

Till Family Rock Band - "Also known as a Harmonicon"

Dr A.M. Till, April 2011

See: <https://www.michaeltill.com>

I am only an indirect distant relative of this Concert Group but my interest was first stimulated some 20 years ago when an aunt passed on to me an original Till Family Rock Band concert programme, dated 1885.



The following are a few Abridged
TESTIMONIALS AND OPINIONS OF THE PRESS.

From F. W. BRIDGMAN, Esq., Professor of Music, Edinburgh.

"Having had an opportunity of hearing the Messrs Till and Sons' Rock Band, at the City Hall, Glasgow, I have great pleasure in testifying, not only to the merits of the instrument, which they have so very ingeniously constructed out of Stones collected from the Cumberland Mountains, but also to their able and tasteful performance upon it. The rich and pure tone which they managed to bring out of these stones was something marvellous, and the harmonic combinations they produced were truly charming. I was particularly struck with their performance of Handel's *Harmonious Blacksmith*, both the air and variations of which were rendered exquisitely. The pieces were listened to with rapt attention by an audience which crowded the hall, and the impression they produced was of the most favourable description."

From the Rev. CHARLES GARRETT, President of the Wesleyan Conference.

"Allow me to thank you for the great pleasure I derived from your performance. I have long heard of *Sermons in Stones*, but I never imagined there was so much Music in them. Of course very much of the pleasure was the result of your wonderful skill in evoking the music, but that so much melody should be lurking in such unpromising looking materials is a marvel to me."

CRYSTAL PALACE.—"The performers proved that there were not only *Sermons in Stones*, but most musical tones."—*The Times*.

"That sixty rough slabs of lava-blacks slate, collected on the slopes of Skiddaw and Rossettiers could be formed into an instrument whose upper tones are as sweet as silver bells, and whose lower ones have the depth and resonance of an organ; which has a compass of five octaves, and which can discourse Handel, Weber, Diabelli, &c. is a thing which to be believed, must be seen. There is something in the Persian King's "new pleasure" in the satisfaction which apart from its own melodious excellence our ears in listening to an instrument which we know to be unique—which has taken over ten years to construct, and which, looking to the age of the material is the oldest, and to that of its invention is the newest instrument in the world. It is hard to say which is the most interesting part of the exhibition—the deftness of the performers—the curiosity of the instrument—or the excellence of the music. It is one, however, which no visitor to the Lake district should omit seeing.—*Manchester Courier*, August 29, 1882.

"The richness and beauty of the tone produced is something wonderful."—*Standard*.

THE ROCK BAND.—The entertainments given by this band of instrumentalists and vocalists (five in number), under the auspices of the Church Institute, on Tuesday and Wednesday last, were, we are inclined to think, as clever, extraordinary, and gratifying as anything that ever did or ever will visit Driffield. It is not simply the fact that all the performers are evidently musicians of a high order, which renders the entertainment pleasing, but the extraordinary and hitherto unknown instruments which are made to give forth the sweetest of sweet sounds. The weary travellers through the wilderness were no doubt nightly astonished when water came out of the rock, but this Till family demonstrate the almost equally astonishing fact that the rocks can be made to give forth the most charming music. Some sixty pieces of rock, having the appearance of carbon, and varying from six inches to four feet in length, are laid on a skeleton table, and those struck by the performers (three) with small wooden hammers give out most mellifluous tones, whilst the manipulative proficiency of the players is marvellous beyond description. Besides this rock harmonicon, as it is called, his rummy (though not so sweet) is brought out of other "instruments," called the carina, the gigniers, the xiphones, and even a bodyjack, of which it is impossible to give a conceivable description. The hall was well filled on each occasion.—*Driffield News*.

CITY HALL, PERTH.

FOR ONE NIGHT ONLY.—

WEDNESDAY, 18th FEBRUARY,

Doors open at 7.30—Commence at Eight o'clock—Carriages at 9.45 p.m.

