

The Early History of the Town Waits

This file contains chapter 8, "The Early History of the Town Waits", from my doctoral thesis *Secular Musicians in Late Medieval England* (Manchester University, 1968). Since I wrote this, further thought on my part and discussions of early material by James Merryweather, various REED editors and others have made known new material that needs to be added to the work. My basic understanding of it has not changed, however, and my view of the early history of the town waits therefore remains the same.

An important factor in this is my identification of the misunderstanding that apparently gave rise to the myth of the watchman-turned-musician. This myth was accepted by every wait-historian of the 20th century, and is dying very hard. I explained the misunderstanding in a talk given to the IGTP in Bedern Hall, York, on 7 July 2006 during the Second International Festival of Town Pipers: and this explanation, together with new material, will appear in a revision of the thesis (with additions by Andrew Taylor) to be published by Boydell and Brewer in due course. Meanwhile, it is posted on this website, at

<<http://www.waits.org.uk/essays/index.htm>>

The IGTP Webmaster has kindly agreed to post this chapter on the Waits website, as well. Numbers in [] give the original page-numbers of the thesis. In reading this chapter, please bear in mind that it is now more than 40 years old, and is inevitably in need of some immediate revision. Some material - comment, updating or extra information arising from work done subsequently to the dissertation's acceptance (mainly many years later) - is also added in []. There will be other places where amendment is needed, but I hope that these are relatively few and far between: certainly the subject is still "live" in the sense that I continue to work on it.

Readers of this chapter should note that

- (a) in quotations I have usually extended scribal abbreviations, in which case the omitted letters are here italicised; and
- (b) the short references in the footnotes refer to full bibliographical citations in the Bibliography.

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THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE TOWN WAITS

Waytes and Watchmen

The word *wayte*, spelt in various ways, had several connotations at the end of the thirteenth century:

- 1 A double-reed instrument of the shawm type.¹
- 2 The players of this instrument, of whom the *vigiles* were in the majority. For these two meanings of the word I have used the spelling “wayt”.
- 3 Various types of watchman. The household *vigiles* belong to this category also; so do the *vigiles* guarding the Exchequer treasures² and those who held lands by virtue of wayte-service at castle gates,³ both being domestic (but not strictly household) posts; the word was also used in connection with the keeping of town gates.

A fourth use of the term, appearing much later in date, is the one which mainly concerns us. The town waits were bands of civic minstrels. They do not appear earlier than the fifteenth century, and they had no direct connection with the *waytes* [214] mentioned above: for this reason I have used the modern spelling “wait” when referring to them.

The early history of the town waits has in the past been considerably confused because historians have not distinguished between the different types of *wayte*. For this reason it is necessary to trace the use of the word from the late thirteenth century. A statute of c.1296 required that each gate of the City of London should be shut by the servant living there, and that he should have a *wayt* at his own expense.⁴ The man is meant, I think, not the instrument: his duty would have been to watch from the city wall and give the gate-keeper a signal at the approach of anyone for whom the gate would have to be opened.

This watchman was not a minstrel, and the appropriate instrument for making such a signal was likely to be a horn rather than a wayt.⁵ The use of horns in this context continued: when a messenger approached Tutbury castle in 1385, “the horn was blown, ... and the stranger was admitted within the castle”;⁶ and when Henry V made his

¹ See above, pp. 157 and 161.

² See above, p. 162 and n. 76: I use “domestic” to mean “attached to a domestic *building*” and therefore not itinerant.

³ *Temp.* Hen III and Ed I: see Hill/*Handbook*, p. 89, and Sandys/*Christmastide*, p. 83.

⁴ Hill/*Handbook*, p. 89.

⁵ See *ibid.* for a quotation from Alexander Neckham’s *De Naturis Rerum* (early 13th century): “Assint etiam excubiae vigiles (veytes) cornibus suis strepitum et clangorem facientes”. [But see Merryweather “Neckham”, this website.]

⁶ Mosley/*Tutbury*, p. 105.

triumphal entry into London after the battle of Agincourt in 1415, he passed through the gateway of London Bridge [215] to the sound of horns being blown.⁷

After the reign of Edward I, however, the word “wayte” gradually disappeared except in connection with the household *vigilatores*, for whom it was exclusively used by the beginning of the fifteenth century.⁸ It is not found in the records of the reorganisation of watch and ward in the various towns, and its absence here is the more remarkable because these civic watches certainly used horns. Six men who attacked the watch of Walbrook Ward, London, in 1302 were captured and brought to trial “after the hue and cry had been raised by horn and voice and the neighbouring wards had come to help”.⁹ This must have been a marching watch, which we find again in 1461, when it was ordered that an armed watch should patrol every ward between 9 p.m. and 4 a.m.¹⁰

Not only was there a patrolling watch. The organisation of the London watch in 1311 made provision for each ward to supply men to keep a regular watch at the city gates.¹¹ Chester organised a watch on the city walls in 14 Ed III, and citizens were fined for neglecting this duty as late as Tudor times.¹² The north [216] gate was entrusted to the Sheriffs, who retained the tolls in return for certain duties, including the hanging of felons after sentence, the publishing of the Earl’s proclamations, and the calling of citizens to assembly of Portmote by sounding a horn.¹³ At Coventry, the Chamberlains requested in 1450 that four men be appointed from each ward to guard the gates: these four were to choose one man to keep the keys and close the gates every night at 9 p.m.¹⁴

These watches, then, consisted not of professional watchmen but of citizens. Moreover, both the patrolling watch at London and the guard on the gates of Coventry existed at a time when the respective town waits were already well established. Nowhere do we find any mention of the word “wayte” in relation to such duties.¹⁵

The evidence is negative, but decisive. When we consider the town waits, we must forget the older connotation of the word “wayte”. The town waits, as far as one can tell, normally had no connection with the watch;¹⁶ and the citizens’ watch as [217] organised in towns during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries does not seem to have made the use of the term “wayte”.

