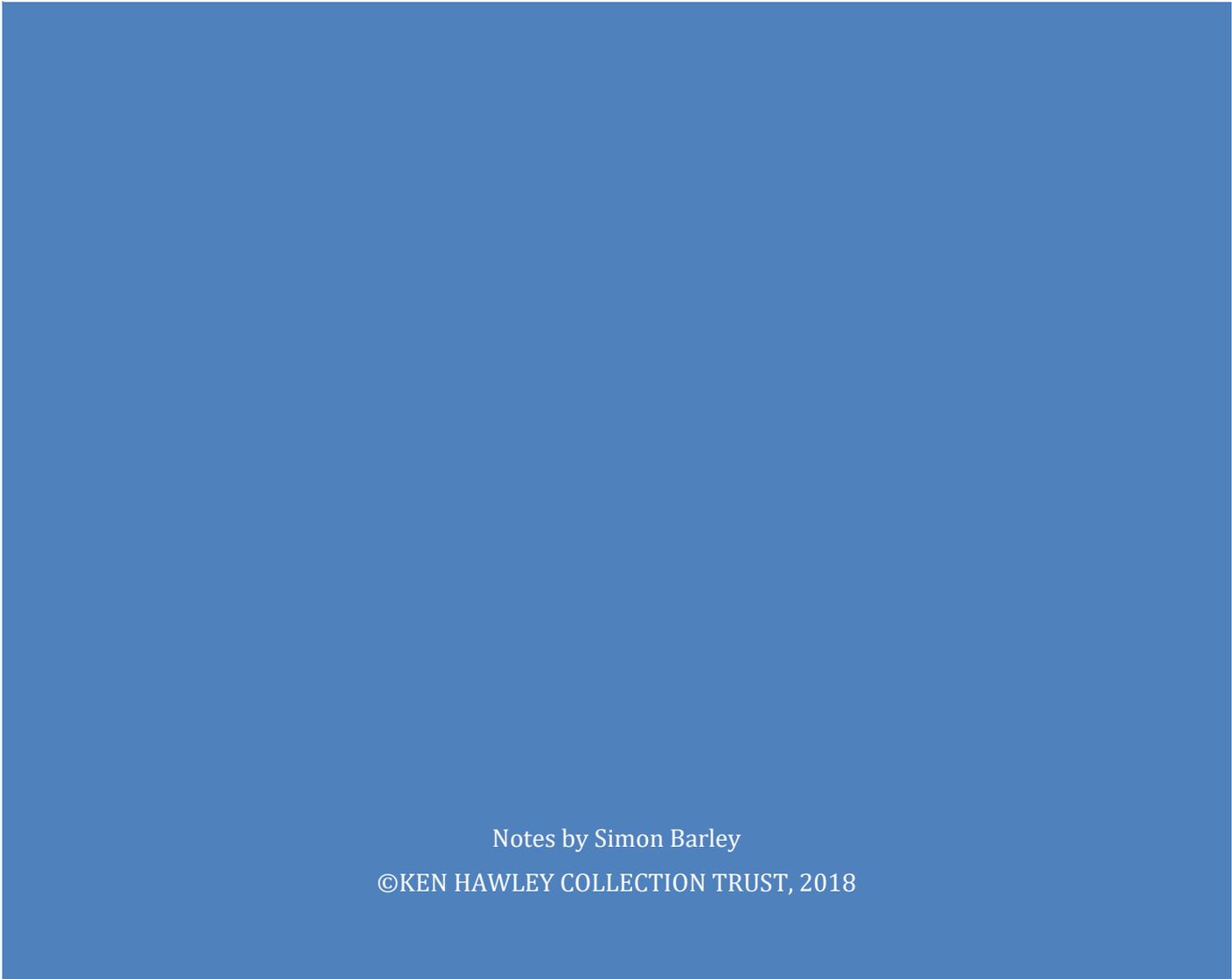




THE PRINCESS AND THE SAW



Notes by Simon Barley
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In 1858 Queen Victoria's eldest daughter, Princess Victoria Adelaide Mary Louisa ("Vicky"), married the Crown Prince of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm.



*James Brooks—The Marriage of Victoria, Princess Royal, with Prince Frederick William of Prussia in the Chapel Royal, St James's Palace, 25 January 1858
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The first royal wedding of Victoria's reign, it was celebrated lavishly, the ceremony taking place in the chapel of St James' Palace in London, before the couple went back to Berlin a few days later with colossal numbers of wedding presents. Amongst these gifts was a saw.