THE GREATEST NOVELTY OF THE AGE!

A Grand Concert

WILL BE GIVEN BY THE CELEBRATED

ROCK BAND

(TILL FAMILY).

Under the Distinguished Patronage of

The Right Hon. the Earl of Breadalbane; The Right Hon. the Earl of Kinnoull; Colonel Macdonald-Macdonald of St Martins; Andrew Coates, Esq., Pittullich House, &c., &c.

Reserved Seats (Numbered) 5s., First 2s., Second 1s., Third 6d.

Tickets may be had from Messrs Paterson, Sons & Co., Musicollers.

Some original admission tickets survive, though identity of performance arena is not identified and prices varied according to venue.



Since that time I have collected information from various sources in UK and USA. The Till family were one of three who lived in the Lake District and constructed stone notes from rock removed from a valley alongside the mountain known as "Blencathra". The Richardson family produced their instrument and played throughout the UK (instrument is in good condition and exhibited in the Keswick Museum / Cumbria). The Abraham's were the last family to have their own instrument but it's whereabouts has never been established. The Till's instrument would date from 1870 to 1880 for construction. The instrument consists of a wooden trestle, some 11 or 12 feet long, supported two shelves of stones tuned to give 5 octaves - 65 notes insulated and mounted on straw ropes. Wooden hammers covered in leather were used as percussors. Individual stones measured from 3oins to 6ins long and up to 3" broad or more.



Annie

Daniel

William

Daniel Jnr.

Elizabeth

Family group with complete instrument

A BBC Radio 4 programme in 2006 presented by the international percussionist Evelyn Glennie featured the instruments in the Keswick and Coniston Museums and the Richardson stones have been played in public at a number of concerts mounted on a modern wooden sounding board.

Besides performing in their own locality, the Till Rock Band toured Birmingham, Bath, Brighton, Liverpool and Llandudno, Darlington and Preston, Torquay, Scarborough and York. Scottish appearances were in Perth and Dundee. They even played in the Isle of Man.

Their crowning performances of 136 concerts were at the reconstructed Crystal Palace site at Sydenham in 1881. Recent research has revealed a superb advertisement for their appearances in the main auditorium.



THURSDAY, MARCH 24th, 1881.

Six o'clock, in Opera Theatre,

TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND

Will perform a Selection of POPULAR AIRS, and DANCE and other Music, on their Instruments composed of

THE CELEBRATED MUSICAL STONES OF THE LAKE DISTRICT.

The rock from which is formed the curious instrument on which to-day's programme is played is known in the Lake District as hornblende slate; but a microscopical examination shows that hornblende is a comparatively rare constituent of the rock; and it is therefore described by the Rev. J. Clifton Ward (formerly of the Geological Survey), as spotted schist. It is found near Skiddaw, where it surrounds two patches of Skiddaw granite, and appears to be the result of metamorphism acting between the Skiddaw clay-slate and the granite. Messrs. Till, after numerous journeys in the mountains and many inspections of the different rocks, commenced in 1870 to construct the Harmonicon, and at the end of the first year, after considerable labour, collected sufficient stones to make an instrument on which one player was able, with two hammers, to perform simple tunes. They have added and improved till the instrument has attained its present form. The construction of the instrument is entirely their own. The stones vary from 6 inches to 4 feet in length, and are arranged on straw so as to produce the greatest vibration possible. Inspection of the instrument at the close of the performance is invited.

The Programme will be selected from the following:

SELECTION	...	...	...	...
BLUE BELLS OF SCOTLAND (WITH VARIATIONS)	...	...	...	...
CHANTILLY VALSE	...	...	...	Waldteufel.
MUSICAL BOX	...	...	...	Lievich.
THE HARMONIOUS BLACKSMITH (WITH VARIATIONS)	...	...	...	Handel.
IL COKRICOLO GALOP	...	...	...	De Cruz.
GAVOTTE	...	...	...	Louis XIII.
POPULAR AIRS	...	...	...	...
HOME, SWEET HOME (WITH VARIATIONS)	...	...	...	...
LES FOLIES POLKA	...	...	...	Waldteufel.
SWISS AIR (WITH VARIATIONS)	...	...	...	Hünter.

