

Old violin gets Ruth tuned into the past

The restoration of an ancient violin will help Ruth Harper restore the fascinating story of her great grandfather who crafted the instrument during spare hours as a lighthouse keeper off the Scottish east coast.

Ruth, who works as a team leader for AEA Technology's sensors and micro systems operation in HR, was given the instrument by her grandmother, a self-taught musician. At the age of eight Ruth was desperate to play the violin and the instrument played an important role in her decision to become an accomplished violin and viola player. Today she regularly plays lead violin with the Warrage orchestra and plays viola for Orford Sinfonia. Ruth still has a book of traditional Scots music which belonged to her grandmother and loves rediscovering her musical roots in informal gatherings.

Her great grandfather's violin is sadly in several pieces but this has revealed an inscrip-

tion he wrote inside. It confirms he made the instrument between 1900 and 1905. This and several articles he wrote for the *People's Journal* - a Dundee weekly paper - have given Ruth a wonderful insight into his life as a principal lighthouse keeper.

Robert Clyde was born in 1858 and took his first station on the Isle of May lighthouse at the age of 20. He was to spend nearly 40 years at different lighthouses including Langress, Ramsey Head, Bell Rock, Beas of Lewis and Cromarty. Ruth believes he would have educated himself in many fields to occupy his erratic off-duty hours. An average shift was four hours on, four off. The work was physically very hard, operating the oil lamps, open to the elements, to warn passing ships of the treacherous coastline.

Over the years he wrote poetry, crafted objects and furniture in wood and metal and, in the Scots tradition, even made his own golf clubs and constructed a couple of holes beside one of



Ruth is having the violin restored in an lighthouse. Through a musician, she plays violin and viola.

the lighthouses on which to swing them? He also played an important role in early wildlife conservation. Birds were often attracted to the flashing light and Robert began to keep records of their numbers, ringing them to check migration patterns.

While stationed at Bell Rock - both by Robert Stephenson senior - his wife and seven children stayed on the mainland in the Signal Tower. Incredibly, wives would often use semaphore to communicate during separation. History shows that Bell Rock has always had a 'fiddler' and this may have prompted Clyde to turn his

talents in this direction. It was the first instrument he had made and incorporated maple for the back with a softwood front.

According to Newbury violin-maker and dealer, Philip Brown, the instrument has the look of a Scottish fiddle. Philip will be carrying out the restoration work for Ruth who plans to keep it as an heirloom. She has no need to play it, already owning a violin made in 1784 and a measured new viola which Ruth recently bought from Philip because 'it is beautiful to look at, feels wonderful and produces a sound like vintage port' she says.

When the violin fell apart Ruth discovered the inscription 'made at Bell Rock Lighthouse, Jan 1905, Robert Clyde'.



Robert Clyde was in spare time 40 years on lighthouse duty and discovered creative talents including violin-making.