⁷ Wylie/*Henry V*, ii., p. 259.

⁸ See above, pp. 156 f and 159.

⁹ Rickert/*Chaucer*, p. 41.

¹⁰ Sharpe/*LBL*, p. 12.

¹¹ Rickert/*Chaucer*, p. 43, quoting H.T. Riley’s *Memorials of London*, London, 1868, i, pp. 92 f.

¹² Morris/*Chester*, pp. 257–59.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 232.

¹⁴ Harris/*Life*, p. 284, n.

¹⁵ I except here the special marching watches in London on the vigils of St John the Baptist and SS Peter and Paul which, being then an old custom, were discontinued in 1539. The waits took part in this, but it was the pageantry of a holiday celebration, and had nothing to do with the maintenance of city security or of law and order: see Stow/*Survey*, pp. 93 f, and c.f. above, pp. 55–59.

¹⁶ See below, however, pp. 223 f, and n. 39.

When Stow mentions¹⁷ that in 1253 Henry III commanded watches to be kept in cities and borough towns, therefore, there is no justification for an assumption that the London *waits* were established then.¹⁸ Equally unjustified is an assumption that the tax sometimes levied on citizens for the upkeep of town waits during the fifteenth century was “doubtless a survival of the *wait-fee* levied for watch and ward”.¹⁹

Minstrels and Waytes in Early Town Records

If a mistaken identification of the town waits with the watch has been a source of confusion to the wait-historian, so too has the waits’ position as civic minstrels. It is easy for the historian, finding the record of a gift to “*histriones civitatis*” in civic accounts, to assume that the waits of the town were meant: but in fact, the term was used before the time of the waits, with the less specific meaning of “minstrels of (i.e. living and working in) the town”. Nor did a minstrel have to be in a town’s regular employment to buy the freedom of the town through one of the guilds: [218] this, too, can be misleading. Attempts to trace the date at which town waits were first employed are never wholly successful if this sort of evidence is used.²⁰

Civic records are rich in gifts and payments to minstrels long before town waits make their appearance. The accounts of the Mayor of Leicester for 1318–19 record a payment of 4d to Wade and his companion, minstrels, at a feast;²¹ those for 1338–39 show that minstrels were paid 3d for playing (*tubant*) before the community, mustered on the Earl’s orders before the feast of St Peter in Chains (1 August).²² Although this sort of minstrelsy was a matter of casual employment, we need not assume that it was left to chance whether the right minstrels were present or not. Any town had minstrels living and working there who were well-known and often respected by their fellow-citizens and by the civic authorities: the latter could easily secure their services for a specific occasion. As we have already seen,²³ the Corpus [219] Christi pageants and the processions then and at other times of the year were reliant on such minstrels even after the institution of town waits. At York, the authorities had to impose a limit of 45.0d on their expenses for Corpus Christi Day as late as 1490;²⁴ in 1397, when the king had

¹⁷Stow/*Survey*, p. 92.

¹⁸Langwill/*Waits*, p. 172. Stow does not, in fact, refer to London.

¹⁹Oswald/*Waits*.

²⁰The Exeter waits provide a good example of the disagreement between historians. According to Langwill/*Waits*, p. 181, the Exeter waits existed by 1362: Oswald/*Waits* records a single wait in 1363 and two in 1396–97. Stephen/*WCN*, p. 1, gives the latter date as his first record of them. Oswald records three waits in 1406 (*op. cit.*), while Bridge/*TWT*, p. 64, has 1408 as the first reference. In fact, I doubt if we can be sure of the existence of waits at Exeter until 1429, when scutcheons were delivered to them (Oswald/*Waits*).

²¹Bateson/*Leicester*, i, p. 319.

²²*Ibid.*, ii, p. 45.

²³See above, pp. 52 f and 55–59, *passim*.

²⁴Raine/*York*, ii, p. 55.

attended the Corpus Christi festivities at York, the Chamberlains had paid out 13.4d to local minstrels and £7.7.4d to those of the king and other nobles.²⁵

The high standing of some of these local independent minstrels is shown by their entry into the gilds, some of them at quite an early date. At Leicester, William le Tauborer appears in a Gild Roll of 1313–14;²⁶ John Sturmyn, trumpeter, bought his freedom in the city of Norwich in 1346–47;²⁷ and Roger Wayte, piper, became a freeman of York in 1363.²⁸