Seats, Sixpence and One Shilling.

DAILY till further notice,

TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND
 Will perform in the Opera Theatre, on their Instruments composed of
THE CELEBRATED MUSICAL STONES OF THE LAKE DISTRICT,
 A Selection of Popular Airs, and Dance and other Music.
Seats, Sixpence and One Shilling.
 N.B.—For Hours of Performance see Daily Advertisements.

CALENDAR TILL TUESDAY, MARCH 29th.

Thursday, 24th.	PLAY, "LEAH," under the direction of Miss Isabel Bateman. TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND. ORCHESTRAL CON- CERT. Skating Rink. Organ.
Friday, 25th.	TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND. ORCHESTRAL CON- CERT. Skating Rink. Organ.
Saturday, 26th.	NINETEENTH SATURDAY CONCERT. MISS MARY DAVIES, HERR ZUR MUEHLEN, MADAME MONTGOMY-REMAURY. TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND. Skating Rink. Organ.
Monday, 28th.	TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND. ORCHESTRAL CON- CERT. Skating Rink. Organ.
Tuesday, 29th.	PLAY, "THE HUNCHBACK," under the direction of Miss Isabel Bateman. TILL'S SKIDDAW ROCK BAND. ORCHESTRAL CONCERT. Skating Rink. Organ.

The original performers were Daniel (Snr) Annie, William, Daniel Jnr, and Elizabeth (Lizzie).

Research has not revealed whether the Till instrument, used in their performances, exists. However, 22 stones, mounted on a trestle, were taken to USA by the Tills and are in the Metropolitan Museum, New York. There are other small stone instruments made by the Till family:

1. Owned by a near relative - single octave.
2. Under care Lancaster Maritime Museum - single octave.
3. Instrument originally presented to John Ruskin who admired the sound of the instrument - this small version is in the Ruskin Museum, Coniston.

Letter from John Ruskin, the great English art critic:

Brantwood, Coniston. Lancashire 9th September 1884.

Dear Mr Till,

I am extremely grateful for the specimens of Skiddaw Rock, and congratulate you most heartily on the wonderful instrument you have composed of such materials, no less than on the admirable skill of execution with which you have learned, aided by your Father, to exhibit its peculiar qualities. You may have given me, with a new insight into the nature of crystalline rock substance, also a musical pleasure. Believe me always faithfully,

Yours John Ruskin

Various reports in UK and USA lead one to believe that the family were of a Non-Conformist background and supported their local churches with fund raising etc. Indeed they performed for several years at the Chautauqua Institution. Originally this was a Methodist Foundation in 1894 but is now open to all faiths not only to increase knowledge of religion but also education and the arts. Thomas Edison, of phonographic fame, was Honorary President of this Foundation and a friend of the Tills.



Photographic material available gives insight into the dress of the performers and the main “Harmonicon” and additional instruments mentioned in the programmes. Cello and violins, swinging harps and musical glasses gave variety to the performances as well as vocal solos. We have detail of the nature of Zither and Gigilera also mentioned. Accuracy over dates is difficult but by 1895 the Till family decided to tour America and in the end stayed for 5 years as a performing group. They settled in Bayonne, New Jersey - Manager William Till's address is listed as 715 Ave. C (telephone 51A Bayonne!). They toured the USA and Canada (Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick) and it is recorded that in total they performed 8,000 concerts and never failed to fulfil a booking! After five years the group decided to disband with three members returning to the Lake District in UK. However, William remained and continued to perform ably assisted by his three daughters Esther, Mildred and Greta.

1999 saw the publication of “Images of America - Bayonne” in which there are descriptions and references to the Till Family Rock Band and as a result of this publication references to Till family activity have been extracted from the “Bayonne Herald”.

