned a Stradivari violin to Mary Law (see overleaf), but that violin was label-dated '1692', not '1687', and the loan had been effected in 1910.

¹⁶ Jost Thöne (ed.), *Antonius Stradiuarius* (2016), Vol. V, p. 154; the writer of the historical commentary is not identified.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, footnote 4.

Thöne's historian also relates (still using Alfred Hill's letter as the source) that

William E. Hill (Alfred's father) had first become aware of [Lawson's] violin around 50 years earlier; indeed, in 1875 the violin was supposedly in the hands of an English clergyman whose name [Alfred] Hill could not remember.

Thöne's historian adds:

The certificate [for the 1687 violin] produced by Rare Violins of New York in 2012 names this priest as a certain George Parsons, who is thought to have purchased the instrument at the London dealership Hart & Son.

and:

Before Lawson's death, the [1687] violin was briefly in the hands of the young British violinist Marie Law (1889-1919), who was photographed with the instrument in November 1916.¹⁸ The violin possibly remained in Lawson's possession during this time, and it was not until after the musician's death in 1920 [1921] that his family sold the instrument, putting it up for auction at the renowned London auction house Puttick & Simpson in July 1921. The highest bidder was the American instrument collector and dealer Robert A. Bower (c1860-1947) who sold the violin on in 1924 to the violin dealership Rudolph Wurlitzer of New York.

The Stradivari violin which was put up for auction at Puttick & Simpson's on 14th July 1921 was label-dated '1692', not '1687', and it belonged to the Parsons family; Lawson's family was not involved in any way with the auction; Robert A Bower did not buy any item at the auction; see pp.12-13 of this account.

GEORGE HENRY LEWIS PARSONS

The following exposition is primarily sourced from a family history – *The Palmer, Parsons, and Pringle family history* – researched and written by Peter J Millington and web-published at <https://en.calameo.com/read/000675467c11e708a00a4>:¹⁹

George Henry Lewis Parsons was born in 1867 into a wealthy and highly successful family of chemists and manufacturers of homeopathic medicines (Ashton & Parsons). At his death in January 1921 the Net Value of his estate amounted to £118,000. He and his family lived in Aldrington Road, Streatham Park, one mile from Mary Law's home on Streatham Hill.

G H L Parsons owned an Antonio Stradivari violin, label-dated 1692,²⁰ which he bought from Hart & Son, of 28 Wardour Street, London, on 20th January 1910. According to a diary entry written by Alfred Hill and dated 15th July 1921 (i.e. the day after the Puttick & Simpson auction – see p.12) this violin was 'a very much damaged and repaired Stradivari for which Mr Parsons paid £700.'²¹

On pp. 102-105 of his *family history* P J Millington presents the contents of a collection of insurance documents and letters which relate to the loan of a Stradivari violin, by Parsons, to Mary Law:

1. On 26th January 1910 the Fine Art & General Insurance Company, Ltd., London, issued an insurance policy: 'On a violin by Antonio Stradivari, the property of the insured [G H L Parsons] and lent to Miss Mary Law.' The violin was insured for £750 (UKPs).

¹⁸ See the present writer's earlier comments (p.8) about the Bassano photographs.

¹⁹ Accessed September 2021.

²⁰ According to Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive G H L Parsons had also previously owned at least one Carlo Bergonzi violin.

²¹ Hill blames the interference of Mary's violin teacher, Max Mossel (1871-1929), for the unsatisfactory purchase. It is assumed that Mossel was commissioned by Parsons to choose the violin.

2. On 28th January 1910 Mary Law sent a letter to Parsons which formalised the loan of the 1692 violin. This letter was drawn up by Parson's solicitors – Mayo, Elder & Co. – and merely required Mary's signature to be added at the end.
3. An undated letter (but surely from January 1910) from Mary to G H L Parsons includes:

I do not know how to thank you enough for your great kindness but I hope you know how very grateful I am. I have had a new bridge fitted at Hills and the violin sounds most beautiful now.²² I should like to bring it to you soon, so that you can hear it.
4. In an undated letter (but, again, surely from January 1910) Mr Parsons wrote to Mary:

