

Autoharp Clearinghouse October 1994 – Sheila Brain

My link to **Sheila Brain** was Raymond Whiteway-Roberts, whom I met a few years back at the International Bluegrass Music Association Trade Show and Fan Fest in Owensboro, Kentucky. Raymond is a festival promoter and announcer in England, and is also active in the Bridge Bluegrass Club and the British Bluegrass Music Association. During the course of our conversation while walking from the festival site back to the hotel in Owensboro, Raymond mentioned that he needed an autoharp workshop leader for his upcoming event, Wadhurst Bluegrass Day. I put Ray in touch with Mike Fenton and gave him several copies of the issue of *AC* that featured Mike on the cover. In addition to securing Mike in the capacity of performer and instructor for his festival, Raymond gave a copy of my publication to Sheila Brain who, in turn, immediately telephoned me across the Atlantic. Thus began a relationship that led to the article that follows. In response to my request, Mike was kind enough to add his “two pence worth.” We’ll begin Sheila’s story with that contribution. ER

“Sheila is one of the leading lights in England’s growing autoharp fraternity. I regard her as a close and trusted friend who has provided valuable support and encouragement to me in spreading the autoharp gospel throughout England these past few years. She is a fine singer with autoharp, and regularly features the instrument in her duet work with Gerry Williams in and around Wadhurst...the town in East Sussex which is home to both of them. In fact, through Sheila’s enthusiasm, Gerry has now turned his hand to building autoharps, and the first results are very promising. We need an English custom builder.

Sheila is committed to both chromatic and diatonic work, and is the proud possessor of one of the older Sunburst-patterned Schmidt 21-chord models. It is a beautiful ’harp, which suits her voice admirably. It has been my pleasure to get to know Sheila well these last few years, and we’ve had many a pickin’ session at her home when I get to stay there whilst on the road in southern England. She has recently conducted her first autoharp workshops with notable success, and appears to be never happier than when her home is full of autoharps and associated materials all over the place. Her work with Gerry is gathering momentum and, hopefully, it won’t be too long before their first recording sessions come to fruition with a cassette recording.

Sheila and Peter Brain reside in a delightful old converted coach house in the East Sussex Weald about fifty miles from London. American autoharpers visiting England are assured of a warm welcome there as well as a fine pickin’ party with Sheila and the other old-time and bluegrass musicians who live in the vicinity.” **Mike Fenton**

Sheila Brain’s introduction to the autoharp took place some twenty years ago when her singing partner, Gerry Williams, suggested that the instrument might lend itself well to their music. A friend purchased Sheila’s first ’harp for her (an Oscar Schmidt Classic) while on a trip to New York. Sheila says it has been her most-treasured possession since that time. Gerry, an accomplished instrumentalist in his own right, got Sheila started on the autoharp. From there, she continued her education via Meg Peterson’s books and tapes. At some point, Sheila wrote to Meg, which eventually resulted in Meg being her houseguest during two trips to England. Sheila

says that she still regularly uses quite a few of the strums and licks that Meg taught her during those visits.

Gerry introduced Sheila and Peter Brain to the world of old-time and bluegrass music, and they gradually built up a vast collection of recordings by such artists as Doc and Merle Watson, the Original Carter Family, Maybelle Carter and the Carter Sisters, Pop Stoneman and Kilby Snow. Peter, an architect and Sheila's husband of twenty-nine years, doesn't play an instrument. However, along with the couple's three grown sons, he is supportive of, and enthusiastic about, her involvement in music. Together, they are active in Christian worship. Sheila incorporates the autoharp into her music ministry both instrumentally and as an accompaniment to her voice. She also provides entertainment and spiritual music therapy at area convalescent homes.

While developing their craft as a duo, Sheila and Gerry put in eight hours of intense practice weekly. This collaboration of congenial talents has led to their being much in demand to perform in pubs and clubs, and at concerts and festivals. Sheila has been writing songs for many years, and her compositions lend an air of originality to both her church-related presentations and her performances with Gerry. Several tracks of traditional as well as self-penned songs have been laid down in the recording studio. Like so many other artists, Sheila and Gerry are doing their debut album on the "installment plan" as finances allow.

Sheila has begun teaching autoharp, and was the featured performer and instructor (called tutor in England) for our instrument at Wadhurst Bluegrass Day this past spring. Mike Fenton has been taking Sheila along now and then when he presents his music programs at primary schools in her locale. Sheila says that watching Mike "perform his magic" with the children has been a tremendous source of inspiration, and has made her eager to do more teaching herself.

A woodworker and furniture maker by trade, Gerry Williams has recently expanded his skills to include instrument building. As of this writing, he has completed two autoharps (which he is shown playing in the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group homepage). At the present time, both Sheila and Gerry find twelve chord bars sufficient for the majority of the music in their repertoire. Sheila reports that they are both thrilled with the sound of the instruments. Gerry calls his autoharps "Wild Rose," with that design being carried out as his sound hole design.

Other instruments in Sheila's arsenal include several antique autoharps and related instruments in addition to a Keith Young diatonic 'harp in the key of "C." Until fairly recently, the German Rosen Harps were the most readily-available chorded zithers in England, but Oscar Schmidt and ChromAharp models now have increased representation as do American-made custom instruments. As of this writing, Gerry Williams is Great Britain's only known builder of autoharps.

During a recent musical jaunt to England, American traditional music veterans Bill Clifton and Jimmy Gaudreau stopped off in Wadhurst to perform at a bluegrass club there. On that occasion, Sheila had the opportunity to play Bill's recently-acquired Orthey 'harp and says that she was extremely impressed by the volume and tone of the instrument. Neither Sheila nor Gerry have ever been to America, but they hope to make that trip sometime next spring. It is my wish that

they might find time in their itinerary for a stop here at *AC* headquarters. Folks like Sheila Brain, who are all fired up about the autoharp, are quite possibly just what we need to bridge the gap musically between our continents. I am honored to dedicate this issue to her.

September 2007 Update: Along with the aforementioned Jimmy Gaudreau, Sheila and Gerry did come to Kent Island for a visit in 1995. They also completed and released the recording on which they had worked long and hard. Sheila's husband, Peter Brain, later passed away. I regret that my contact info for Sheila and Gerry, as well as Raymond Whiteway-Roberts, is no longer current. If any of the UK 'harpers reading this know where they are, please have them get in touch with me. **ER** - esroys@verizon.net