The last of these items could be very misleading, for there is no positive evidence of town waits at York until the mid-fifteenth century. 1363 is too late for Roger to have been a gate-keeper's watchman, and in this case he would probably not have been a piper. He may have been a castle watchman, or even a household *vigilis* [220] (the latter is less likely, since noble households tended to be itinerant).²⁹ [This is actually irrelevant: the king certainly took one or more *vigiles* on his travels, and probably other nobles did too.] There was no reason why liveried minstrels and other servants should not enter a gild: Hugo the trumpeter, who entered the Merchants' Gild at Leicester in 1343–44, was probably a minstrel of the Earl of Derby, at whose request the entrance-fee of a gold florin was remitted to him.³⁰

A further complication in our consideration of the civic minstrels concerns their livery. Although liveries were not made regularly to minstrels before the appointment of town waits, they had previously been given for special occasions. In London, liveries were made to the Mayor, Aldermen and certain citizens when they rode out to meet a royal personage:³¹ the gowns and hoods were usually red and white, which were the colours of the city. The fact that in the Lord Mayor's Procession in 1409 all the musicians wore red and white hoods,³² therefore, does not prove that [221] they were waits in regular employment.

The Institution of the Waits

To this existing state of affairs, the appointment of town waits made little immediate difference: the waits did not, as it were, add a new dimension to civic life. Primarily, they were minstrels who were under a special obligation to perform at civic ceremonies. Since

²⁵Davies/*York*, p. 230.

²⁶Bateson/*Leicester*, i, p. 356.

²⁷Stephen/*WCN*, p. 5.

²⁸Langwill/*Waits*, p. 171.

²⁹The same applies to many other men called Wayte or Weyte in 14th-century records. The name was not uncommon, and in some cases seems to be a "fixed" surname (even during the 14th century), being the name of men who were not watchmen of any sort.

³⁰Bateson/*Leicester*, ii, pp. 58 f: see also Kelly/*Notices*, pp. 128 and 131. The name of John Brothir, trumpeter of the Earl of Derby, suggests that he may have been a gild-member: see above, p. 202, and Rastall/*MERH*, p. 26, n. 1. Another possible case is John Broder, minstrel of Edward IV: see Lafontaine/*Musick*, p. 1.

³¹See Stow/*Survey*, pp. 479 f.

³²Hill/*Handbook*, p. 89.

they were usually attendant on the person of the Mayor on these occasions, the waits were sometimes known as the Mayor's minstrels, as at Lincoln in 1422 and at Bristol in the late fifteenth century.³³ For the discharge of these duties, they received a yearly fee, records of which provide our first certain evidence of regular employment of town waits rather than the casual employment of local minstrels for specific occasions.

We cannot be sure how the civic minstrels came to be called "Waits". Some towns, such as Norwich and Coventry, called their minstrels by this name almost from the start, while others seem not to have used it until the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In the late fifteenth-century accounts of the bailiffs [222] of Shrewsbury the waits are referred to as "the minstrels called the Wayts" or even "the common minstrels called the Wayts of the town".³⁴ Granted that the waits were minstrels first and foremost, their duties were comparable to those of the *haut* minstrels of the nobility rather than to those of any sort of watchman. But at the beginning of the fifteenth century the only "wayts" still in existence were the instrument and the household *vigilator* who played it. The town wait must therefore have derived his name from one of these two: moreover, there must have been good reason for the name to be transferred, for by the early sixteenth century the term "wait" was universally applied to the civic minstrel. There was, therefore, some obvious analogy between the civic minstrel and the household *vigilator*.

The possible analogies are two:

- 1 The marching duties undertaken by the town waits.
- 2 The town waits' use of the wayt-pipe, or at least of shawms.³⁵

Of these, the first has been assumed by all wait-historians [223] (following Hill's lead)³⁶ to be the connection. By the late sixteenth century most towns required their waits to patrol the streets at night, serenading the citizens and telling the time. By the seventeenth century, there can be no doubt that the very existence of a band of men patrolling a small town would contribute to civic security. Thus in 1657 the waits of King's Lynn were still walking the streets on winter nights "according to ancient custom of this borough, whereby many mischiefs have been prevented".³⁷

The custom was indeed "ancient" at Lynn, where the waits had patrolled the town as early as 1433.³⁸ Times had changed, however, and although the waits' prevention of "mischiefs" might have been an important contribution to civic security in 1657, it cannot

³³1422: see Lambert/*Lincoln*, p. 205. For Bristol, see Smith/*Gilds*, p. 423: the Mayor's register for 1479-1503, which often refers to established custom, includes an annual payment of 5 marks to the Mayor "for his mynstralles". At Norwich, the waits' liveries were paid for out of the Mayor's funds and the City Treasury in equal portions, c. 1440: see Stephen/*WCN*, p. 44.

³⁴"Ministralli voc' Wayts", 1479; "Com' histriones voc' le Wayts ville", 1483. See Owen/*Shrewsbury*, pp. 325 f.

³⁵See above, pp. 180 f. In 1545-46 the Norwich waits received new banners for their "shalmys", while a city inventory dating from before 1420 includes "ij elde baneres for ministralles": see Stephen/*WCN*, pp. 64 and 6 respectively. As far as I know, trumpets and shawms were the only instruments from which banners were hung.

³⁶Hill/*Handbook*, p. 89.

³⁷Oswald/*Waits*.

