

Town Pipers: A European Tradition

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August 2006

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This article is based on one I wrote for the Journal of the American Association of Lowland and Pipers in February 1991, now some 15 years ago - in the scheme of things, a mere pump of the bellows. It is an honor for me to be asked to contribute this to the 2006 Pipers' Convention and I happily acknowledge the encouragement of Bill Gority in these pursuits.

The idea of the town piper stems from a community's need for a rallying point, and in the absence of newspapers, televised media, and blogs, the musical offerings of an itinerant busy-body who could deliver news and praise, song and dance – all at the drop of a hat – makes sense. We carry in our selves the distant memory of a *piper* performing a benevolent community function, musically leading the town folk off into some unspecified future...a prime example from English literature is that left by Geoffrey Chaucer in his Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

*“...A baggepype wel coud he blowe and sowne,
And ther with al he brought us out of town”*

While Chaucer's motive for highlighting the bagpiping skills of his Miller may have been to prove him a buffoon, he reveals a certain familiarity with the piping class of his day. To find the town pipers of this article, however, it is necessary to look at pipers in general from the earliest recorded times – keeping in mind that

events were only documented that rose to a level deemed worthy of noting-down, as oral traditions gave way to written ones, on vellum and parchment that came at high cost and was therefore reserved for high deeds.

References and allusions to bagpipers, in pastoral, religious, and urban settings, are to be found in the literature, poetry, visual art, and lore of Europe in the written record of the 13th to 18th centuries. To examine the anonymous works of mediaeval and renaissance artists and specific works by masters (1) is to witness a continuous documentation of pipers for every occasion – civil, ecclesiastical, social - right up to the 18th century, a time when we recognize the widespread use of bellows pipes in France, in the northern part of England and throughout Scotland. To bring the last point home, the French bellows-blown bagpipe shown below, in Figure 1, dated circa 1650, is similar to one shown in Praetorius' Syntagma Musicum (published between 1614 and 1620) and has a similar chanter to the simple unkeyed chanter depicted in Peacock's A Favorite Collection of Tunes and Variations Adapted for the Northumberland Small Pipes, published in the late 1700's. According to William Cocks (1967) the earliest English bellows-blown bagpipe, with bellows inscribed 1695, had shuttle drones and that the early bellows-blown pipes of Northumberland and Scotland had open-ended chanters, similar to those of Mariette's piper. Mariette's well-appointed French country piper may not have been a town piper, *per se*, but his traveling kit suggests that he enjoyed a measure of prosperity and indeed may have serviced his community at large - from sheep to town clerk.

¹ see the works of: Guy Marchand (ca. 1490), Hieronymous Bosch (ca. 1490), Sebastian Virdung (ca. 1511), Albrecht Durer (ca. 1514), Hans Holbein (ca. 1583), Pieter Brueghel (ca. 1550), Hans Sebald Beham (ca. 1550), Abraham Bloemaert (ca. 1600), Michael Praetorius (ca. 1615), Marin Mersenne (ca.1648), and David Teniers (ca. 1650).



Figure 1. Engraving by Mariette, after Michael Lasne, c.1650, entitled “Gallant Shepherd Playing the Musette”. The caption reads: *This shepherd, glory of his era, Stricken with a discrete flame, Gives his desire gaiety, vigor to his musette’s tender strain.*

Other examples of pipers in various contexts are plentiful: there is mention in the priory records of Old Christ Church, in Dublin, of a Geoffrey the Piper in 1206; there is the Prussian tale of the piper of Hamelin who cleared a town of its vermin in about 1290; a similar tale was related in Florence in 1348; the use of bagpipes as a processional instrument on Palm Sunday in Mons, Scotland in 1342; there is the French poem Eches Amoureux of 1375 in which the dancers call out for more ‘*drum, bells, cymbals, and bagpipes*’; there is a woodcut from Le Calendrier des Bergers (1493) showing a piper bringing news of salvation to the shepherds;

and there is Philip Stubbes puritanical account of Morris dancers in 1583 (Anatomie of Abuses), he writes of the

*“heathen company [marching] towards the churchyard, their pipers
piping their drummers thundering...with their hobbie horses, dragons,
and other antiques...wherein they daunce all that day and all that night too.
And thus these terrestriall furies spend the Sabbath-day!”*