The brass back is engraved with the words Presented by Messrs Taylor Brothers, Saw Manufacturers, Adelaide Works, Sheffield; the blade is etched with the words, surrounding the two royal arms, May God's Blessing attend the Marriage of his Royal Highness Prince Frederick William of Prussia with her Royal Highness the Princess Royal of England.

The Illustrated London News, which functioned then as the celebrity magazines do today, showed several pages of the presents, the six-foot high wedding cake and the multitudinous guests, but not the saw. There is in fact no contemporary record of this gift, nor is it difficult to imagine that in the presence of so many magnificent objects, and in spite of its local significance and outstanding design and execution, it probably attracted little notice. Why was it given, and what happened to it afterwards?

There is no direct answer to these questions, but there is much information to be found about the people who received the gift, and those who made it, and some suggestions can be made about its significance, at least to the donors. What follows is in three main parts: it describes the royal couple and their lives, and why they should have been chosen to be the recipients of the saw; the origins and making of the saw in Sheffield, England; and the fate of the saw after the deaths of its first owners.

When Princess Victoria first met the Prussian prince, then aged 20, at the Great Exhibition in 1851, she was only 12 years old, but her family were nevertheless already thinking of her marital prospects. Although there were aristocratic families scattered all over Europe, her parents – her father was himself German – naturally turned their minds first to the large numbers of eligible young men in that country, still consisting of over 30 kingdoms, duchies, grand duchies, principalities and free cities. Prussia was the largest and most powerful of these, and Victoria's parents were anxious that a carefully arranged marriage of their daughter to the heir to the Prussian throne might move that state's authoritarian traditions in a more liberal – and pro-British – direction. Victoria was betrothed at the age of 14 in 1855 and married three years later.



The first picture of the newly weds

This young woman thus became at the age of only 19 an instrument of political manoeuvring which might have destroyed her, but which, with the help of the husband to whom she was so devoted, she more than survived. Her relations with probably the most powerful politician Germany ever produced, Otto von Bismarck, were never easy, and often frankly adversarial; Bismarck used his unmatched manipulative skills to oppose her constantly, to emphasise her nationality, and by implication (and by outright explicit remarks) her alien status: she became widely known, and repeatedly referred to, as “The English Empress”.



Otto von Bismarck (medal on his frock coat) with fellow parliamentarians

Victoria was, however, well able to hold her own against the Iron Chancellor and has been described as one of the most remarkable of all English princesses in history. She was highly intelligent, widely read (Marx's *Das Kapital* in the original German, no less) and interested in literature, music and social affairs. Much is known about her private life and thoughts from the stream of letters which she and her mother exchanged throughout their lives, writing two or three times a week and detailing the constant clashes she had with Bismarck, especially on the many occasions when the politician worked to put her husband into positions of less influence.

Her family life was a mixture of delight and sadness: two of their seven children died young of infectious diseases, and her beloved husband was diagnosed with cancer of the larynx some months before he succeeded to the throne of Bismarck's united Germany in 1888; he survived, speechless and in agony following a laryngectomy, for a mere three months.