³⁸Green/*TLFC*, p. 145.

have been so two centuries earlier.³⁹ A band of minstrels playing at the street corner was unlikely to surprise a thief, and in this respect a waits' patrol did not compare with the marching watch organised by the citizens of each ward. Moreover, the waits patrolled only during the period between All Saints and the [224] feast of the Purification (Candlemas).

As the citizens' watch declined, therefore,⁴⁰ the waits' marching duties assumed a measure of importance. In other words these duties, far from being the last remnant of a medieval watch, actually originated separately from that watch and grew in importance during the sixteenth century.

Having, I hope, sufficiently distinguished the fifteenth century civic watch from the town waits, we can nevertheless see an analogy between the latter and the *household waytes*:⁴¹ both performed a nocturnal patrol, telling the time at intervals. If we could show that the performance of this duty by the civic minstrels in any specific town always ante-dated – or coincided with – their description as “waits”, then the description would be explained.

In fact, this cannot be shown. The marching duty was by no means universal among town waits in the early years of their history, and in the fifteenth century we find it only at King's Lynn and Norwich.⁴² At Lynn, it appears to have been a new duty in [225] 1433, for it coincides with an increase in the waits' emoluments. In addition to their liveries, the three waits of Lynn had received 21.0d as their fee in 1431, and two years later this was increased to 20.0d each *per annum*.⁴³ Our first reference to the marching watch at Norwich also involves new financial arrangements, although the marching duty there was not new in 1440. In that year the waits successfully petitioned the civic authorities for the right to perform at night from All Saints until Candlemas as they had formerly done. It is unlikely to be a coincidence that at the same time a tax on the citizens was started, whereby each citizen contributed, according to his means, to the upkeep of the waits.⁴⁴

We notice here that the marching watch was not a duty required of the Norwich waits, but a privilege granted to them. Quite apart from the late date of this record, therefore (the Norwich waits certainly existed as early as 1408),⁴⁵ the waits are most unlikely to have performed their marching watch at the time when they were established.

³⁹This is not to say that its contribution was negligible during the 15th century. The waits were probably useful in raising the alarm on the discovery of fires, street brawls, etc., and it is presumably for this reason that New Romney paid 2.0d for two horns for its waits in 1486–87 (*HMC 5*, Appendix, p. 547).

⁴⁰The impression gained from my work on published civic records is that city watches were generally ineffective by the second half of the fifteenth century.

⁴¹For the duties of the household wayte, see above, pp. 162 f.

⁴²With the probable addition of New Romney: see above, n. 39.

⁴³Green/*TLFC*, p. 145.

⁴⁴Stephen/*WCN*, p. 44. For the effect of this tax on the waits' personal incomes, see below, p. 228, n. 53, and pp. 230 f.

⁴⁵The Company of St George decided in that year to give a salary of 5.0d *per annum* to “the minstrel Waytes of the City”: Stephen/*WCN*, p. 5.

With the evidence that we have at present, therefore, we [226] cannot say that the town waits were so called because of a similarity between their marching patrol and the duties of the household wayte. We are drawn to the conclusion, then, that the civic minstrels normally played wayt-pipes or similar instruments.⁴⁶

The Appointment and Payment of Waits

A number of records survive of the appointment of town waits. John Underwood and Roger Jacob, admitted to that office at Norwich in 1422, were required to take an oath. This probably bound them to be available for civic functions at which their services would be required: a similar record of thirty years later, when three men were admitted waits of Norwich, shows that the oath contained the conditions of their appointment.⁴⁷ At Doncaster, Allan Pyper and William Pyper were elected “Pipers or Wayts” in 1457;⁴⁸ at York, Robert Congilton was admitted a wait of the city in 1486, [227] taking the place of Robert Sheyne, who was then too old.⁴⁹

Sheyne had been a wait at York for forty years: the post of a wait offered many advantages, and some waits were probably content to hold office for many years. For the same reason, there was competition for places, especially in the more important cities. When William Smethley, a wait of Chester, died in 1484 or 1485, several minstrels applied for “the Rowme and charge of the waitmen of the said city”.⁵⁰

Most appointments were probably renewable at regular intervals, however, and not for life. At Beverley, two waits were elected at the feast of St Mark (25 April), 1436, for one year.⁵¹ Such appointments could be extended indefinitely: William Johnson, Symon Herforth and John Wardelowe were retained in their office in 1438; John Wardelow, Robert Congilton and Thomas Seman in 1440; John Hesilhede, Robert de Celario and Martin Gymer in 1453; Walter Kirkby, Robert Spek and William Watford in 1464; and William Watson, John Watson and John Bulson in 1467.⁵² [228] “Retained” here does not necessarily imply that a wait had already held office, I think, but means “employed as a

⁴⁶See above, pp. 180 f; also above, p. 222, n. 35. For the civic pipers of Aberdeen, Dumfries, Edinburgh and Wigtown, see below, ii, Appendix D, *passim*: we should not, of course, assume that these were *bagpipers*.

⁴⁷Stephen/WCN, p. 28, quotes the City Records of Assembly: “Johannes Underwode et Rogerus Jacob admissi sunt ad officium de lez Waytes civitatis praedictae. Et jurati sunt”. (21 September, 1422); “Et eodem die (2 August, 1452) tres personae admissae fuerunt pro officio de lez Waytes in Civitate occupandum sub condicionibus in sacramentis eorum recitatis”.

⁴⁸Bridge/TWT, p. 64.