In Yorkshire is recorded in 1610 that the Morrice was danced to the tune of an old song called “The Literary Dustman”, and in 1641, it is written that pipes were used to lighten the labors of harvesters. In between-time, William Browne, in his Britannia’s Pastorals (1625) wrote:

*“I have seen the lady of the May
Set in an arbour on a holy day
Built by the Maypole, where the jocund swains
Dance the maidens to the Bagpipe’s strains”*

The use of bagpipes at the time of early Morris dancing, in England, is documented with a poem dated 1609 known as “Old Meg of Herefordshire for a Maid Marian, Hereford Towne for a Morris Daunce, or Twelve Morris Dauncers of Herefordshire or Twelve Hundred Years Old”:

*“The courts of kings for stately measures:
The city for light heeles and nimble footing:
The country for shuffling dances
Western man for gambols
Middlesex men for tricks above grounde
Essex men for the hey
Lancashire for hornpipes
Worcestershire for bagpipes
but Herefordshire for a Morris dance puts down,
not only all of Kent but very near (if one had live enough to measure it)
three quarters of Christendom”*

In Scotland a quaint 18th century Scottish print shows a bellows piper giving a ‘Scots entertainment’ to an outing in an otherwise undocumented context (Figure

2). In everyday life, it seems, we can detect that pipers played a measurable role, if nothing more than to provide entertainment during annual festival seasons.



Figure 2. Catchpenny print (or lottery sheet print) of “A Scots Entertainment” published ca.1780 by Bowles and Carver, London (sent to Brian by Richmond Johnson).

In other countries the community bagpiper fulfilled a ritualistic role, such as Italy and Poland, where he was the harbinger of religious holidays. During lent, the Shepherds of Abruzzio, the Apennines in Liguria-Lombardi, Istria, Lazio, Calabria, and Sicily would descend from the foothills and mountains and enter the towns with their flocks and bagpipes, known as piva, sordelina, and zampogna, playing tarantellas and novenas of the region. My Polish grandmother told me that the koza players would come into Reading and Pottstown, Pennsylvania, at the turn-of-the-last-century, from the surrounding farmlands, after Easter to celebrate the return of spring and the hope of good times ahead, a continuation of traditions brought from Poland. These customs persisted as a living tradition in Europe and America until the time of the second world war.

How do we relate these early observations to the well-documented occurrence of professional pipers in the Scottish and English municipalities of the 17th to 19th centuries? We look to the continent. In the German *Markt Platz* of the 14th to 17th centuries, *Der Spielmann* (The Performing Man, or Minstrel) was an important figure, variously acting as balladeer, musician, folk-dancer, animal trainer, and magician. Among his repertoire of musical instruments were the *Bauernleier* (hurdy gurdy) and *Dudelsack* (bagpipe), typically having two drones in a common stock, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. St. Urban's elcome to Nurenberg, from a mid-16th century watercolor. In *Handbuch der Deutschen Volkskunde*, Vol. II, by Wilhelm Dekler (1939).

Pipers played a more official role in European courts and municipalities and held a civil status which bonded them, albeit sometimes loosely, in service to a lord, court or town. These ‘town pipers’ were among European cities’ earliest civil servants - beyond shepherd but not-quite-statesman, neither vagrant nor merchant, but alas, poor civil servant. We can differentiate between a town piper such as John Hastie, the Jedburgh town piper in early 16th century, from one in the service of a lord, such as Janino Chevretter (John the goat player) recorded in 1307 while in the employ of Edward II. In his book Lives of the Great Composers (1970) Harold Schoenberg tells of the complaint J. S. Bach had while living in Leipzig, Germany, where his efforts to assemble an orchestra were confounded by the availability of mediocre musicians, among them *“four town pipers, three professional fiddlers, and one apprentice...modesty forbids me to speak at all truthfully of their qualities and musical knowledge...”*.

In the Border counties and in Northumberland, pipers filled a civil position through the 18th century, and in Northumberland, the post of “Piper to the Duke of Northumberland” has been filled up to the present day. While the indentured piper played at his lord’s pleasure, the principal task of a town piper was to signal the morning and evening hours by piping along a specified route or at a given location within the town. Their more familiar counterparts were the “town criers” or Town Waits of 19th century London, serving the function of musical night watchmen. The Northumbrian towns of Alwick, Hexham, Morpeth, Newcastle, Roxburgh and others had town pipers, known as Corporation Pipers or simply as Waits. The Newcastle waits, in the course of their evening rounds, stopped to play beside a special chalk mark scribed onto the wall of a prominent building.



