

MUSIC INDUSTRY NEWS

MORE THAN A FELTING

Robert Fielder of Anglia Piano Services talks to *MIN* about the long road to offering a unique service for piano owners in the UK

As a pianist with an engineering background and an intense interest in anything mechanical, I took the opportunity to train in the art and science of piano tuning and restoration, as this was a profession that fewer people were entering and was considered a dying art.

I eventually established my business as a self-employed piano tuner technician in the early part of the 1980s and I later adopted the trade name of Anglia Piano Services, as many professional bodies preferred dealing with a company name.

The piano is a machine, its invention developed from the need of a keyboard instrument able to respond to the variation in touch and expression that the player demands. With its compass and all round versatility, the introduction of the upright piano and mass production led it to become the main source of entertainment in many homes, and a major industry in the UK.

The piano retained its popularity until around the 1950s, then gave way to increasing alternatives to home entertainment. The introduction of television to the home in the 1950s, the electric organ in the 1970s, home computers in the 1980s and digital keyboards from the 1990s, plus rising production costs, all led to the piano losing its 'one in every home' status.

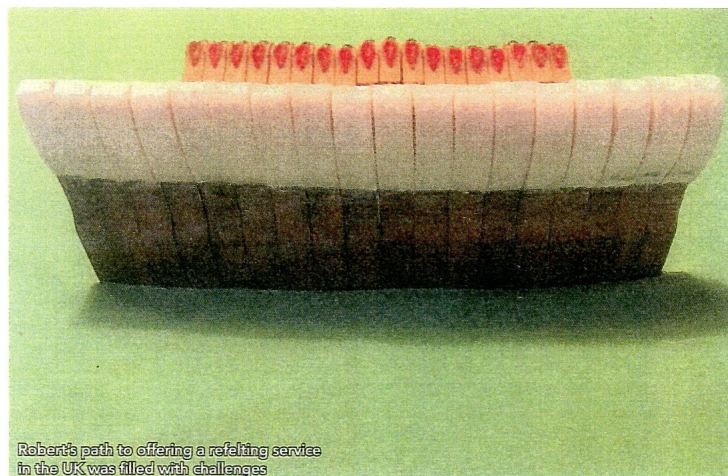
As the piano industry waned, trade skills were not passed on, and in recent years this has given way to imported instruments and services. There remains however a strong interest among many musicians for the piano as the superior keyboard instrument, as piano tuners and technicians throughout the UK are kept busy servicing and restoring many fine quality instruments.

Although piano tuning has always been the main part of my work, seeing other services in the trade disappearing from our shores led me to see a potential for expanding my services in another direction. I saw an opportunity in the process of worn hammer felt re-covering, and so I started my investigation.

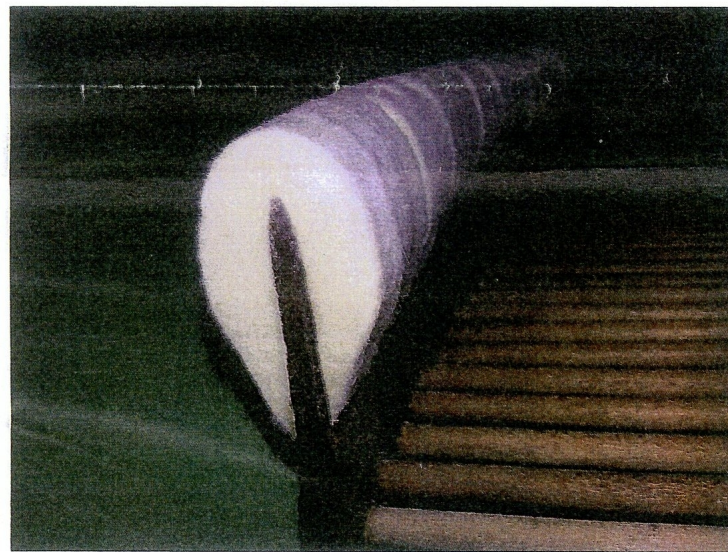
There was very little written information on the subject of the recovering process. I found some literature on the Dolge hammer press of the USA, but it provided very little detail. I made enquiries within the trade and training colleges, but it became obvious I needed to start from scratch.

An opportunity to visit to Bury Cooper & Whitehead of Manchester, producers of Royal George hammer felt, was an early and worthwhile starting point. The felt needed for the recovering process is produced in sheets approximately a metre square, tapered in thickness from bass to treble and of various weights and densities according to the size of hammers required. They supplied me with a small quantity of sheets to experiment with.

The felt sheets needed to be cut along the taper from bass to treble and contoured, to compress and stretch around the hammer heads in a continuous



Robert's path to offering a refelting service in the UK was filled with challenges



into a U-shaped caul under considerable pressure, and sideward vice like jaws close and hold the felt around the hammer heads while the glue sets. The hammers are then separated, stapled or riveted and finished by hand.

I constructed the U-shaped caul first in fibreglass, moulded from a timber pattern, and then cast in steel by a local foundry. The final machining of the caul was undertaken by a local engineer, who also helped with the design and building of the press, which could accommodate hammer heads of varying shapes and sizes. After much experimentation, and crossing each hurdle in turn, I was finally on the verge of achieving my goal, and several years of persistence looked like paying off. Then a major setback occurred, as Bury, Cooper & Whitehead closed their factory and hammer felt became an import-only product.

Several years of research and design was drawn to a halt while I reconsidered the cost effectiveness of the whole project using imported felts. The minimum

invest in. My project was shelved while I pursued an opportunity to take on more tuning and repair work.

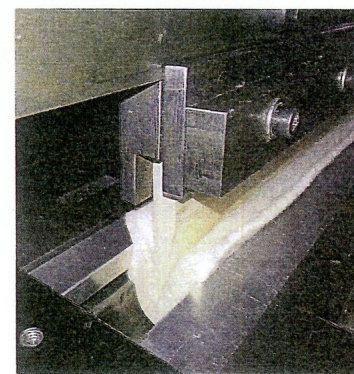
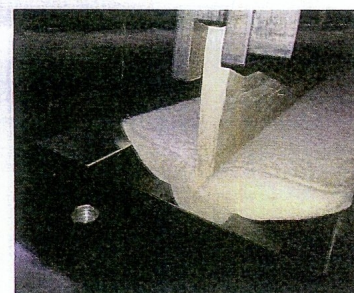
It was about two years ago, when discussing the poor quality of some imported hammers with a colleague, that I mentioned the earlier success of my hammer press. Intrigued and enthusiastic, it didn't take much persuasion for me to review my ambition.

With the advantage of the internet, I was able to access further information of the hammer covering process, and found a very helpful supplier of fine quality German felt. I took the plunge and placed an order for a quantity of felt to the size and specifications that I required, allowing me at last to offer a hammer re-covering service to the piano industry in the UK.

My future plan is to expand into producing new as well as re-covered hammers, but so far it seems that machining the wood mouldings is another lost skill of the UK. I shall therefore need to consider a larger workshop to develop in that direction, but like any new



From top to bottom: The stages of the refelting process



and additional overheads often prove prohibitively costly.

So for now I shall focus on gaining more experience in achieving the high quality of hammer re-covering that I as a piano technician would expect. I think even in the current economic climate there will always be a demand for pianos in this country, and a niche in the market for the manufacturing of new instruments on home ground, as it is an instrument that gives so much back to the player, even with the production costs of a new piano and its need for regular tuning and servicing, it still remains an