⁴⁹Raine/York, i, p. 170.

⁵⁰MS Harley 2091, f. 21.

⁵¹HMC 54, p. 105.

⁵²*Ibid.*, pp. 120, 124, 137, 141 f and 143. Robert Congilton is unlikely to be the man of that name appointed at York in 1486, when the Beverley wait – if he was still alive – could hardly have been less than 64 years old.

retainer". Of the four waits "retained" at Coventry in 1423, one had probably taken the place of Richard Waite, who had recently retired.⁵³

The fee paid to waits varied with the town concerned, although waits no doubt made sure if possible that their emoluments were comparable to those in other towns.⁵⁴ The 5.0d *per annum* given to the Norwich waits by the Company of St. George in 1408 was perhaps additional to the fee paid by the city.⁵⁵ If so, the Norwich waits were better-paid than some waits were many years afterwards: as late as 1464 the waits of Nottingham received only 20.0d for their fees and 15.0d for their liveries [229] each year,⁵⁶ while the three minstrels of the Mayor of Lincoln received 8.0d *per annum* and red livery in 1422.⁵⁷

The increased fee of the waits of King's Lynn in 1433 has been noticed:⁵⁸ the new fee of 20.0d each *per annum* in 1405, which was also the fee of each wait at Canterbury in 1498,⁵⁹ was probably about the average. The waits of Bristol were paid a little less, however, at 5 marks [£3.6.8d] between the four of them.⁶⁰

The waits of Beverley were especially well-paid. The two waits were paid 40.0d *per annum* in 1405, a fee that was unchanged in 1436.⁶¹ Two years later, however, the number of waits had been raised to three and they took 36.8d each: at this time they had a boy as a servant, who was lodged with Symon Herforth.⁶² In 1440 the boy's pay was subtracted from that of the waits, who now [230] received 33.4d each.⁶³

⁵³Harris/*Coventry*, p. 59: "Allso (the city authorities) orden that Ric. Waite for his good service he hathe doone to ye Cite of Coventre, and for his long contynuanse in the same, shall have of the Trinitie gylde whill he lyvythe 13.4d, or CorpusXpi yeld 6.8d, and of the wardens of the said Cite 20.0d.

Allso thei have retained Matthew Ellerton, Thomas Sendwell, Willm Howton and John Trumper, Mynstrells as for the Cite of Coventre; and yat yei have as oyer have had a-fore them. Allso yat thai have of every hall place jd, of every Cottage ½d, every quarter; and after yer beryng better to be rewardyd. And also yai orden yat thei shall have ij men of every quarter to help them to gathur yer Quarterage."

⁵⁴c.f. the London waits' petition concerning liveries, below, p. 232.

⁵⁵See above, n. 45.

⁵⁶Stevenson/*Nottingham*, ii, p. 379: for the same allowances in 1461–62, see *ibid.*, iii, p. 416. This probably had to be divided between three waits (see below, p. 240): but even if there were only two waits, 10.0d each and 706d for livery was not a large allowance. The allowance was raised to 51.0d *per annum* c.1504: Stevenson/*Nottingham*, iii, p. 320.

⁵⁷Lambert/*Lincoln*, p. 205: it is not clear whether 8.0d each is meant, or 8.0d divided between the three of them.

⁵⁸Above, p. 225.

⁵⁹Langwill/*Waits*, p. 177.

⁶⁰i.e., 16.8d each: see above, n. 33. I assume that they were already four in number, as 5 marks cannot be divided exactly into three: there were four waits of Bristol present at the Duke of Buckingham's dinner at Epiphany, 1508 (Gage/*Stafford*, pp. 311 f).

⁶¹HMC 54, pp. 158 and 105.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁶³*Ibid.*, p. 124: the boy presumably received 10.0d *per annum*, therefore.

In addition to paying a basic fee, some towns imposed a tax for the upkeep of the waits. The amount levied at Norwich in 1440 depended upon the circumstances of the individual citizen:⁶⁴ so did that at York, where, during the reign of Richard III (1483–85), the waits were authorised to collect the tax from each citizen, according to the citizen's rank and means.⁶⁵

At Coventry, the tax imposed on each home in 1423 was 1d or ½d per quarter, depending on the size of the building: two men from each ward were to help the waits to collect this tax each quarter. The waits were free to receive larger sums if the citizens felt that they had deserved an extra gift.⁶⁶ The waits later had difficulty in collecting this tax, probably because, understandably, nobody wanted to help collect a tax from his neighbours: perhaps, too, the helpers had sometimes taken the opportunity of lining their own purses. In 1460 the Coventry waits successfully petitioned⁶⁷

... that an honest man in every ward shuld be assigned be the Meir to go wt the waytes to gader their wages quarterly ...

At Leicester, a tax was imposed, not on the general public, but on the aldermen of the borough. In 1498 it was⁶⁸

... concended and agreed at the same comen hall [on 21 September] that every of the said XLVIII shall pay to the waytes 2d a quarter.

