



# CHRISTMAS

*with*

# STANLEY POTTS

**On a seasonal visit to England from his new home in Australia, retired luthier Stanley Potts stops in at the old shop – where some things, at least, haven't changed...**

## *Monday 17 December*

Heathrow!! I never thought I'd actually be pleased to see an airport, but it's good to be back in England. It's a pity about the rain, though.

Can't wait to get down to the Spotted Dog for some Fuller's London Pride. I must say, the beer in Australia

really is awful. I suppose it's all right for Australians, but it's totally unsuitable for anyone with a discerning palate.

My old friend Jack met us at the airport – he'd come straight from a rehearsal and was still carrying his viola. Very kind of him to offer to look after me and Rose while we are here. He seemed surprised

that I hadn't brought over any instruments with me, but I explained to him that I really had retired from violin making, so the only tools I'd been wielding for the last year were a corkscrew and a bottle opener.

## *Thursday 20 December*

Dropped in to my old shop on the High Street today... Toby has completely rearranged everything! He got rid of my bench!!! The nice old kettle has been replaced with an espresso coffee machine. And he's put in a much bigger music system... he was playing Bryan Duckworth so loudly I could barely hear myself talk. I had a quick look at his CD rack but couldn't see any sign of that Gilbert & Sullivan set I'd bought him as a farewell present.

Toby was quite surprised to see me, of course... but I think he looked rather pleased as well. He immediately started telling me about all the problems he'd been having lately. There's a new teacher in Dorking who is selling Chinese instruments direct to the students (and they all have to buy one from him, of course). Then he pulled out a dreadful old violin and said: 'And look at this! eBay!! That's the fourth one I've had this month. They expect me to make it work somehow. It's going to end up costing them more than if they'd bought one from me in the first place, but people just can't resist a bargain!'

However, it seems his main worry at the moment is a violin that he's had on consignment... a Lorenzo Ventapane, and he's let it out on trial to Ross Bingham. That was a mistake! Now he can't get it back. And to make matters worse, Victoria Scott is in the market for another violin and she's very keen to try it out, but Toby can't get it to her.

Oh dear... I explained to him that Bingham was notorious for taking Italian instruments out on trial and keeping them for as long as possible. In fact he once 'tried out' a Fagnola and took it on tour to South America for two and a half months! The owner found out when he was flying back, and managed to ambush him at the airport and wrestle the instrument away from him. Toby turned white when he heard that... he was looking so worried that I offered to make some enquiries about it while I was here.

## Saturday 22 December

I'd noticed that Beth Hurley was playing *The Four Seasons* tonight at the Town Hall, so we went along to the concert. She played beautifully and Rose thoroughly enjoyed it, but I couldn't help noticing that the Pedrazzini wasn't really standing out above the orchestra, especially in the upper registers. I still think she would have been much better off with my violin (but of course those meddlesome 'loan foundation' people are only ever concerned with big names, not good sound).

Rose and I were going to walk home from the concert but unfortunately it was still raining so we had to get a cab.

## Monday 24 December

On my way to the Spotted Dog this afternoon I dropped in to see Toby and found I could hardly get into the shop. There was a huge load of instruments piled up near the door... it seems that St Mark's School are now expanding their string programme (lucky Toby!).

He was very pleased to see me – I'd turned up just in time to help him glue on a fingerboard. While I was putting on the clamps I asked him if he had any of his own instruments in the shop at the moment, but he told me that he hadn't been able to make a thing since I left... much too busy now.

Afterwards he showed me another cello that had just come in. It was one of the Chinese instruments being pushed by that new teacher. Toby said: 'Look at this – the neck's come out! He's quite happy to sell them, but of course he doesn't take any responsibility when they fall apart.' I thought the bridge on it looked familiar, but didn't say anything.

He's still fretting about the Ventapane but I couldn't give him any more news. (I'm starting to get a little concerned about Toby... he really needs to learn to relax a bit more. I'm sure I was never this stressed when I was running the shop.)

## Tuesday 25 December

Christmas dinner with Jack. He got me a bottle of Lagavulin... excellent choice! (and also one of his favourites). Rose bought me the new edition of the *Complete Annotated Gilbert & Sullivan*. Hours of great reading there. We spent a very pleasant evening gossiping about musicians and trying out the whisky.

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Jack and I discussed the Bingham quandary... turns out that Jack is actually playing in a New Year concert with Bingham, so it didn't take us long to come up with a plan (in fact, it was probably only a half-bottle sort of problem).

## Thursday 27 December

Today I called round to see Jenkins, my old colleague in Reigate. I was soaked by the time I'd walked there from the train station (I'm sure it wasn't this wet when I lived here... must be global warming). Anyway, I was pleased to see that at least his workshop was looking exactly the same – still knee-deep in wood shavings and full of half-finished jobs. He was very keen to show me some old planes he'd recently added to his collection – a very interesting Preston bullnose and a beautiful Norris no.50G with mahogany infill and handle. (Jenkins always did seem to be much more interested in tools than fiddles.)

While I was there I mentioned that new teacher in Dorking and he said he'd done a lot of fitting up of instruments for him – he'd been told it was a job lot for some school, so he gave him a good deal too. I filled him in on the whole story and he assured me that the teacher would have to go further afield for his set-ups in future.

Jack and I finished up my Christmas present after dinner tonight (and I'm sure he ended up drinking more of it than me!). I think I'll get him another bottle as a thank-you for having us here... but I'll make sure I give it to him well before we leave. I may need it anyway – I think I can feel a cold coming on.

## Friday 4 January

I called in to see Toby again late this afternoon. We were just thinking of heading off to the Spotted Dog when Victoria Scott came in carrying a violin case... Toby's eyes nearly popped out of his head. Victoria told him she'd been trying out the Ventapane for the last few days and was very impressed... she just

wanted the nut lowered slightly and a different E string and then she'd take it away again for a longer trial. After she'd gone Toby looked at me and said: 'What... who... how did you manage that?'

I explained to him that it was common knowledge that Ross Bingham would only play on Italian instruments. So at the last rehearsal Jack had mentioned to him that he'd heard the Ventapane had a fake certificate and was really a Voller Brothers (of course Jack was also able to point out a few of the 'typical Voller features' that we'd thought up). Anyway, that was enough to make Bingham completely lose interest in it.

Toby still didn't quite follow, and asked: 'But how did Victoria Scott end up with the violin?'

'Ah, yes,' I said. 'You probably also need to know that Bingham has hated her ever since that last orchestra audition when Victoria got chosen over him for the permanent position. When Jack told him that Victoria Scott was interested in buying the violin, he couldn't wait to rush around and land her with a "fake".'

I got the fiddle out and had a look at it – no doubt about it, a classic example of Ventapane. Quite genuine of course... not very well made but interesting, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing. Toby was still looking a bit lost for words but he managed to croak out: 'Right... pub... my shout... best whisky.'

Good lad! Mind you, he might be a fine woodworker, but he's still got a lot to learn about working with people. ■

To find out more about Stanley Potts and his world, visit [www.stanleypotts.co.uk](http://www.stanleypotts.co.uk)



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