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GEORGE BRISTOW IS INNOCENT, OK?

(and a plea for help in proving it)

by Dr. P. Morris

It is just 20 years ago that the authoritative journal 'British Birds' published a lengthy paper which sought to demonstrate that an improbably large number of rare birds had been collected supposedly from the Hastings area of Sussex. There were so many of these 'Hastings Rarities' that they surely could not all be genuine, so a long series of records were declared invalid and many rare birds struck off the British list.

The original authors declined to say who might have been responsible for importing phoney rarities and passing them off to rich collectors, but the popular press were less inhibited and named George Bristow, the well-known taxidermist of St. Leonards-on-Sea. Many (but not all) of the rarities certainly were mounted by him. So great was the ballyhoo at the time, that the Hastings Rarities affair probably ranks second only to Piltdown Man in public awareness as the biological hoax of the century. Unfortunately, Bristow had died in 1947 and was thus unable to defend himself; though others tried (notably J. Harrison in "*Bristow & The Hastings Rarities*"; A. H. Butler Ltd. 1968) but of course did not get the same size newspaper headlines.

Consequently, to this day, Bristow is widely assumed to have been responsible for a major zoological hoax and to have made money out of dishonest trading in rare stuffed birds. In fact, there is a lot of unpublished information to suggest that Bristow did neither. I feel that it would be nice to produce evidence which would clearly set the record straight, at least as far as Bristow's role is concerned. It would also be nice to think that the Guild had done something to defend its own so to speak, and clear the name of a respected taxidermist from unfair (and probably unjust) accusations. So, I am writing to ask if any members of the Guild have or know of any information relating to George Bristow which has not already appeared in 'British Birds', Harrison's book, or the popular press in the early 1960s. Are there any photographs of Bristow or his shop? Where is his diary and account book?

It is unlikely that many members can help in that rather specific way, but I am also seeking to compare Bristow's charges for mounting birds with the prices of other contemporary taxidermists. So, here's a wider appeal: Do you have (or have access to), or know of, any price lists, account books, invoices, Museum order books, etc., etc. from which we might draw up a list of prices charged by as many taxidermists as possible any time between 1890 and 1916 (and also 1930-40).

If you think you can help in this, please drop me a line so that we can discuss more specifically the best way of collecting and collating the information.

Any help with information on poor old Bristow or about other people's price lists and charges would be much appreciated.

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