When Richard Waite retired from his service at Coventry in 1423, he was awarded a total of 40.0d *per annum* by way of a pension.⁶⁹ In Coventry, there were flourishing religious guilds in the early fifteenth century, as well as the craft-gilds, and two of the former contributed 20.0d between them, the city treasury contributing another 20.0d. Even if the award of a pension was not unusual, this sum was probably higher than average. I have found only one other record of a pension being awarded, however: Robert Sheyne was given 13.0d *per annum* and a house when he retired at York in 1486.⁷⁰ This was certainly exceptional, for Sheyne had served the city for forty years.⁷¹ We can probably assume, therefore, that pensions were not usually given to town waits.

Liveries

Some towns no doubt continued to give liveries only on [232] special occasions – if then – for some years after their waits had been established. At Norwich, we first hear of cloth-liveries being given in 1432–33, although the waits had been established there by 1408;⁷²

⁶⁴Stephen/WCN, p. 44.

⁶⁵Davies/York, p. 13, n.

⁶⁶See above, n. 53.

⁶⁷Harris/Coventry, p. 307.

⁶⁸Bateson/Leicester, p. 355.

⁶⁹See above, n. 53.

⁷⁰Raine/York, i, p. 170.

⁷¹This incidentally tells us that the waits were established at York at least as early as 1446.

⁷²Stephen/WCN, p. 49, and above, p. 225 and n. 45.

at Coventry there is a similar gap between 1423 and 1442;⁷³ and at Beverley, where the waits had been established by 1405, we have no record of cloth-liveries until 1502.⁷⁴

Both at Norwich and at Beverley the earliest records of scutcheons being given ante-date those of cloth-liveries;⁷⁵ in other towns, however, gowns appear to have been the earlier livery. Either livery was a visible sign of the waits' status and, like any livery, advantageous to the minstrel who wore it. In 1442 the London waits petitioned the Lord Mayor and Aldermen that they should have livery like the waits of other towns.⁷⁶ Lincoln, Lynn and Norwich had already given liveries to their waits by this time,⁷⁷ and our first record of liveries at Coventry also dates from 1442.⁷⁸

[233] The liveries in the latter case were given for the feast of Corpus Christi. Other town, which celebrated Corpus Christi on a less magnificent scale than Coventry did, probably gave liveries to their waits in time for Christmas. In 1437 the city of Norwich decided to make liveries at Christmas to the servants of the city, as had formerly been done;⁷⁹ at York, too, the three civic minstrels received their cloth liveries in time for Christmas in 1462.⁸⁰ In the late fifteenth century Norwich made liveries both in winter and summer,⁸¹ although I have not found other towns making more than a single livery in a year.

At Nottingham, an allowance of 15.0d for cloth-liveries in 1461–62 was probably divided between three waits;⁸² at Shrewsbury, the livery-allowance to the waits was also 5.0d each in 1479, and a total of 15.0d allowed to the waits in ?1483 shows that there were three waits at that time;⁸³ and the city of Cambridge paid 16.4d for the waits' liveries, both in 1484 and the following year,⁸⁴ the number of waits being unspecified.

In most towns the delivery of scutcheons seems to have been [234] a later development than the cloth-liveries: this was no doubt on account of the intrinsic value of these silver badges, for which towns usually required security. At Beverley, the use of scutcheons ante-dates the giving of cloth-liveries, however. When two waits were elected there in 1423 and again in 1436, they were required to provide security for the

⁷³See above, n. 53; also above, p. 181 and n. 140.

⁷⁴See above, p. 229 and Poulson/*Beverlac*, p. 267. In 1502 there were still only three waits at Beverley.

⁷⁵See below, p. 234.

⁷⁶Hill/*Handbook*, p. 89.

⁷⁷See above, pp. 229 (and n. 57) for Lincoln, and 225 (and n. 43) for Lynn; also Stephen/*WCN*, p. 49, for Norwich.

⁷⁸Harris/*Coventry*, p. 200.

⁷⁹Stephen/*WCN*, p. 49.

⁸⁰Davies/*York*, p. 12.

⁸¹Stephen/*WCN*, pp. 50 f: c.f. the liveries to royal minstrels, p. 121, above.

⁸²See above, p. 229 and n. 56.

⁸³Owen/*Shrewsbury*, pp. 325 f.

⁸⁴Cooper/*Cambridge*, i, p. 231.

scutcheons:⁸⁵ the two scutcheons were remade in 1433⁸⁶ and another one added by 1438; in the latter year, and again in 1440, three waits received scutcheons.⁸⁷ The badges were once more re-made in 1450.⁸⁸ None of these records makes any mention of cloth-liveries.

At Norwich, too, the records of the delivery of scutcheons antedate those of cloth-liveries, but in this case by only six years. The Treasurer's accounts for 1426–27 record a payment of 2 marks to Richard Bere, goldsmith, for making three silver *skochnys* for the minstrels.⁸⁹ The number of the waits was later increased to four, and a record of 1432–33 shows that Bere had made another scutcheon: this record describes the badge as having the arms of the city on it.⁹⁰

The Coventry waits received scutcheons, together with their [235] cloth-livery, in time for the Corpus Christi celebrations of 1442, security again being required.⁹¹ One of these badges was perhaps lost or broken at a later date, for in 1470 Richard Wode, grocer, delivered to the city wardens “*unum scochyn argenti cum colerio argenti*” for one of the waits.⁹² The chains of the Nottingham waits also had to be mended, in 1496.⁹³

The four silver chains received by the Mayor of Leicester in 1503 were probably those of the waits: perhaps John Clement, who delivered them to him, was the senior wait, returning the badges at the end of a term of office.⁹⁴ Almost certainly they were not new badges being delivered by the silversmith for the first time: Leicester borough archives include an undated record of sureties for two waits' chains, which suggests the wearing of chains at a much earlier date, when Leicester employed only two waits.⁹⁵

Two other towns are known to have provided scutcheons for their waits during the fifteenth century. The Exeter waits had scutcheons in 1429, which must have been within a few years of [236] their institution, while a record of waits' scutcheons at Lincoln dates from 1480.⁹⁶

⁸⁵HMC 54, pp. 161 and 105.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 161

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 120 f and 124.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 135. For descriptions of the badges in 1464 and 1466, see *ibid.*, p. 142: see also above, p. 23, n. 46.

