

 HIS MASTER'S VOICE



## A HOUND AND A HORN

**Brian Willey** looks at the life and times of Nipper – HMV's listening dog

**N**ow that 78rpm shellac records have become historical artefacts, the image of Nipper, the HMV listening dog, is not seen so often. In times past, he was surely the most familiar dog in the world. Captured in a famous painting titled *His Master's Voice*, Nipper became the trademark for HMV, and later for RCA Victor in America, Deutsche Grammophon in Germany, and RCA Victor in Canada and Japan.

The English factory for The Gramophone Company's shiny black shellac discs with Nipper's picture on either side, was established in the town of Hayes, Middlesex, about 11 miles from central London. Built in 1907 as its pressing plant, it later developed into the main industrial centre for its gramophones and radios, complete with a Nipper weather vane installed on its clock tower.

The Americans also revered the image and in 1954, a statue measuring 25ft high and weighing four tons was hoisted onto the roof of 911 Broadway in Albany, New York. Although the

building has no present connection with RCA, the local residents have now adopted the statue as their mascot. A smaller one also adorns the roof of the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore; this one complete with the horned gramophone.

The dog's birthplace was Bristol, in 1884. Possibly a cross between a Fox Terrier and a Jack Russell, the pup formed a habit of nipping the backs of people's legs and the name Nipper was soon applied.

He became the pet of Mark Barraud, a scenic designer working at the Prince's Theatre in Bristol and, when Mark died in 1887, Nipper was inherited by a younger brother, Francis, an artist living in Liverpool.

Francis Barraud was born there in 1856 and, when he became successful, Liverpool Corporation purchased one of his paintings in 1887 for their permanent collection. Titled *An Encore Too Many*, the subject is a circus scene where a trapeze artist has fainted and is being watched over by two companions. The painting is still periodically displayed in Liverpool's Walker Art Gallery.

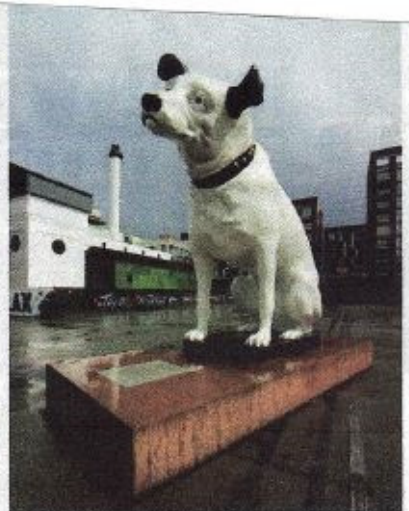
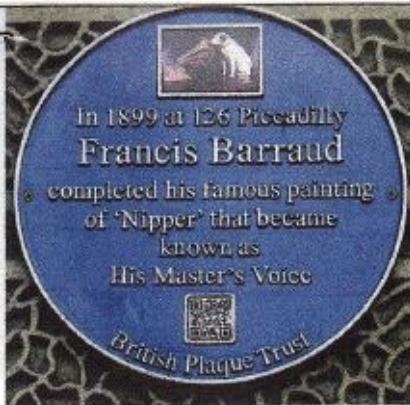
During Nipper's life in Liverpool, it had been noticed that he paid quizzical attention to the family phonograph whenever it was in use. He never actually sat in front of it, but merely glanced at it, as if wondering where the voice was coming from. It was this attention that Francis Barraud later recalled and was inspired to paint and it became his commercial masterpiece.

Mark Barraud's widow moved from Bristol to Kingston upon Thames and, having done so, asked for the dog to be brought to her to keep her company. Nipper spent the rest of his life living in Surrey, where he died in 1895 at the age of 11 years, having suffered a stroke which paralysed his hind quarters.

There being no garden to her residence, a teenage nephew buried Nipper beneath a mulberry tree in a grassy public area known as Durham Gardens, 77 Clarence Street.

In the early years of the 20th century, the town of Kingston upon Thames was further developed and Clarence Street became a main thoroughfare, with that grassy plot built over. Nipper died long before he became famous but fortunately





the nephew who had buried him could recall the site and establish the precise location, which is now the car park at the rear of Lloyds Bank.

On the 100th anniversary of Nipper's birthday in 1984, Mr DF Johnson, the chairman of HMV Shops Ltd, visited the area and placed two commemorative plaques to Nipper, one at the entrance to the bank and one in the car park.

Nipper was dead when Francis Barraud had the thought of painting him, but he set about the job despite having to work from a photo and his memory. Barraud included a phonograph in the picture, and when it was completed, he sought out a representative of the Edison Bell phonograph company to whom he offered it for sale, but was told scornfully that "dogs don't listen to phonographs" and the offer was rejected.

Still convinced that his picture was worthwhile but could perhaps be more attractive, he decided to paint over the existing black japanned horn, and replace it with a brass one. Needing to borrow such an article, he went along to the Gramophone Company in London's Maiden Lane to ask if they would lend him one. They naturally asked what it was wanted for and, having told them, they suggested that he change the whole

machine to a gramophone and could they have first refusal on its purchase?

Enthused by the idea, he ended up borrowing an entire gramophone and the revised painting was duly completed in 1899 at his studio at 126 Piccadilly. The Gramophone Company promptly purchased it for £50 plus a further £50 for its copyright – a handsome sum at the turn of the century. It was then displayed in their boardroom and the image was constantly used for advertising.

The rest of the story is history, for the painting eventually became their trademark and first appeared on the company's record labels in 1909. By then the entire company had been created around the picture and, as the whole enterprise was based on Francis Barraud's inspiration, its commercial value was immense.

To acknowledge this fact, in 1920 he was awarded a £250 annuity – worth at least £11,000 in present-day money.

Opposite: His Master's Voice – the classic image. This page, clockwise from top left: Barraud and Nipper have a blue plaque in commemoration of the portrait. Nipper at Bristol. A 15ft high Nipper at Hayes. Brain and Nipper. Francis Barraud in his studio.

Sadly its benefit to him was short lived. In April 1924, the annuity was increased to £350 and, five months later on 29 August 1924, Francis died aged 68 at his home in Melina Place, St John's Wood and was buried in Hampstead Cemetery.

As the years rolled on, changes would inevitably take place. In 1931 The Gramophone Company became the Electric and Musical Industries Ltd. Some 40 years later its record labels turned from HMV to EMI, without the branding of Nipper.

The Hayes site is now very different, but some memories remain. I recently visited the area to find the original factory is now a grand business centre, and a large statue of Nipper adorns a central square. He is about 15ft high and looking very lost and bewildered in unfamiliar surroundings. Personally I felt he would be much better placed looking down from the roof of The Old Vinyl Factory, giving him greater dignity as the most familiar dog in the world. 