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Heckscher & Co. Ltd., London – a brief history. by Martin Heckscher

The story of our company is so entwined with the history of piano making in the UK, that the reader will hopefully forgive me for delving into a little of what was happening back in the “boom” times of the piano industry. Heckscher & Company was established in 1883 by Siegmund Heckscher who had arrived in London from Hamburg some years before. In the 1880s the motor car and aeroplane had not yet been invented. Pianos however, were big business. In those days, long before television and computers were even thought of, many households possessed a piano. Pianos were always heavy items which were difficult and expensive to transport. Camden Town, the area of North London where we are based, had some decisive advantages as a piano manufacturing base. It had a good transport infrastructure with the Grand Union Canal and the relatively new railway system on the doorstep. By the late nineteenth century, at least one hundred piano factories had sprung up in Camden Town and neighbouring Kentish Town. Some of the local factories were giants of the industry such as Collard & Collard, Brinsmead, Chappells, and Challens. These larger concerns would have made many components “in house”; but there were also many smaller manufacturers who bought in their components from other local factories who made such things as actions, hammers, keyboards and strung backs. Herrburger Brooks, the action makers, were just one of these other local factories. And so it was that Leo, Siegmund’s son and my grandfather, brought the company to the Bayham Street premises, which it still occupies today, in the heart of all this manufacturing activity. The eminent piano historian, Alastair Laurence, tells of a local pub, The Old Mother Redcap (now re-named The World’s End), which is just 200 metres from our warehouse. This was a virtual labour exchange for the piano industry. Here the factories would come to hire both skilled and unskilled workers who would gather there in the hope of picking up work. Sadly all the piano factories and component manufacturers have now gone and we are the only

remnant of a once thriving industry. Over the intervening years there were many difficult periods. At the time of the great depression, survival was paramount, as many of the factories ceased trading altogether. My father left school in 1931 and was told to go and do something else as there was “no future in the piano industry”. Leo worked on well in to his eighties, until he died in 1958. The business was continued by his sons, my uncle, Derek, and my father, Roy (who had finally joined the company in 1948). Following Leo’s death, they just managed to survive the prohibitive death duties (inheritance tax) which applied at that time, and threatened the survival of any business on the death of its principal owner. But they managed to continue trading, and in 1971, I too joined the family company. We are a small and compact organisation: my business partner Graham Williams arrived here in 1978, and Phil Smith, another key member of staff, joined us in 1987. Lee Chapman & Anne Bodie are more recent arrivals. In 1997 one of our long term customers, Tom Montague, retired, and we took up a long standing invitation to take over his small retail piano business, Montague Pianos, which was, and still is, based in Berkhamsted, Herts. Montague Pianos continues to trade, and has been enormously beneficial in giving us an insight into what our trade customers expect from us. Today we are still specialist suppliers to the piano industry, but there have been enormous changes since those early days. Now that piano manufacturing has almost completely ceased in the UK, the emphasis is on supplying parts, materials and tools for piano restoration, and piano stools to the piano retailers. Our cloths and baizes are made in England, and are of the highest quality. Our tuning levers are effectively made to measure - customers can select the timber for the handle, and also choose its length. We are very proud to be working with a number of “partner” companies: we are agents for Helmut Abel GmbH (hammer heads and action parts), Hidrau Model (piano stools), Denro Corporation (tuning pins), Dean Reyburn (CyberTuner), and Spurlock Specialty Tools of California. We are also the UK distributors for Toyo Pianos. Other specialities are piano covers, castors, and piano safety equipment for schools and colleges. Our underlying policy continues unchanged: we strive to supply our customers with the best products supported by the best service. Please note: the bulk of this article was written for Europiano

Magazine & published by them in late 2009. Please have a look at our websites: www.heckscher.co.uk & www.montaguepianos.co.uk

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