⁸⁹Hudson/*Norwich*, ii, p. 66.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, ii, p. 67.

⁹¹Harris/*Coventry*, p. 200.

⁹²*Ibid.*, p. 359: that is, a scutcheon and chain (c.f. above, p. 200, n. 28).

⁹³Stevenson/*Nottingham*, ii, p. 287: “Item paid the last day of Janyver, to Robert Northwod for a quarterne of an ounce of sylver to amend the colers of the waytes that were hurt and broken, 10d”.

⁹⁴Bateson/*Leicester*, ii, p. 363.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶Oswald/*Waits: Lambert/Lincoln*, p. 205.

Relations with the Gilds

Town waits, like independent local minstrels, were sometimes employed by the gilds on an occasional, casual, basis. Thus, as we have already seen, the Coventry waits performed at the annual dinners of certain gilds there, and also took part in the Corpus Christi pageants and processions.⁹⁷ The civic authorities at Coventry were closely allied to the gilds, and so we find the Trinity Gild and the Corpus Christi Gild contributing towards a wait's pension.⁹⁸

The Coventry gilds were perhaps the wealthiest and most active in the country. The Smiths' Company actually recruited all four waits in 1481, together with their wives, making them brothers and sisters of the Company on condition that the waits should perform for the Smiths' pageant and procession at Corpus Christi for a fee of 8.0d and their dinner.⁹⁹ At Norwich, the Company of St George – which was closely identified with the civic authority – gave a [237] yearly fee to the city waits, perhaps under similar conditions.¹⁰⁰

Independent Work

No town could give its waits enough work to keep them fully occupied all the year round: nor were the waits' fees enough to live on, even supplemented by the substantial gifts that they could earn.¹⁰¹ The waits therefore accepted other work in their own towns, for at times when they had no civic duties they enjoyed the freedom of independent minstrels with the status of liveried retainers.

The anomaly of this position inevitably caused friction. As liveried minstrels, the waits offered serious competition to other local minstrels; but as they were not “foreign” in their own towns, they could neither be prevented from playing nor fined in the usual way by a minstrel fraternity.¹⁰² It was usually as well, perhaps, [238] that the waits should belong to a minstrel-gild where there was one.¹⁰³ Otherwise, they could buy their freedom through one of the trade-gilds, as any other minstrel could.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷See above, pp. 53 f and 56 f; also below, ii, Appendix E, *passim*.

⁹⁸See above, n. 53.

⁹⁹Sharp/*Dissertation*, p. 213. The waits are named as Thomas West, Adam West, John Blewet and Brese.

¹⁰⁰ See above, n. 45.

¹⁰¹ For the gifts earned by waits in their official capacity, see below, ii, p. 133–41, *passim*, and Appendix C, *passim*. On some occasions a town would reward its own waits: in 1420–21 Norwich gave its waits 13.0d in rewards and expenses for the Mayor's riding and the Corpus Christi celebrations, and 10.4d in rewards and expenses at the visit of the king (Stephen/WCN, p. 6); in 1423 Beverley gave its waits 20d for riding with the banns of the Corpus Christi play (*HMC 54*, p. 160); and in 1460, when the same town sent men to Northampton to fight for the king, the waits were given 6d for playing when the men departed (*Poulson/Beverlac*, p. 228).

¹⁰² For the disagreement between the London fraternity and the City waits, see above, p. 18.

¹⁰³ c.f the cases of the waits of Canterbury and Beverley, pp. 18 f and 23, n. 46, above.

¹⁰⁴ Thus Thomas Wylkyns, “wayte”, was admitted to the Merchants' Gild at Leicester in 1499: Kelly/*Notices*, p. 131. See above, also, p. 236

To some extent, therefore, waits found it not to their advantage to remain in their own towns, where they might be under the control of civic or guild authorities. Elsewhere, they could compete with other liveried minstrels on equal terms, and would have a distinct advantage over independent minstrels. Thus we find the Norwich waits being rewarded at Thetford Priory in 1498–99, and again in 1509–10, the gift being 1.4d in each case.¹⁰⁵ At the Duke of Buckingham’s dinner at Epiphany, 1508, the four waits of Bristol were present;¹⁰⁶ and when the Trinity Guild at Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, presented a play of St George on the feast of St Margaret (20 July), 1511, the players were assisted by a minstrel and the three waits of Cambridge.¹⁰⁷

In none of these cases did the waits travel far from home, [239] however; they were not itinerant, like other liveried minstrels. Whereas the minstrels of a noble may have been out of court for several months between major feasts, it seems that town waits were expected to be near at hand in case they were needed – for the unexpected entry of a nobleman, for instance. The Norwich waits could comfortably have gone to Thetford and back within two days if they were on horseback, while Bassingbourn and Thornbury were one-day excursions from Cambridge and Bristol respectively.