It is really not Mrs. Parson's or my own intention for you to pay the first year's instalment of insurance on the violin, but my solicitor who drew up the agreement of loan thought it better that you should do so as a matter of principle [...] In concluding we both wish you every success, and trust that if you are not already at the top of the tree of your profession you will soon be so.
5. Eight years later, on 5th April 1918, Mary's husband, Hugh Sewell Kingdon, wrote to G H L Parsons:²³

I was under the impression that Mary had discussed with you the matter of selling [the 1692 violin] through Harts but apparently this is not the case.²⁴ Harts have been trying to sell [the violin] for some time and I also advertised [the availability of the violin] and received about fourteen replies. Nothing has resulted up to now although I had a number of likely purchasers. I am afraid that Harts do not want to do business as they cannot make two or three hundred out of the transaction. If you approve I will take the fiddle away from them and effect the insurance in your name but naturally shall pay the account on Mary's behalf instead of sending it to you.
6. The next day, 6th April, G H L Parsons received a letter from George Hart who explains that Mary's husband

has left your Stradivarius here on sale at £750. In the event of his finding a purchaser we have arranged to charge Premium of 5% for our trouble in the matter. Should we succeed in disposing of it we are to pay £750 net. This arrangement leaves us a free hand to enter into an exchange. I understand Mrs Kingdon [Mary Law] has purchased another Strad which she prefers to the one she has been using for so many years [since 1910]. I do not know how much she paid for it.²⁵ I have given instructions to have the Strad. [i.e. Parsons' 1692 Strad.] insured against aircraft risks as you wish; I will let you know the cost as soon as I hear. I think it is only a small matter even for a business house.²⁶

I am sorry to hear you have been so unwell, I trust you are now quite reinstated.

Believe me
Sincerely yours
Geo. Hart
7. On 27th April 1918, Hugh Sewell wrote a second letter, reporting to Parsons that he has

put several possible buyers in touch with Harts but I imagine the military position may account for their failure to conclude any sale at the moment. Whilst it is very kind of you to suggest that you should pay future insurances I think this is quite wrong as your possession of the fiddle [correctly:

²² Was Mary just being polite about her 'much damaged and repaired' violin? If the Hills, when they fitted a new bridge, could see that the violin needed expert restoration did they inform Mary Law and/or Mr Parsons of this necessity?

²³ Hugh Sewell Kingdon's address is given as: 9 Waterloo Street, Hove (Brighton); see also p.13 of this account.

²⁴ Did Mary consign the 1692 violin to Hart without consulting Mr Parsons?

²⁵ Clearly it was not from George Hart that Mary obtained her replacement violin. The aforementioned Hill diary entry states: Mary Law purchased another Stradivari through the same professional adviser [Max Mossel], an equally unsatisfactory fiddle.

Marie[!] Law died comparatively recently, and this other Stradivari [of 1687] is also being hawked about for sale by her husband.

²⁶ i.e. the cost of the insurance is likely to be minimal.

‘as Mary’s usage of the fiddle’] arose entirely from your kindness to Mary which I need hardly say she very much appreciates.

The aforementioned collection of documents includes an insurance policy issued by the Fine Art & General Company, dated 8th April 1918, headed ‘Government Aircraft Insurance’. The insurance is for ‘a violin by A. Stradivari contained in the building No. 28 Wardour Street, London.’ Parsons’ 1692 violin is insured (once again) for £750 and the policy is accompanied by a receipt for the payment of the premium.

8. On 20th January 1920 George Hart sends another letter to G H L Parsons:

I regret we have not succeeded in placing the [1692] Strad for you yet. I am now in communication with a client about it and hope to be able to let you know the result very shortly.

I strongly advise you not to send a violin of this kind to the Auction Rooms.²⁷

Following the death of George Henry Lewis Parsons on 18th February 1921 his heirs evidently chose to ignore George Hart’s advice: the 1692 Stradivari violin was put up for auction at Puttick & Simpson’s rooms at Leicester Square, central London; the auction would take place on 14th July 1921.

