

The origin of the Town Waits, and the myth of the watchman-turned-musician

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The facts as we know them – or do we?

We all know about the origin of the town waits. The waits go back into the mists of history, and they provide an interesting story of how one kind of civic employee – the watchman – was gradually turned into another – the musician that we know as a town wait, or town piper. The process was succinctly described by Walter Woodfill in 1953, in his classic book *Musicians in English Society* (p. 33):

Waits originally seem to have been watchmen or sentinels in camps, castles, and other fortified places, including towns, and to have played some kind of horn as an alarm or signal. By the fifteenth century towns were becoming the characteristic employers of waits, and in some towns waits were coming to be regarded as musicians primarily and watchmen secondarily. By the end of the sixteenth century the transition was general if not complete: waits were then municipal musicians, who had traditional but relatively unimportant functions. ...

Later, on pp. 45-6, Woodfill tells us what these “traditional but relatively unimportant” functions were:

Their duties fell roughly into two classes, marching duties, including night watches, and concert, or purely musical, duties.

In 1454 the common council [of London] adopted, among various measures designed to maintain the peace, an order that the waits were to perambulate each night for the recreation of the people and to prevent robberies. The fact that the first-named object of perambulation was to entertain is a foreshadowing of the development of the watch kept by the waits. The constabulary appointed at the wardmoots must have done far more to keep order than the musicians, whose playing must have warned housebreakers and brawlers of their approach. The waits, instead of weapons, carried valuable instruments and insignia easily lost, damaged, or even stolen in a scuffle. ... Although originally waits may have been hired chiefly to look out for robbers and fires, in London by 1454 musical entertainment was becoming the more prominent part of their watch, and, by the sixteenth century, completely predominant.

Woodfill’s book opened up many important areas concerning musical life in Elizabethan and early Stuart England, and it is not surprising that it has been influential in musical-historical studies. To anyone interested in the Town Waits, this account of their early history has appeared to be the definitive statement, unassailable and, indeed, in no need of being questioned.

But a careful reading ought to ring some alarm bells. In the first place, Woodfill clearly found evidence for a variety of situations that could not reasonably be assumed to confirm

one another. He was too good a scholar not to set out all the circumstances that he had studied – watchmen in “camps, castles, and other fortified places, including towns”, for instance – and much too sensible to pretend that conflicting evidence could be reconciled. Note, for instance, how he guarded against the obvious criticism that a group of musicians could hardly be effective in preventing crime: his solution is to use this “fact” as a reason for them turning away from being watchmen to become musicians. Note, too, how loosely he expressed the chronology of this change; and how, with disarming honesty, he used such phrases as “seem to have been” and “must have” to distinguish the guesses from the statements of verifiable fact.

Once one begins to question Woodfill’s conclusions the story that he tells begins to look a little glib, a piling-on of evidence that does not really stand up to scrutiny. It is because of his belief that the waits were originally watchmen that the London Common Council’s order of 1454 must be seen as a security requirement; and the acceptance of this demands further theories about a change from watching duties to musical duties. At this stage one begins to suspect that his arguments are actually proceeding backwards. The noun “a foreshadowing” is the give-away: and indeed if one then examines Woodfill’s authorities, it becomes clear that he tends to extrapolate in reverse, using the relatively abundant later material to reach conclusions about an earlier period. This being so, his reasoning must be called into question. Can we believe any of it? Do his own observable doubts suggest that, after all, he had it all wrong?

The origin of the myth?

The myth that Woodfill presented so eloquently, and with such attractive detail, is suspect because of what we can see of his historical method and flawed reasoning. Why was it necessary to extrapolate backwards? It stems, I think, from the misreading of another fine and influential scholar, Sir Edmund Chambers. One of the questions that Woodfill side-stepped was that of the change of instrument from horn to pipe, a matter that he left us to assume arose as a matter of course during the change from watchman to musician. This, I think, gives us the clue.

The extended and very thorough account of English minstrelsy that Chambers gives in his first volume is well worth reading. Chapter II, on “Mimus and Scop” (pages 23-41), is followed by an extensive discussion of “The Minstrel Life” (Chapter III, 42-69) and another on “The Minstrel Repertory” (Chapter IV, 70-86). Chambers had studied an impressive range of sources, and he used them well: this part of his work is effectively a collection and summation, in full, of all previous writing on minstrelsy in England.