THE ROCK BAND CONCERT COMPANY.



WILLIAM TILL, MANAGER,
715 AVE. C. - - - BAYONNE, N. J.

Two further programmes exist neither are dated or give a venue and may have been produced for use at several concerts on a tour. There are also two examples of "Window Bills" advertising their concerts. A later hand bill describes:

Mr William Till (of the Till Family Concert Co.) Organist and Choirmaster St John's P.E. Church, can now take pupils on the piano, organ, violin and zither No. 42 West 37th Street, Bayonne City.

He was apparently organist at this church for 27 years.

The Rock Band Concert.



SWINGING HARPS.

UNIQUE, ARTISTIC AND POPULAR

Musical Entertainment

The Marvelous Rockophone

<p>SWINGING HARPS, MUSICAL GLASSES, Etc.</p>		<p>VOCAL SOLOS, TRIOS, READINGS, Etc.</p>
--	---	---

Miss Mildred Till
Miss Mabel Till

Miss Esther Till
Mr. William Till



Musical Glasses



String instruments



William Till with three daughters Esther, Mildred and Greta



William with the Rock Band at his retirement home and garden in East Orange

A concert bill includes the following notes:

The Rock Band Concert - A Musical Instrument 100 Million Years Old

"Mr. Till has for many years been exploring the palaeozoic rocks of the Cumberland Mountains, England, and has at length found a series of rocks which, when struck, give sounds as various and more accurate than the chords of a grand piano. The Rocks are Gneiss and Hornblende, and were deposited prior to the introduction of life on earth, probably 100 million years ago. Mr. Till commenced to collect these stones by way of amusement, and by the end of the year he had gathered enough to form an instrument of an octave and a half on which simple airs could be played. The idea of a perfect instrument followed as a natural sequence. Mr. William Till and his father, Mr. Daniel Till, continued to work on it and devoted eleven years in bringing the instrument to its present complete form. The stones are from six inches to four feet long, arranged on a frame 12 feet long. It has a scale of five octaves."

MR. WILLIAM TILL, the originator of the Rock Band, received his musical education in England, studying the organ, violin and piano. He has directed all the Rock Band Concerts, over three thousand, commencing at Crystal Palace, London, Eng., and after a tour in Europe came out to this country through the influence of the Rev. Dr. F.E. Clark, of Christian Endeavour renown. After visiting all the principal towns and cities the family retired from active concert work and confined their concerts to Greater New York only, where they have given 300 concerts. Mr. Till was engaged as organist and choirmaster of the First Reformed Church and musical director of the Bayonne Musical Society. At the last concert under his leadership Handel's great oratorio, The Messiah, was rendered with large chorus, orchestra and distinguished soloists. As many requests have been received from all parts of the country to give his remarkable Rock Concerts, the present tour has been arranged, which will positively be the last. Mr. Till will be ably assisted by his two talented daughters.

MISS MILDRED TILL as a vocalist possesses a rich contralto voice, deep and full, thoroughly trained and under full control. Her selections are always received with the most enthusiastic applause. Miss Till is now studying with the well-known teacher, Madame Murio Celli. As an instrumentalist she is a brilliant pianist, also an accomplished organist, and has studied with Victor Baier, the organist of Trinity Church, New York.

MISS ESTHER G. TILL, the young and gifted elocutionist, has appeared with great success at concerts in New York and Brooklyn; her selections, especially the humorous, are very popular. She is also a clever instrumentalist and joins the family in all the concerted pieces on the Rocks, Glasses, Swinging Harps, etc.