With the first five children

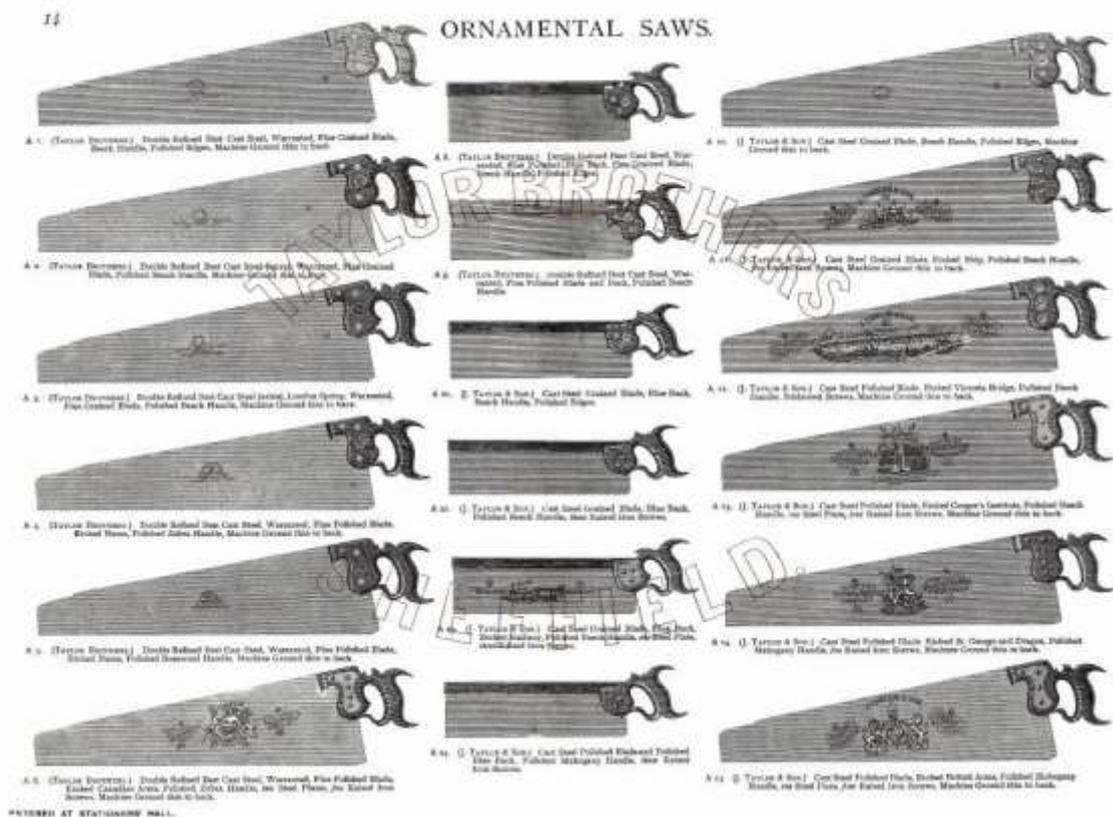
Even the management of his appalling illness was made the occasion of strife between German and English doctors, who disagreed on the diagnosis and treatment of this horribly painful condition, subjecting the unfortunate man to repeated operations and interventions, but denying him sufficient amounts of morphine to alleviate the pain of his last days. In the years before that, the couple had been planning to rule as English-style consorts, sharing equal influence and power, and had shown themselves far more liberal than many German politicians in their attitude to Jews and in their aversion to anti-Semitism. Their family life was spent not only of necessity in the formalities of Berlin, but also in the country, where on their estate they encouraged farms and schools. After Friedrich's death his widow continued to try and influence their son Wilhelm, who at the age of 28 became the emperor and ruled Germany until his empire came to an end in 1918. Her husband's memory was preserved in the vast castle called Friedrichshof which she built near Frankfurt-am-Main; it was completed in 1893 and she died there in 1901, only a few months after her mother.



Interior of castle; it is not difficult to see how a small saw could disappear unmissed

Why, amidst all these high political and royal matters, might a small saw be important? In the context of the heaped-up wedding presents the couple received it is indeed easily overlooked, a supposition which will be touched on later. In the context of the British industrial town where it was made, however, it is highly important: of the millions of saws which Sheffield's saw trade produced, no such decorative saw, or anything remotely like this one made by Taylor Brothers, has been recorded. It represented the greatest possible degree of technical and artistic craftsmanship, combining the skills of the designer, the saw-making tradesmen in steel and brass, the etcher, the engraver and the carver of ivory. Trade fairs and exhibitions such as that of 1851 might call forth saw 'specials' with decorated blades and handles of fine timbers, but this one went well beyond those.

The company had been formed in 1837 by John and Joseph, then aged around 30 years old, and the sons of a grinder. There is no documentation to indicate if either of them had artistic inclinations, nor why they should have had a different philosophy from their competitors about saw design, but there is much surviving information which shows their marked inclination to decorate their products almost to the point of flamboyance. Of all the scores of Sheffield firms making saws they were not only the earliest to adopt the practice of including an illustrative etched design on their saw blades, but as the illustration below shows, took the practice to great lengths.



A page from Taylor Brothers 1890s catalogue

Beginning in the 1840s they established a close working relationship with a local firm of printers. First, they commissioned a design that was transferred to a steel plate from which tissue paper transfers were printed; then each transfer was used once to allow a powerful acid to etch the design on to the steel, leaving the sort of decorative picture shown here.