It is in the course of Chapter III, "The Minstrel Life", that Chambers discusses minstrels and their various functions. After dealing with the itinerant minstrel in popular life (42-6), he turns to the place of minstrels and their art in courtly life and their employment by royalty and the nobility (46-53), the administration and control of minstrelsy (53-5), the relationship between minstrels and the Church ((55-62), and a final section that both makes a comparison with minstrelsy in continental Europe and looks ahead to the later Tudor period. During his discussion of the royal minstrels he first mentions those known as "waits" (p. 50) and some time later, in mid-paragraph (p. 51), turns from the constitution of the Northumberland household minstrels to a brief notice of town waits:

Minstrels are also found, from the beginning of the fifteenth century, in the service of the municipal corporations. [Here he names eleven of them.] They received fixed fees or dues, wore the town livery and badge of a silver scutcheon, played at all local celebrations and festivities, and were commonly known as *waits*.* This term we have already found in use at court, and the 'Black Book', which contains the household regulations of Edward IV, informs us that the primary duty of a wait was to 'pipe the watch', summer and winter, at certain fixed hours of the night.**

* Here there is a footnote giving references to the records of various towns, and a discussion of the terms used for town waits.

** Here a footnote quotes the item relating to the wait in the *Liber Niger*.

It is easy to see how this passage could have been misconstrued, although a careful reading shows it to be unambiguous. It is something of an aside, which is why it starts in mid-paragraph: but that positioning might also put it into the reader's mind that there is an exact parallel between court and town, and it is easy to miss that it is the *word* "wait", not the function, that he is using as a link back to the royal household ("This term we have already found ..."). Chambers does not, in fact, state that the *town* waits piped the watch: but once someone made that misconnection, it also led to the problem already noted, that the horn-playing watchman has now become a piper.

Chambers certainly did not intend this to be an issue, as he was clearly referring to the domestic wait, not the civic one. But the possibility for misunderstanding continues: the next paragraph discusses the attendance and responsibilities of royal, noble and municipal minstrels, with a footnote about the waits (p. 52, n. 1) referring to those of Lynn and Coventry. Nevertheless, he is still referring to the domestic wait, for he gives evidence from a passage in the 'Black Book' that relates to the royal minstrels. However confusing the link made through the *word* "wait" (and his writing is somewhat compressed here, which does not help), Chambers did not confuse the *functions* of the domestic and civic waits, which are clearly distinguished on a careful reading but certainly might be confused by a cursory one.

I do not know who first misread this paragraph, but the resulting confusion has been repeated by every wait-historian of the twentieth century. Galpin was certainly under the impression in 1910 that waits were watchmen, thoroughly confusing the town and domestic waits and failing to distinguish Edward IV's "wayte" from his minstrels (*Old English Instruments*, 119-20). But Galpin was interested in the instruments, not in the history, and the misunderstanding became more important in works published in 1915. F.A. Hadland's account shows two clear tendencies, both of which were followed by others: to elaborate in picturesque but purely fictional ways, and to skate over the unexplainable "facts" in a vague narrative:

It is hardly worth while to go back earlier than 1314, when Hugh the trumpeter was enrolled in a guild at Leicester. Originally the waits were mainly watchmen, sounding or piping signals on such instruments as they carried. As the signals became more varied, the Watch began to assume something of a musical character, and to play such simple tunes as were in vogue.

In the LIBER NIGER DOMUS REGIS quoted in Rymer's *Foedera* is an account of the musicians of the household of Edward IV. Mention is made of "A Wayte that nyghtly from Michaelmas to Shrove Tuesday pipes the watch within the Court fowere tymes ... "

Something of the same sort is stated also by A.F. Hill in the 3rd edition of the *Handbook of the Worshipful Company of Musicians* the same year.

Hadland's mention of Hugh the trumpeter is part of a more general (and indiscriminate) stratagem to link town waits to guilds in the absence of hard evidence. As in much of 20th-century wait history, fiction takes the place of the missing fact. In the second sentence, Hadland's general statement demands a vague historical statement in order to obscure the problem over the instrument played: "such instruments as they carried" is clearly nonsense, for we can hardly assume an *ad hoc* situation in which they did not know what they were doing. As if to compensate the reader starved of hard fact, Hadland then creates the narrative explaining how signals turned into music. In the beginning of the second paragraph, he quotes from the *Liber Niger* to show the wait's duties, but without explaining (a) that this is a domestic wait, not a civic one, and (b) that this passage is taken from the section on the wait, not from that on the minstrels. These mistakes were to be repeated by Langwill (1950), Oswald (1952) and others.