THE TILL FAMILY CONCERT. - The most surprising and pleasing musical entertainment of the year was heard last night in Library Hall. The Till family play as sweetly as can be imagined. Professors and students from Cornell University vied with blacksmiths and carpenters from the city workshops (of course the ladies were all proud and delighted, too) in the volume and warmth of applause for every number. Music in the rocks and glasses, in the swinging harps and zither - purest, sweetest, most astonishing of music. Old musical critics and young professors of music laid aside their reserve and gave vent to their delight and surprise. To tell the truth, we did not expect such music. Ithaca did not believe the strong praise that preceded this family. The sweetest music in the world is in the rocks and glasses that we heard last night. The selections were very popular and the artistic side of the entertainment was high. The singing of Miss Mildred was exquisite, while the recitals of Miss Esther were simply charming. The grace and modesty of the young ladies were captivating. A return date to Ithaca will again pack the hall with our best musical and intellectual people. - Ithaca, N.Y., Daily News.

THE ROCK BAND CONCERT.

.. Programme ..

PART I.

ROCK BAND, { a, "Qui Vive," *Ganz*
 b, Selection from "William Tell," *Rossini*

SOLO, MUSICAL GLASSES, { a, Intermezzo from "Cavalleria
 Rusticana," *Mascagni*
 b, "Popular Airs"

MISS MILERED TILL

RECITALS, { a, "Way Down East," *Hall*
 b, "Going on an Errand"

MISS ESTHER TILL.

ROCK BAND, { a, "Harmonious Blacksmith," *Handel*
 b, "March," *Sousa*

CONTRALTO SOLOS, { a, "Expectancy," *Dudley Buck*
 b, "Two Spoons," *Adams*

MISS MILERED TILL

TRIO, MUSICAL GLASSES, "Sacred Melodies"

PART II.

ROCK BAND, "Stephanie Garotte," *Czibulka*

SOLOS, Gigillera and Ocarina

RECITALS, { a, "Hanging a Picture," *Jerome K. Jerome*
 b, "Terrible Fright"

MISS ESTHER TILL.

WESTMINSTER AND TRINITY CHIMES

MR. WILLIAM TILL.

CONTRALTO SOLO, Selected,
 MISS MILDRED TILL

DUET, "Cheerfulness," *Gumbert*

THE MISSES TILL

ROCK BAND AND SWINGING HARPS, "National Airs"

For information regarding engagements of the Rock Band Concert Company, address
 Telephone, 51A. WILLIAM TILL, 715 Ave. C, Bayonne, N. J.

THE ROCK CONCERT,

PROGRAMME

PART I.

OVERTURE

ROCK BAND, "Qui Vive," *Ganz*

TILL FAMILY.

STREICH ZITHEL SOLD, "Ernie," *Jakovicki*

SWINGING HARP, "Chimes of Westminster," *English*

MR. WILLIAM TILL.

"Selected,"

RECITATION, MISS ETTA TILL.

ROCK BAND, { a, "German Patrol," *Eitwberg*
 b, "March," *Rezy*

TILL FAMILY.

CONTRALTO SOLO, "Daddy," *Bohrend*

MISS MILDRED TILL.

MUSICAL GLASSES, "Nearer, My God, to Thee," "Abide With Me,"
 "It Is Well With My Soul," etc.,
 TILL FAMILY.

INTERMISSION.

PART II.

ROCK BAND, "New Admiral March," *Boar*

"Imitation of a Music Box," *Leblich*

SOLO MUSICAL GLASSES, "Selection"

TILL FAMILY.

MISS MILDRED TILL.

RECITATION, "Mehetabel,"

MISS ETTA TILL.

ROCK BAND AND GIGILLERA, "National Airs" *American*

TILL FAMILY.

SWINGING HARPS, "Popular Airs" *Foster*

TILL FAMILY.

PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE ROCK BAND, 10 CENTS.

For Terms and Dates address William Till, 715 Ave. C, Bayonne, N. J.