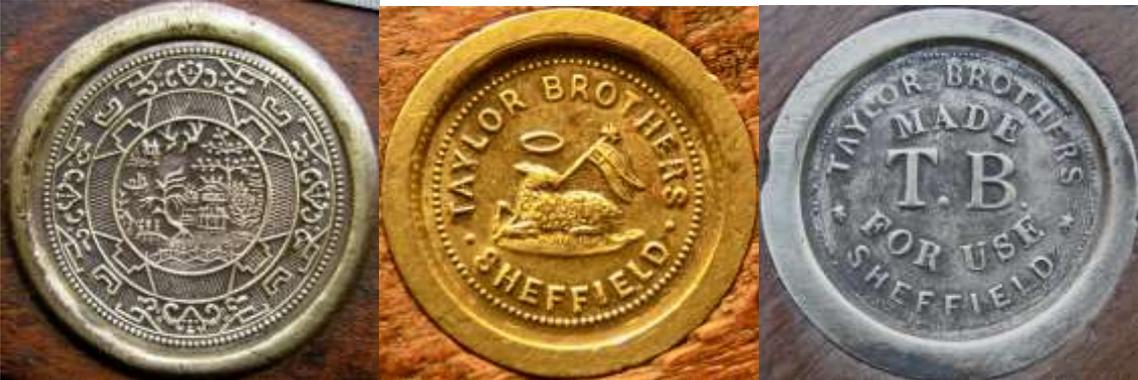
An example of Taylor Brother's 'Willow' saw

Their design flair did not stop at the saw blade. As this frontispiece from a catalogue shows, they made over 20 named brands of saw – a business practice in which they were again ahead of their competitors and which enabled them to market perhaps only three or four different qualities of saw under different names, but giving the impression of a large and flourishing enterprise (in fact several of the names are of firms they had absorbed earlier).



Frontispiece of 1890s catalogue

Apart from the saw blade, other parts were treated to extra decoration. Their practice in this direction was much the same as the more enterprising of their competitors, but Taylor Brothers seem to have gone the furthest.



Some examples of Taylor Brothers' ornamental register plates and medallions

Even the labels put on to boxes of tools were an opportunity for fresh design.



Labels from boxes of Taylor Brothers' products

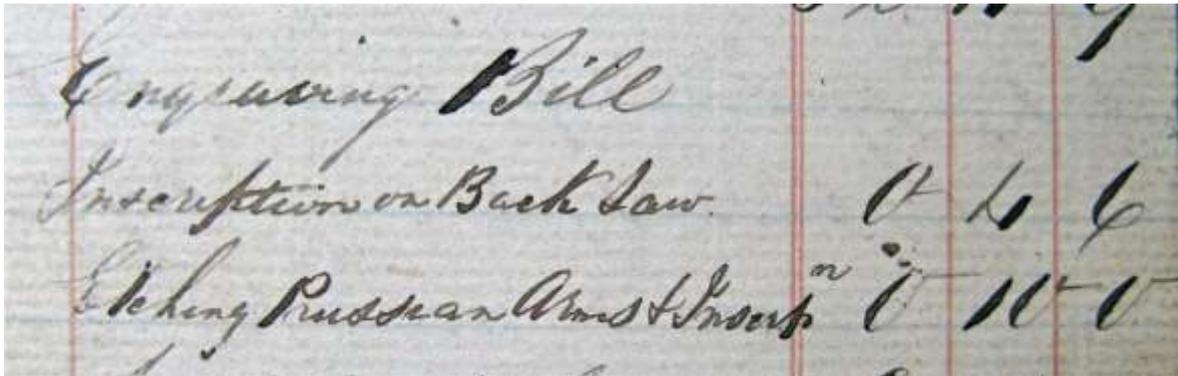
Given that this Sheffield firm had by 1858 enjoyed twenty years of rapidly increasing growth and had shown an unusual degree of flair in product design, is there any reason why they should have decided that they should present as a wedding gift to their sovereign's daughter a saw that surpassed anything that they, or anyone else in Britain, had ever made? It was stated above that no information about the saw can be found in the printed record of 1858, a disappointing lack, considering that the company might have taken the chance in at least the local newspapers to advertise themselves and why they had made their eye-catching present.

One clue may be found in the tradition of European aristocrats owning, and presumably using, tools for what is now called DIY, or at least their hobbies and domestic pastimes. The illustration shows a saw, a razor and other tools from the collection of a 16th century ruler of Saxony, all richly made and decorated in iron, steel, gold and silver.