Figure 4. The mark of the Newcastle Waits.

The earliest documented town pipers in Scotland appear to be those of the Hastie family of Jedburgh, in the Borders. Robert Lawrence, writing in 1928, in The Bagpipe in History and Anecdote, neatly summarized the position of the town piper:

“In ancient times almost every town, especially in the south of Scotland, had a piper, whose office was often hereditary, and who was generally attached to the burghal establishment of the place. These functionaries, who are supposed to have been the last remains of the minstrels of a more early age, were frequently the depositories of oral, and particularly of poetical tradition. About spring time, and after harvest, it was the custom of the pipers to make a progress through a particular district of the country. The music and the tale repaid the lodging, and they were usually rewarded with a donation of seed corn. They received a livery and small salary from the community to which they belonged; and, in some burghs, they had a small allotment of land, generally called the Piper’s Croft.”

More generally, the repertoire and skill of the Border pipers are alluded to in this statement by Dr. John Leyden in the Edinburgh Edition of the Complaynt of Scotland, Edinburgh (1801):

“The original airs of the Gathering songs and Historical ballads have no inconsiderable resemblance to the martial tunes of the Welsh, Irish, and the Scottish Highlanders, and formed the favorite music of the Border pipers, among whom the perfection of the art was supposed to consist in being able to sing, dance and play on the bagpipe at the same time.”

Some notable Border pipers, including town pipers were described by William Stenhouse in his notes to Samuel Johnson’s Scots Musical Museum:

“...The late Mr. Alexander Campbell, editor of Albyn’s anthology, made occasional tours to different parts of the country, partly with the object of collecting local tunes; and I possess a manuscript journal by him, in 1816, when he visited Roxburghshire, in which he has introduced a notice of the most eminent Border pipers of the last century, which I may take this opportunity to extract. As stated, it was written down from the communication of Mr. Thomas Scott at Monklaw (the uncle of Sir Walter Scott) who was himself a skillful performer [of the Border bagpipes].

“ Monday, 21st, Mr. Thomas Scott performed many pieces on the pipe, two of which I noted down; after which, I jotted down the particulars following regarding the best Bag-pipers of the Border, most of whom he himself knew personally.

“ A list of the best Border bagpipers (together with a few particulars regarding them) who lived from about the beginning of the year 1700, down till about the commencement of the year 1800, noted down from Mr. Walter Scott’s uncle, Mr. Thomas Scott, presently resident at Monklaw, near Jedburgh...”

1. *Walter Forsyth, piper to Mr. Kerr of Littledean, Roxburghshire: He was an excellent performer.*
2. *Walter Forsyth (son of the former) was gamekeeper to the then Duke of Roxburghe; the son was reckoned likewise a good piper.*
3. *Thomas Anderson, by trade a skinner, in Kelso. The father and grandfather of Thomas Anderson were esteemed good performers on what is called the Border or Bellows-Bagpipe. They lived about the close of the seventeenth century.*
4. *Donald MacLean, piper at Galashiels (father to the well-known William MacLean, dancing master in Edinburgh), was a capital piper, and was the only one who could play on the pipe the old popular tune of "Sour Plums of Galashiels," it requiring a particular art of pinching the back hole of the chanter with the thumb, in order to produce the higher notes of the melody in question [what some have referred to as 'shiverin the back lill']. He died about the middle of the eighteenth century. Richard Lees, manufacturer in Galashiels, has the said William MacLean's bagpipes in his possession.*
5. *John Hastie, piper of Jedburgh, lived about the year 1720 [see his elegy at the end of the article]. He was the first performer who introduced those tunes now played in Teviotdale on the bagpipe. Mr. Thomas Scott is decidedly of opinion, that the Border bellows-bagpipe is of the Highland (or, at any rate, the north-east coast) origin, as all the pipers with whom he was acquainted positively declared. This is a remarkable fact, not generally known, and difficult of belief. The small Northumberland bagpipe differs considerably from the one alluded to, particularly in the mode of execution. The successor of John Hastie, was,*
6. *Robert Hastie (nephew of the former). Mr. Thomas Scott, thinks that Hastie succeeded his uncle [as town piper] about the year 1731: he was reckoned a good performer.*
7. *George Syme was supposed to have been born and bred in one of the Lothians. He was the best piper of his time; he knew the art of producing the high octave by pinching the back hole of the chanter, which was reckoned a great improvement. He was the best piper of his day. He lived about the middle of the eighteenth century.*
8. *The earliest pipers (Mr. Thomas Scott says) of the Scottish Border, properly speaking, were of the name and family of Allen, who were born and bred at Yettam, in Roxburghshire. They were all tinkers. The late James Allen was piper to the Duke of Northumberland, and was the best performer on the loud and small bagpipes of his time. He being a 'Border-lifter', the poor fellow was caught hold of in some of his lifting exploits, and cast into prison; but escaping justice, and set at large, he renewed of his bye-jobs, was again incarcerated, and condemned to be hanged; which sentence was, at the solicitation of the duchess of Northumberland, changed to imprisonment for life. He died in jail, at the advanced age of eighty years and upwards, about two months before his pardon came down from the King; this happened in the year 1808."*