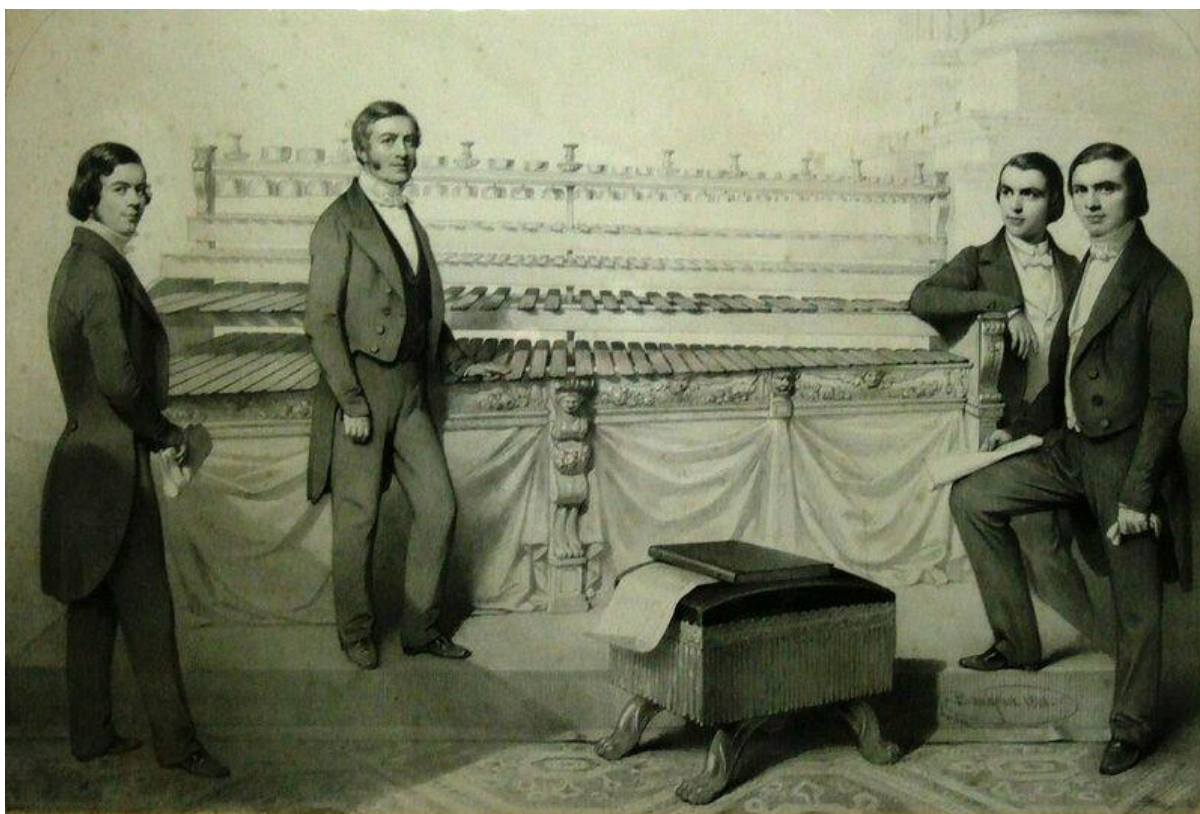
Additional information collated by Gavin Holman, September 2021

The “Original Monstre Rock Band” was the creation of Joseph Richardson, a stonemason from Keswick, England. Richardson had created what he called a “rock harmonicon,” one of a class of instruments called lithophones, which feature stone bars shaped, tuned, and assembled in the style of a modern mallet percussion keyboard, such as a xylophone or glockenspiel.

The resonant properties of local Keswick stone had first gained attention in the 18th century, when Peter Crosthwaite, proprietor of a local museum, built a small stone instrument that covered two octaves. Richardson would likely have known of Crosthwaite and his cabinet of curiosities. Being of the maker sort himself, Richardson got to work on a full-scale version.

Beginning in 1827, he spent 13 years carting and carefully chipping pieces of a metamorphic rock known as hornfels until he had an instrument composed of 61 stones, 12 feet long, with a five-octave range. The largest piece of stone was roughly three feet in length, an octave below middle C, and the smallest was a mere six inches long. Each note-producing slab was laid on twisted straw across a pair of long wooden bars. Players used an assortment of specialized wooden and leather mallets to play the instrument.