This painting shows an aristocrat of the same period viewing the contents of a marvellously decorated cabinet, in the foreground a queue of men who appear to be tradesmen bringing yet more for inspection.



It may be an unlikely suggestion that Taylor Brothers knew about this aristocratic habit, but perhaps their close association with the artists and printers who made their decorative designs for saw blades might have given them the idea. At any rate, the business documents of their printers, still extant in the Archives section of Sheffield City Libraries, show an invoice for preparing the etching on the royal saw blade, and the engraving on the brass back.



The bill paid by Taylor Brothers for decorating the royal saw

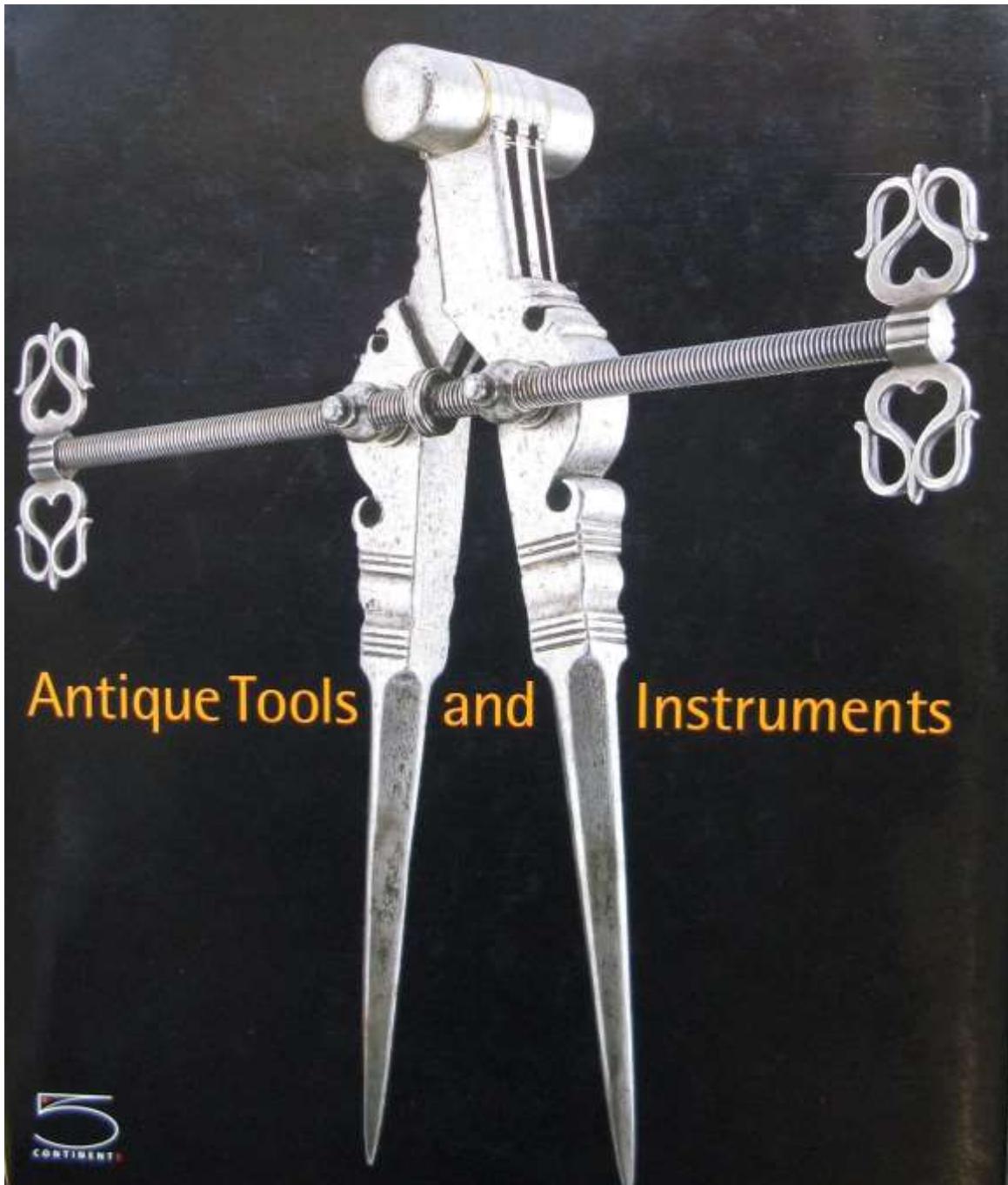
The relationship between the British monarchy and the British public in the 19th century began to change, mainly under the influence of Queen Victoria's consort, Albert. His commitment to public affairs was perhaps most clearly shown in his crucial support for the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the establishment from its profits of the Victoria and Albert Museum in South Kensington. It was well known that at the family's most informal home, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, where they spent much time, their children were encouraged in everyday pastimes like cooking and woodwork; in the grounds of Osborne there was a wooden building known as the Swiss Cottage for them to pursue these activities.