(Mis)reading facts and writing fiction

I have no wish to lampoon wait-historians like Hadland and Hill, who were working in the tradition of the gentleman-antiquary and doing their best to present an interesting account to their non-historian readers. But the fact that these were amateur and historically incom-

petent writers explains much of the problem that Woodfill had, as a professional historian, nearly 40 years later. Faced with what was by then almost a *fait accompli*, but without the musical knowledge and purely musicological curiosity that might have made him question the received history, Woodfill had to add the detail in the most convincing way that he could find. Faced with collecting a huge amount of material, he probably did not have time to sit and think through the procedural and conceptual problems that almost certainly never presented themselves to him as such. In the circumstances, one has to say that he did a magnificent job: as a presentation of musical-historical material in a limited historical period (c1550-1645), it could hardly be bettered. One simply needs to be aware that, in dealing with an earlier period for which he had no time to search for new evidence, Woodfill had recourse to a procedure that relied on guesswork and assumption. Convincing as it often looked, his work on the fifteenth and earlier centuries was seriously flawed.

It was all convincing enough for his conclusions to be accepted *in toto* as the standard and accurate account: and when a serious and obviously highly competent historian says something, even when endorsing a rather dodgy proposition, it takes more than the odd counter-blast to dislodge it. My own work, made available to interested parties since 1968, still engenders disbelief and – because the received wait-history is a significant piece of “knowledge” with which we are all comfortable – even a certain amount of anger. This is entirely understandable: and the only way to win hearts and minds is for other writers to follow the lead and make the “new” understanding more generally available.

Unfortunately, this has not happened. How many books and articles – on both waits and minstrels generally – have I read in which, although my work is cited, the author has obviously not read the work properly? How many REED editors and others have collected important documentary evidence on the waits and then bent their interpretation of the facts to conform to their received “knowledge”? I have reviewed some of the work concerned (see Bibliography, below), and I have also written articles to refute published work by others. It is all hard work, and I wish that it were not necessary.

This is a general situation, and I plead guilty to committing this crime in the past. But in case my readers should think that I am being over-sensitive about my own work, let me tell you, by way of a diversion, about the example that most exasperated me, not least because it came from an unexpected quarter. I was asked to write the article “Wait” for *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 6th edition (otherwise known as *The New Grove*), which was eventually published in 1980. As there was very little space I decided that I could use it best by giving a series of clear definitions that would separate out the various types of wait

that had been confused in the past. The definitions being in the body of the article, the top line (where a generic definition is usually given) was left with only the etymology. I therefore wrote the top line as

Wait [wayt, wayte] (from old Fr. *gaitte*, a watchman). The various meanings [are then spelled out in the rest of the article] ...

Note that this gives a definition only for the word that I took to be the etymological derivation of “wait”, not for “wait” as a concept. By now my reader may be prepared for what came back at proof stage:

Wait [wayt, wayte] (from old Fr. *gaitte*), a watchman. The various meanings ...

Moving the bracket, presumably to conform with “known” fact, would negate the whole exercise. I corrected the proof, and added a clear explanation of why the line was as it had been written, plus, for good measure, a clear request to stick to my original. Despite this, the final published version was the incorrect one: so now Rastall, who is supposed to know what he is talking about, has clearly confirmed that “wait” means “watchman”.

This not only delayed a solution for 21 years – the second edition of *The New Grove* was published in 2001 – but actually made the situation worse. People who heard my correction to the received account would refer me to the *New Grove* article and point out that this authoritative account contradicted what I was apparently telling them. So when I was asked to review my article for the second edition I saw it as a chance to correct the error, and did so with a note to the sub-editor that this version of the top line really was correct. Imagine my feelings when the proof came back with the line altered to the 1980 version. Becoming rather shrill now, I wrote to the Editor to say that what had been published in 1980 had been changed after proof stage, that what I had written REALLY WAS CORRECT, and would he PLEASE make sure that my ORIGINAL VERSION WOULD BE PUBLISHED. The Editor (a fair-minded man and an excellent scholar) wrote back to say that he would do this, and did.

I have recounted this tale to illustrate how difficult it often is for even the most intelligent people to approach historical facts with an open mind. Human nature being what it is, the overturning of established fiction is a long and difficult process: and it is therefore worth considering how we might proceed from this point onwards.

Where now?

First, do not believe everything you read, even if everyone seems agreed on it. Authors often just repeat one another without further investigation, citing their authorities quite uncritically. To be fair, there is not always time to read the original sources in full: but one sometimes

suspects that the sources have not been read at all, or at least not carefully (which may come to the same thing). We need to remember, too, that authors have their own prejudices and that these affect their interpretation of the facts. Always go to the original sources cited (and others), if possible: it is surprising how often an author is seen to misrepresent the sources, when one looks closely.