The title page of the Puttick & Simpson auction catalogue²⁸ announced the following:

CATALOGUE
of VALUABLE
Violins, Violas, Violoncellos & Bows
INCLUDING
A Violin by Antonius Stradivarius, 1692
The Property of the late G. H. L. Parsons, Esq.,
of Streatham Park
[...]
Which will be sold by Auction
by Messrs. Puttick and Simpson
47, Leicester Square, W. C. 2
On Thursday July 14th, 1921
AT TEN MINUTES PAST ONE O’CLOCK PRECISELY

Lot 142 was the final lot to be auctioned and the details were presented on page 8 of the Catalogue:

THE PROPERTY OF THE LATE G. H. L. PARSONS,
Esq., of Streatham Park.
(By order of the Executors)

A VIOLIN, BY ANTONIUS STRADIVARIUS, CREMONA, 1692.
The back in two pieces of medium curl, the table of fine grain,
in two pieces. Brown orange varnish and measures 13¹⁵/₁₆ in.
With Messrs. Hart & Son’s guarantee.

²⁷ Hart’s alarm is noticeable. Having Parsons’ ‘very much damaged and repaired’ 1692 violin on public view at an auction would not enhance Hart’s reputation, especially if the ‘guaranteed’ violin was met with a wall of silence when the bidding started (which is what happened). Whether or not the wall of silence was ‘engineered’ by another London violin dealer cannot be determined.

²⁸ Archived at the British Library, St. Pancras, London.

The P&S clerk who was compiling the auction's ledger writes 'Mayo & Elder' as the purchaser of Lot 142, apparently at the price of £500 (UKPs);²⁹ adjacent to '£500' the clerk has added a tick, in red ink. On another page of the ledger, on which the names of the buyers are listed in alphabetical order, the clerk has written 'Mayo Elder & Co', but then, underneath, in red ink, has added '(re late G. H. L. Parsons)'. Also in red ink, in an adjacent column, is the figure '500', and yet another red-ink '500' appears on a further page of the ledger, adjacent to the black-ink text: '142, Mayo Elder & Co'.³⁰

The likely sequence of events at the auction was:

1. George Parsons' heirs used Mayo, Elder & Co. as their agent, and it was the latter, acting on behalf of the family, who presented the 1692 violin to P&S for auction.
2. The auctioneer started the bidding by proposing an initial price of £500. Nobody in the auction gallery offered any advance on that price: 'It was bought in for £500, there being no real bid for it.' (Alfred Hill diary entry)
3. The violin was therefore withdrawn.

Thus the red-ink entries in the auction ledger all refer to a sum of money which, in reality, never existed.³¹

The name 'Bower' does not appear anywhere in the ledger records for the P&S auction which took place on 14th July 1921; there is no record of Robert A Bower buying any instrument(s) at the auction.

The unsold 1692 violin was returned to Mayo, Elder & Co. who, presumably, returned it to the Parsons' heirs. The post-1921 movement of the George Parsons/Mary Law 1692 Stradivari violin is unknown.

Robert Augustus Bower was born in 1867; he was originally from Chicago and his surname, at birth, was 'Bauer'. He and his family moved to England, and by 1914 they were residing at 4, New Church Road, Hove (Brighton).

Robert Augustus Bower and Hugh Sewell Kingdon lived just a few hundred yards from each other. It is here proposed that around 1922 H S Kingdon approached R A Bower with regard to Mary's 1687 (Lawson) violin. Bower bought the violin, took it to America, and sold it to Rudolph Wurlitzer. From the evidence of Jan Röhrmann's high-definition photographs (Jost Thöne, *Antonius Stradiuarius*, Vol. V, pp. 154-161) it is difficult to understand why the 1687 violin was described so negatively by Alfred Hill.

²⁹ According to James Coover (*Music at Auction*; Harmonie Park Press, 1988, p. 379): 'The [14th July] sale is noted in *MO&MTR* 44 (1921): 966, with a list of some items sold, buyers' names, and prices fetched; the two best, a violin by Andreas Guarnerius, 1655, £300 (Reed), and a 1692 Strad, £500 (Mayo).' The text which appeared in *Musical Opinion & Music Trade Review*, vol. 44 (1921), p. 966, is: 'Another Strad Sold. On July 14th last at Messrs. Puttick & Simpson's, Leicester Square, was held a sale of valuable violins, violas, &c. Among the lots offered was a violin by Andreas Guarnerius (1655) which realised £300, and a violin by Antonius Stradivarius (1692) which fetched the sum of £500.'

³⁰ Charles Richard Mayo and Robert William Elder were partners in the firm of solicitors.

³¹ The significance and function of the red-ink entries have not been appreciated by James Coover.