To play the harmonicon for audiences, Richardson’s three sons worked in frenzied concert, wielding mallets with heads the size of baseballs. Crowds were amazed with their intricate classical repertoire. A July 1841 issue of *The Athenaeum* raved about the Richardsons, calling the spectacle “like fabled things made real,” and comparing Richardson himself to “a shipwrecked Mozart” capable of calling forth beautiful music from the rudest, crudest, most improbable materials.



Joseph Richardson and his sons, the Original Monstre Rock Band - Keswick, 1846

Their repertoire included selections from the great composers, Handel, Beethoven and Mozart, with arrangements of waltzes, quadrilles, polkas, and gallops, the 'Pop Music' of the day.

Reporting on a concert held in Liverpool in September 1842, a correspondent added 'Some wild young fellows feel desperately inclined, under the exciting influence, to infringe upon the rules of formality, by clearing away benches and asking the young ladies to dance with them, which I'm sure, as far as the regularity of time and tune is concerned, might be easily accomplished; however the irregularity of time and place might shock the decorum of strait laced individuals'.

By 1845, the Original Monstre Rock Band was performing regularly at London's Egyptian Hall, and played multi-week engagements at the Royal Surrey Zoological Gardens, amid traditional bands, animal feedings, and reenactments of the Siege of Gibraltar. The band's popularity and success led them to 'top the bill', headlining at Buckingham Palace in February 1848, in front of a large assembly of English and foreign nobility. Both Queen Victoria and Prince Albert requested encores of certain musical pieces. The Queen was, apparently, a rock purist, and was displeased when the Richardsons chose to sully the show with the addition of steel bars on the second occasion.

Following the triumph of the Royal Command Performance, a decision was made to add vocal selections to an already growing instrumental repertoire.

With an established reputation, and with all the glamour and style of the age, the Richardsons engaged the 24 year old vocalist Miss Julia Gould, for a series of

national concert dates during 1848 and 1849. Julia thus became the first ever 'lead singer' with a Rock Band and established herself as the original 'Rock Chick'!

In an age of limited geographical mobility, the Richardson's toured extensively throughout the United Kingdom and Ireland during the 1840's to the 1860's. With over a ton of equipment, their earlier 'gigs' were arrived at by carriage and horse drawn haulage, but at the height of their fame they were able to utilise a newly developed steam railway system.



Richardson Rock Harmonicon in Keswick Museum

Pre-empting the legendary UK and US Rock Concerts of the 20th Century, by over a hundred years, the Richardson's played both the Isle of Wight and Woodstock. In September 1850, they performed at Cowes Town Hall 'to a numerous and genteel audience, who were highly pleased and appreciative with the concert'. And in April 1851 they gave a recital at the Town Hall in the rural Oxfordshire market town of Woodstock, noted in the local press as 'The evening was received with enjoyment, gratification, and the astonishing performances, of which are now well known, were greeted with volumes of applause'.

Like the Rock Bands of today, the group were quick to discover the promotional and marketing potential of selling 'branded concert merchandise' with the band name logo and illustration, printed on placards, sheet music and programmes. At a later date, with improved photographic and printing processes, lithographic reproductions of the instrument and players were also available for sale at venues; a 'must have' for their increasing fan base.

The 'hornfel' rock seems curious to a very small area of the Skiddaw region of the Lake District, and so hence generations of 'Rock Players' have originated or quarried the material in that place. Over the years they have included groups such as The Bowes, The Harrison's, Henderson-Tangye & Sons, The Abrahams, a multitude of circus performers, and the very popular 'Till Family Rock Band Concert Company' who played a host of dates in the capital, toured the UK provinces during the 1870's and 1880's, and made 'Brit Rock' big in America in the late 1880's.