The royal children's play-house, the "Swiss Cottage" at Osborne

It can only be guessed that the Taylor brothers knew of these two threads – the history of ornamental tools, and these pastimes during childhood – that might combine to make a gift of a saw appropriate for Princess Victoria and Prince Friedrich. Unlike other Sheffield firms such as one which made skates for the royal family and which prominently advertised the fact, there is nothing in Taylor Brothers' surviving publicity material to record their making of this remarkable saw.

Only a little of what happened to the saw after 1858 is known. Working backwards from today, we know that in about the year 2000 it became part of the remarkable tool collection of a Swiss architect called Luigi Nessi.



The cover of the catalogue of the Nessi Collection

Nessi died in 2012, and the greater part of his collection was dispersed in an auction sale in Zurich, Switzerland. The buyer of the saw was a dealer in Vienna, who offered it for sale in 2015; the price was high, and there were no takers until it came to the notice of the Ken Hawley Collection Trust in Sheffield. The Trust occupies museum space on the opposite bank of the

river that ran behind the original Taylor Brothers' factory, offering the possibility of returning the saw to within some 200 yards of where it was made. At the time of writing, negotiations continue for the purchase, which will be made with the help of a government grant.



The Saw Wall in the Hawley Gallery

How did the saw get from Germany to Switzerland? Only one further step in the sequence is known: Nessi had bought the saw from a dealer in Paris, but in spite of repeated requests for information, this dealer has been unable to remember how or where he came by it. If we assume that the saw remained in the possession of the Empress Victoria until her death, there is a gap of perhaps a century which has to be filled by guesswork.

In 1901 the ownership of Friedrichshof passed to Victoria's youngest daughter Margarethe, whose title Landgravine (more or less equivalent to Countess) came from her marriage to the Landgrave Friedrich Karl of Hesse, with whom she had six children. Their eldest two sons died very young fighting in the First World War; two others, including Philip, to whom the title successively passed, were prominent supporters of the Nazis during the 1930s.



Philip and Christoph von Hesse in the 1930s

Philip was a trained art historian, and it is tempting, but completely speculative, to see him as someone who might have appreciated the saw. He was sufficiently accomplished, and well connected (he married a daughter of the king of Italy), to act as personal adviser to Hitler on what art objects should be bought in Italy. However, in the last years of the Second World War, like many other German aristocrats, he fell out of favour with the regime, and was imprisoned for many months; his elder brother, Christoph, had been killed in a plane crash in 1943. When the Nazi government collapsed, and although the Hesse family's treasures had been mostly gathered into their main home at Friedrichshof, the castle was requisitioned by the American army.

What happened next is known to some extent. All authorities agree that a large number of the objects in the castle were taken away: the word looting is often used to describe the process. The most significant losses were the family jewels, but the thieves (American officers) were apprehended, tried and convicted. Only some of the tiaras, necklaces, brooches and so on, most of them taken apart to try and get better prices for the separate gems, were recovered.



Members of the Hesse family looking at their recovered jewels

In the chaos of 1945, the fate of a small saw, however attractive it might be by itself, can also only be guessed. It was highly portable, and the idea of its being slipped unseen into the knapsack of any passing soldier is all too likely, making its way over the next half century by unknown routes for sale in a Paris flea market.

Lost art treasures, especially those which might have been in Germany in the years 1933-1945, are when possible documented internationally by the Art Loss Register, to which reputable auction houses and dealers all subscribe. The saw is not on the Register, and the present generation of the Hesse family, who still own the castle (although it is now a hotel), have generously assured the Hawley Trust that they would not have any claim on the saw if it is acquired for permanent display in Sheffield.



Hawley Collection

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