The Cozio Archive of Tarisio.com (accessed September 2021) states that the ‘Bello, Marie Law’ violin (ID 41431), dated 1687, is mentioned in Ernest Doring’s *How many Strads?*, and that the violin, together with an illustration, appears in the Jacques Français Rare Violins, Inc. Photographic Archive and Business Records, which are archived at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA.

Doring’s unoriginal 1945 commentary outlining the 1687 violin’s provenance is:

At the turn of the century it was owned by a well known violinist of Liverpool named John Lawson. After his death it passed through the hands of an English dealer, being purchased by an amateur who loaned it to Marie Law, a lady player. After her death the violin was acquired by Robert A. Bower and subsequently passed to Wurlitzer. [...] It was purchased by J. Mariano Bello of Mexico.³²

No record of this 1687 violin (illustrative or otherwise) has been found by the present writer within the Jacques Français Rare Violins Photographic Archive at the Smithsonian Institution.

The sequence of owners which is presented on the Tarisio.com/Cozio Archive for the 1687 violin is:

In 1900	John Lawson
...	...
from 1920	Robert Augustus Bower
in 1925	sold by Rudolph Wurlitzer Co.
from 1927	J. Mariano Bello
from 1941	current owner.

The Cozio Archive of Tarisio.com lists just five Stradivari violins from 1692; none of these can be connected to the Parsons violin:

The ‘Bennett’ violin has a one-piece back plate

The ‘Margaret Harrison’ is a long-pattern violin with a back length of 359mm

The ‘Czar of Russia’ was owned between 1906 and 1975 by Dorothy and Joan Fleetwood-Hesketh

The ‘Falmouth’ has a one-piece back plate

The ‘Marquis de St. Hilaire’ has a back length of 363mm.

There is also the 1692 ‘Oliveira’ violin but this has a back length of 361mm.

Given the very short time period during which Mary Law owned Lawson’s 1687 Stradivari violin (if the narrative proposed in this account is correct) perhaps its current soubriquet – ‘Bello, Marie Law’ – should be amended, and chronologically corrected, to ‘Lawson, Bello’.

1687 violin

c.1900: with John Lawson (Liverpool)

c.1917: ?sold by Lawson to Mary Law

1919: Mary Law dies; violin with H S Kingdon

1692 violin

prior to 1910: with George Hart & Son

1910: bought by G H L Parsons

1910: loaned by Parsons to Mary Law

1918: with George Hart

³² Ernest Doring, *How many Strads?* (1945), p. 60. J M Bello was a wealthy Mexican businessman.

(1921: death of John Lawson)

c.1921: sold by H S Kingdon to R A Bower

1925: sold by Bower to Wurlitzer (New York)

1927: sold to José M Bello (d.1938)

1997: sold by Jacques Francais (according to Thöne)

2012: with Rare Violins of New York (according to Thöne)

2020: the violin loaned to Yesong Sophie Lee.

(1921: death of G H L Parsons)

1921: Puttick & Simpson auction; not sold.

No further information known.

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Author of **The ‘Messiah’ violin: a reliable history?** (2015); see www.themessiahviolin.uk for details.

Author of an historical study of the Stradivari *Habeneck* violin, published in the Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society, 2016, and re-published on the aforementioned website. Author of an historical study of the ‘original’ neck of the Stradivari *Soil* violin (website). Author of a detailed historical study of the two Guarneri *del Gesù* violins which belonged to John Tiplady Carrodus (website). Author of an extensive and detailed investigation into the reality of the 1724 Stradivari violin which Count Cozio di Salabue sold in 1817 to Niccolò Paganini (website). Author of an historical study of the Stradivari *Chant du Cygne* violin (Journal of the Galpin Society, March 2017). Author of a transcription and translation of the complete sales-ledger archive (300 pages) of Jacques Francais (Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC); see website. Author of a detailed historical examination of the Stradivari quartet of decorated instruments exhibited at the Palacio Real in Madrid, Spain; see website. Author of ‘The case of the missing mould’ (*The Strad*, June 2018). Author of a detailed examination of issues which surround both the *Cannone* violin in Genoa and the *Canon* violin sold by David Laurie (website). Author (with Bas Terraz) of a study of the 29 letters sent by Pablo Sarasate to his adoptive mother in Paris; a digest of this study appeared in the June 2020 issue of *The Strad*.

Further investigative articles can be found at the author’s website (www.themessiahviolin.uk); all are free-to-read.