Obviously, the waits could easily neglect their civic duties in seeking work further afield, and no doubt some towns were anxious that this should not happen. At Coventry, the waits were actually forbidden in 1467 to leave the city, with the sole exception that they could go to religious houses within a ten-mile radius.¹⁰⁸

An item in the Nottingham borough accounts for 1500 is interesting for several reasons. It records that the waits of Leicester attended the Mayor and citizens of Nottingham at the feast of Pentecost.¹⁰⁹ It must have been most unusual for the waits [240] of one town to perform in another town which employed its own waits; further, the Leicester waits were presumably invited to Nottingham for this occasion. It would be interesting to know if the three Nottingham waits were also present, and if not, the reason for their absence.¹¹⁰

Status and Standards

I have indicated that there was competition for the post of a town wait:¹¹¹ such a post offered many of the advantages of liveried employment, but without the more or less

¹⁰⁵ Harvey/*Thetford*, pp. 18 and 20.

¹⁰⁶ Gage/*Stafford*, pp. 311 f: the Duke’s household was then at Thornbury. See above, p. 207, and c.f. the Edinburgh pipers at the Christmas and Easter celebrations in the Scottish Court.

¹⁰⁷ Westlake/*Gilds*, p. 64; Bridge/*TWT*, p. 81.

¹⁰⁸ “[Hit is ordeyned] Also that the waytis of this Cite, that nowe be and here-after to be, shall not passe this Cite, but to abbottis and priours within x myles of this Cite”: Harris/*Coventry*, p. 335.

¹⁰⁹ “... lez Waytes de Leycestr’ existentibus et attendantibus super Majorem et Communitatem villae Notingham ad festum Pentecostes hoc anno ...”: Stevenson/*Nottingham*, iii, p. 70.

¹¹⁰ The waits’ chains were mended in 1496 (see above, p. 235); a record of sureties for the chains, delivered to the Nottingham waits for the year 1502–03 names the waits as Hugh Little, William Chumley (also known as William Wayte) and Roger Barker (also known as Roger Wayte): see Stevenson/*Nottingham*, iii, p. 90.

¹¹¹ Above, p. 227 and n. 50.

constant travel attached to employment in a noble household. We should therefore expect town waits generally to be the best minstrels in their district: and as the scale of gifts and payments to waits is comparable to that of other liveried minstrels,¹¹² it seems that local opinion, at least, estimated waits highly.

We have good reason to believe, however, that the best of the [241] town waits were to be considered good players by any standards. The Norwich waits – perhaps the finest band of civic minstrels throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – accompanied Edward IV to France in 1475.¹¹³ As this was at the express wish of the king, we must assume that the waits compared favourably with the king’s own minstrels.

Another wait, John Bulson, who was at Beverley in 1467,¹¹⁴ may be the trumpeter of that name who played at Richard III’s coronation in 1483.¹¹⁵ We cannot, of course, make a definite identification on the evidence of the name alone: but Richard had previously been his brother’s Lieutenant in the North, and was particularly well-known and loved in Yorkshire. His strongest support was in that area, and it is reasonable to suppose that he surrounded himself with his supporters at his coronation. The trumpeters at the coronation must have been some of the best in the country; and if out two John Bulsons are identical, it says much for the Beverley waits.

In view of the pre-eminence of the Norwich waits, an item in the Norwich chamberlains’ accounts for 1533–34 is especially interesting:¹¹⁶
[242]

... And to the waytes at commandement forsed
For studyeng to playe upon the pryksong 3.4d.

The civic authorities, then, were giving financial encouragement to the waits to read mensural notation. At present it is not possible to tell how many other minstrels had learnt or were learning the same techniques. If they were not the first to do so, the Norwich waits were not far behind in the process of adapting themselves to the changing role of minstrelsy in the sixteenth century.

Since the Norwich waits, unable to read mensural notation, could take the place of the king’s minstrels in 1475, we must suppose that the royal minstrels, too, did not then need that technique.¹¹⁷ A simpler notation and the advent of music-printing were only two of many circumstances which changed this old order. Some minstrels, such as the Norwich waits, adapted themselves to the change: others – mainly the independent musicians – failed to do so.

¹¹² The Coventry accounts for 1477 (Carpenters’ Company) and 1492 are typical of the difference in payments to waits and to independent minstrels: see below, ii, pp. 190 f, and c.f. my remarks on liveried minstrels above, pp. 35 f (and n. 85) and 88.

¹¹³ Stephen/*WCN*, p. 7.

¹¹⁴ See above, p. 227.

¹¹⁵ Rastall/*MERH*, p. 35, taken from Lafontaine/*Musick*, p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Stephen/*WCN*, pp. 7 f.

¹¹⁷ See above, also, p. 185 and n. 159.

Thus in the sixteenth century, after many years of struggle,¹¹⁸ independent minstrelsy at last ceased to flourish as an honourable profession. The early part of the century saw the virtual end of medieval minstrelsy in this country.

¹¹⁸ See above, pp. 11 f.