

Overview of Extant English Viols by Maker, Size, Date, and Current Location

The Database of Historical Viols contains records for 237 instruments thought to have been made in England before the 20th century. While only about half of these viols are dated, it is safe to say that nearly all of them were made between 1575 and 1725, a period extending from the earliest known instruments by John Rose to the death of Barak Norman. Only about a dozen are later, including an enigmatic group of seven made by Frederick Hintz in the 1760s and three by Samuel Gilkes during the first quarter of the 19th century.

If Rose was “The Founder of English Viol Making” (as he is described in the title of John Pringle’s article about his life and work), Norman was both the last and also by far the most prolific English viol maker of the historical period, at least to judge by the number of instruments that survive from his workshop, currently totaling nearly 60 (although some attributions are stronger than others, as is usual throughout this database as well as in the whole field of organology). His nearest rival in quantity is Henry Jaye, active three-quarters of a century earlier, from whom some two dozen instruments are extant. These two men alone thus account for fully a third of all surviving antique English viols; adding the output of four other makers (in chronological order: John Rose, William Turner, Richard Meares Sr., and Edward Lewis) brings the total to slightly more than half of the viols listed here. At the other end of the spectrum, nearly a dozen makers are represented by only a single viol, while some 50 instruments remain anonymous.

Three-quarters of all known English viols are basses, with a further 20% being of treble size, leaving only 5% as tenors; none are larger than a consort bass (tuned in D), even though music exists for an instrument called the “great dooble basse” that could play down to AA. One reason for this imbalance of sizes is that consort music died out soon after the middle of the 17th century, effectively eliminating the market for treble and tenor viols, with the result that fewer instruments of these smaller sizes were presumably made in the first place. The bass viol, however, continued to flourish for more than another century, used for playing divisions, basso continuo parts, and in the 18th century also melody lines of sonatas or even concertos and obbligatos in vocal arias. (This contrast is reflected in the surviving instruments of makers active during these two periods: whereas viols made before 1660 by Jaye and Turner are almost evenly divided between basses and trebles, the known output of later makers such as Meares, Lewis, Norman, and their contemporaries is exclusively basses, except for three trebles by Norman.) A second reason for the disproportionate survival of bass viols is that their size made them suitable for conversion into a kind of makeshift cello, thus preserving at least their bodies while making original necks a very rare commodity. In contrast, although some treble viols were similarly turned into violas, tenors were only occasionally deemed fit for transformation into child-size cellos, with the result that most such instruments were probably discarded as unusable relics.

During the past 300 years, the English viols listed here have become dispersed around the world. While more than a quarter remain in the British Isles and an additional one-third in the rest of Europe, a further quarter of the total are now to be found in North America, and a few have migrated as far afield as Japan and New Zealand. Approximately equal numbers are owned by private individuals (a slight majority of whom are professional players) and by institutions (mainly museums). Only rarely are more than half a dozen gathered together in a single place, notably at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the nearby Royal College of Music, now home to the late Dietrich Kessler’s small but important collection of English viols by Rose, Jaye, Meares, and Norman as well as others donated more than a century ago. The current status of 14 instruments remains unknown, in most cases because they were last documented in public loan exhibitions as long ago as 1951, 1904, or even 1872. Quite possibly some of these are no longer extant, but their listings have been retained on the admittedly remote chance that they might one day come to light.

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