During his lifetime Arnold Dolmetsch (1858–1940) built up a considerable collection of early musical instruments and a musical library containing many works of the 17th and 18th centuries. This entire collection was sold in a bankruptcy auction on 29–30 October 1901 by Puttick and Simpson of London. Among the instruments listed was this Richard Meares bass viol, which sold for the comparatively small price of £5. In the same sale an Amati violin and a Vuillaume sold for £51 and £33 respectively. The Meares bass viol was bought by a friend of Dolmetsch and immediately handed back to him. It subsequently appeared in published sources in 1904 and 1905, and in 1929 it underwent extensive restoration in the Dolmetsch workshop. It was finally sold in the mid-1930s to the present owner’s mother, a musician and close friend of Dolmetsch.

**INSTRUMENT**
Dated 1669, this bass viol is quite robust in appearance and is the largest of all Meares’s surviving viols. It has been extensively restored and the fingerboard, tailpiece, pegs and bridge are those made in the Dolmetsch workshop.

**FORM AND CONSTRUCTION**
It is very similar to a Meares bass viol of 1677 in terms of its size, shape and decoration. The soundboard is made up of seven parts, cut from five bent and jointed staves, in the method of construction used by Meares in many but not all of his viols. The arching is full and broad to the edges on the top and bottom bouts, the long arch retaining its shape and consistency along its full length and reaching a maximum height of 23.5mm. The cross-arching has very little recurve. The strong, open soundholes running parallel to the outline are consistent in size and position. The back is made of three jointed strips of lightly figured maple, each framed in purfling both above and below the break. The ribs are made from maple and show a light figure similar to that of the back. The red-brown varnish is well preserved with some loss around repaired cracks, but in general there has been no over-varnishing or polishing.

**DECORATION**
There are two lines of purfling around the edge of both front and back. In the centre of the front, partly obscured by the fingerboard, is a heart-shaped rosette in the style of the English viol maker William Turner. The rosette and its interior tracery are cut from a maple insert, backed with punched vellum. The interior and backing have the appearance of having been originally painted. The rosette is framed within a complicated series of crossing geometric lines of purfling. It is the only Meares viol with a rosette. On the back, the centre strip is decorated at the top, bottom and centre with purflled geometric patterns in a style similar to other instruments of Meares.

**HEAD**
The female head shows the hair gathered at the back and held in place by a bonnet decorated with crosses. The three feathers at the front of the bonnet are a Christian symbol of a virtuous soul. The rear of the pegbox is carved in low relief with wandering floral foliage, the background lightly punched with a small circular implement. The pegbox sides are framed with an incised line and both panels are also lightly punched in the same manner as the back. 

A close look at the work of great and unusual makers

**RICHARD MEARES**

**WRITTEN BY SHEM MACKEY**

www.thestrad.com
upper bouts 332.5mm
middle bouts 248mm
lower bouts 412.5mm

Thanks to Pablo Soriano for photographs and his help