" After jotting down the preceding notices respecting the most celebrated Pipers of the Border, I took my leave of the venerable, cheerful, intelligent, and worthy gentleman who so liberally made the communication, and proceeded to Jedburgh, which is within little more than a mile from Monkton, to deliver my letter of introduction to Robert Shortreed, Esq., the Sheriff-substitute of Roxburghshire, the old and intimate friend of his brother sheriff, Walter Scott."

" Sir Walter Scott records, that his uncle, Mr. Scott, "died at Monklaw, near Jedburgh, at two of the clock, 27th January 1823, in the 90th year of his life, and fully possessed of all his faculties. He read till nearly the year before his death; and being a great musician on the Scotch pipes, had, when on his death-bed, a favorite tune played over to him by his son James, that he might

be sure he left him in full possession of it. After hearing it, he hummed it over himself and corrected it in several of the notes. The air was that called Sour Plums in Galashiels.”

A portrait of James Allan (Figure 5) shows Allan with bellows-bagpipe, badge of position (crescent on arm) and attire. Sometime during this period, the Duke of Northumberland's piper adopted the Shepherd's Check as his official tartan, and Northumbrian bagpipers traditionally wear the plaid today; often the tartan is referred to as the Northumberland Tartan. It is difficult to judge the accuracy of the bagpipe being held by Mr. Allan, but we know that he was a performer of several types of bagpipes. A bellows-bagpipe common to the Lowlands and Borders in the 18th century is shown in Figure 6. This type of bagpipe commonly was described in numerous references and frequently bore no maker's mark. According to Logan, in The Scottish Gael (1838),

“The sharp Lowland pipes have the same tone as the Highland, but are less sonorous, and are blown by a bellows, put in motion by the arm opposite to that under which the bag is held. This is the same manner of giving wind to the Irish pipes,...”



Figure 5. Portrait of James Allan (c.1734-1808).

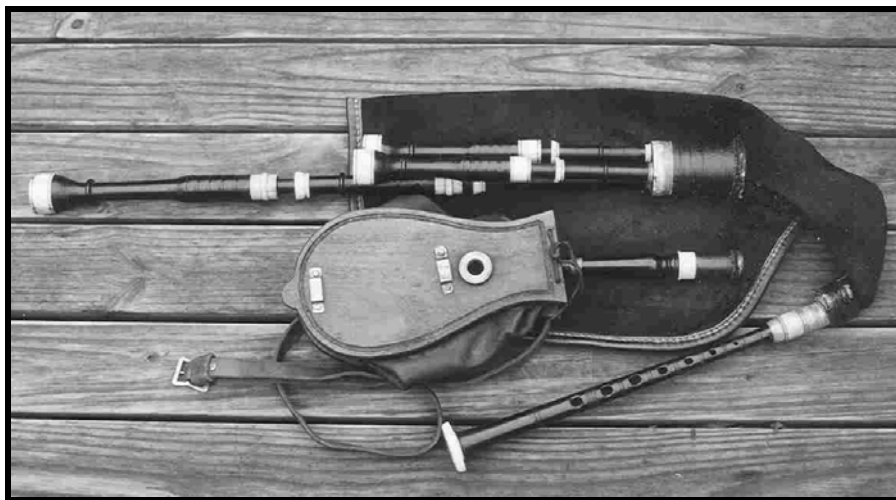


Figure 6. Eighteenth century Scottish bellows-bagpipe (photograph by Brian McCandless).