The other side of this coin is also important. We, the readers, bring our prejudices to the process when we read someone's work, and this affects our interpretation, too. What prejudices have you brought to this article? – and what prejudices have *I* put into it?

Such prejudices are usually insidious, partly because they stem from what we know (or think we know). One might put the difference thus: understanding gained by wrestling with the facts, getting to know them and being able to see them in their various possible relationships, usually results in an open-minded grasp of the situation: this understanding can change as new evidence is assessed. Knowledge that has not been fought for and subjected to critical assessment, on the other hand, is likely to be insecure and to result in prejudice rather than understanding.

Prejudice is also insidious because it is unconscious. No-one deliberately made the various confusions out of Chambers's paragraph discussed above, but once a misunderstanding is raised to the status of "knowledge" it becomes something to be used, proudly displayed, and even fought for. If Love is blind, so, sometimes, is the kind of understanding that results from not knowing just how much you don't know. And that isn't just the province of amateurs: many professionals have thanked their stars that they didn't rush into print with some under-explored revelation, and some have regretted that they did.

What does all this mean, practically, in the present instance? First, I suggest, we should never use the word "wait" unqualified, as this opens the door to assumptions and ambiguities. If we know that we are talking about a domestic wait or a civic wait, then we should say so; if we cannot tell whether a "wait" is domestic or civic we should say that, too, as a guess will be very unhelpful; and if we are dealing with a man called John (or Roger, or William) Wait, it is pointless to speculate without further evidence, because the man might be a huntsman, falconer, or other worker using (presumably) a wait-pipe. Much as it goes against the grain, it is worth remembering that in a subject where hard information is very scarce, it is often impossible to come to any conclusion at all with the help of particular pieces of evidence. That evidence must, then, be kept aside, unused but in sight, as it were, until complementary evidence comes to hand.

Another problem to be explored is the workplace of the domestic waits. The current

distinction is between domestic waits, working for the security of a domestic building and its inmates, and civic waits, working as minstrels in a town. In the fifteenth century, at least, these appear all to have been pipers (and, sometimes, the trumpeter in a civic shawm-and-trumpet band). What, then, of our horn-blowing wait from an earlier period? It will help if we recognise that the word “wait” – in whatever form – was probably never used in the context of civic security and only at a late stage in the context of domestic security. (See James Merryweather’s essay “Neckham” on this website). The security men in the royal households were known as *vigilis* (plural *vigiles*) until around the middle of the 14th century, and then *vigilator* (plural *vigilatores*) until around the middle of the 15th. By this latter time, the royal security men had been known also as “Wait” for nearly a century – first, probably, as the name of someone playing that instrument, but soon as a sign of function within the household. This last usage is the one made famous by innumerable quotations from the royal household ordinances – the Black Book – of 1471-2. (The chronology of this is explored in more detail in my unpublished paper “Pipers and Waits”.)

This is complicated enough, and it would be unwise to muddy the waters further by adding in the confusion of a *castle* wait. Whatever the horn-blowing watchman on a castle wall was called, he was clearly a different kind of man from the (invariably indoor?) household *vigilis* already discussed. We do not know what he was called, nor whether such a horn-blower could be found in or on other domestic buildings or on town walls. Towns, like castles, must have needed a lookout who would not only see people coming a long way off but could also signal an arrival to those manning the entrance-gate and those who would inform the household or civic authority. Curiously, the best information we have is a parallel from France, where some châteaux have a high watch-tower for the man known as *guet* or *gaitte*. A high position was available on town gates, of course, as surviving examples in York, Beverley and Southampton testify. Of domestic buildings, only Skipton Castle, as far as I know, has a high tower apparently designed for the watchman. We badly need to find and assess documentary evidence for this kind of watchman to find out about his work and its relationship to that of the indoor piping *vigilis*.

Finally, the confusions to be seen in this subject were made possible partly by vague or inaccurate chronology. As my discussion of pipers and waits shows, the names, descriptions and functions of the men we study have changed with time, and never, it seems, coincidentally. Vague chronology is therefore another serious cause of confusion. Just as it is highly questionable to skip back and forth across the English Channel for evidence that is then used indiscriminately, so it is of doubtful validity to jump from one century to another

without a very clear chronological framework for the evidence being used. Warnings about the limits of comparison in this way may seem unnecessarily restrictive, and are always frustrating because one cannot make full use of the material available. But it is better to save your evidence unused for another day than to build a fictional structure with it. We deal in fact, not fiction: and we must produce history, not romance.

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