To convey a sense of the widespread use of the town piper institution in Scotland and Northumberland I offer the following table, arranged by town or burgh.

| Town or Burgh | Piper's Name | Dates: From-To, Comment |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| Aberdeen, Scotland | Alexander Thomson | ?-?, c.1664 |
| Alnwick, Northumberland | John Young | ?-?, c.1749 |
| Anstruther, Scotland | Charles James Nairn | 1738-? |
| Banff, Scotland | James Allan | 1680-? |
| Banff, Scotland | James Raney (Ranie) | 1714-1725 |
| Biggar, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1550 |
| Bellingham, Northumberland | Muckle Jock Milburn | ?-?, c.1775 |
| Brechin, Scotland | Piper Wyslie | 1688-1691 |
| Brechin, Scotland | Piper Low | ?-?, c.1796, last piper |
| Dalkeith, Scotland | George Syme | 1750-? |
| Dalkeith, Scotland | Jamie Reid | ?-? |
| Dumfries, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1550 |
| Dunbarton, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1500 |
| Dundee, Scotland | Robert Owen | ?-1734 |
| Dundee, Scotland | John Fenton | 1734-? |
| Eaglesham, Renfrewshire, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1772 |
| Edinburgh, Scotland | John Johnston | ?-?, c.1660 |
| Falkirk, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-? |
| Galashiels, Northumberland | Donald MacLean | ?-?, d.1750 |
| Glasgow, Scotland | John M'Caine | 1675-? |
| Glenluce, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1550 |
| Haddington, Scotland | James Livingston | ?-1783 |
| <i>Hawick, Scotland</i> | Thomas Beattie | 1694-? |
| Hawick, Scotland | James Olfier | 1717-1720 |
| Hawick, Scotland | Robert Foulter | 1721-1732 |
| Hawick, Scotland | John Meader | 1732-1741 |
| Hawick, Scotland | Walter Bellingden | 1752-1756 |
| Hawick, Scotland | William Brown | 1756-1757 |
| Hawick, Scotland | Walter Bellingden | 1757-1778, last piper |
| Hexham, Northumberland | Thomas Patterson | ?-?, c.1665 |
| Jedburgh, Scotland | John Hastie | ?-?, c.1513 |
| Jedburgh, Scotland | John Hastie | 1720-1731 |
| Jedburgh, Scotland | Robert Hastie | 1731-? last piper |
| Kilbarchan, Renfrewshire, Scotland | Halbert Simpson | 1600-? |
| Kircudbright, Scotland | Fergus Neilson | 1598-1602 |
| Kircudbright, Scotland | Donald Murray | ?-?, c.1605 |
| Kircudbright, Scotland | John Neilson | ?-?, c.1610 |
| Kirkwall, Orkney, Scotland | James Wallace | ?-?, c.1812 |
| Linlithgow, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1708 |
| Newcastle, Northumberland | John Peacock | ?-?, c.1775 |
| Peebles, Scotland | James Ritchie | ?-1807 |
| Perth, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | 1800-? |
| Wigton, Wigtonshire, Scotland | <i>No Name</i> | ?-?, c.1550 |

It is interesting point, and one which may never be fully appreciated, that the town pipers of Northumberland and Scotland are uniquely associated with the bellows-blown bagpipes. This is conveyed in the “elegy on John Hastie”, the last town piper of Jedburgh at, published in The Poetical Museum in Hawick (1784):

*“John, whan he play’d, ne’er threw his face,
Like a’ the girning piper race...”*

That the town piper institution eventually faded away is not so surprising, especially as towns grew in size and diversity, and new customs and civic management systems came into use. What is surprising, though, is that their heyday lasted close to 300 years! The popular sentiment towards the town pipers is eloquently expressed in the Epitaph to piper John Hastie:

*“Here lies dear John, whase pipe and drone,
And fiddle aft made us glad;
Whase cheerfu’ face our feasts did grace –
A sweet and merry lad.”*

This article ends with a setting of the tune mentioned by William Stenhouse, ‘Sour Plums of Galashiels’, scored in the key of D.

Sour Plums of Galashiels

