

# The Waits of Edinburgh

Lyndesay G. Langwill

*From a typescript given by the author to Richard Rastall; probably the article submitted to The Scotsman and published on 21 December 1932.*

With the approach of Christmas we are afforded many reminders of the Waits, those municipal servants of the past, musicians who served their day and generation and through six centuries held office in our towns by virtue of charters or statutes. The origin of the name, from the Anglo-Saxon 'wacian', to watch or guard, shows the primary duty of these watchmen-musicians. The Norman-French could not pronounce the 'w', with the result that the forms 'Guet' and 'Gaité' gave rise to such expressions as 'bon-gaite', a morning salutation. The English occupational surnames Gait, and later Wait, Wakeman etc., also resulted. Watchmen termed 'waytes' were established in London and elsewhere by order of Henry III (1216-72) and Edward III (1327-77) had three 'wayghtes' in his Royal Music. Edward IV (1461-83) had elaborate instructions for his Household Waytes and the *Liber Niger Domus Regis* refers to "a wayte that nightly from Michelmas to Shreve Thursdaye pipeth the watch within this Courte foure tymes, in the somere nyghtes III tymes and makyth bon gaite at every chamber door and offyce as well for fear of pickers and pillers".

The first volume of Extracts from the Edinburgh Burgh Records (1589-1603) makes mention of a scheme for Town Musicians – "schalmes howboyes and siclyk" – but the proposal took no effect. On 30th January 1607, however, John Orley was appointed by the Magistrates and Council to serve the town "in his calling and with the musicall instruments of schalmes, howboyes and siclyk be himselff and four expert musicianes quhilk he sall furneis upon his charges". They were to traverse the town "Cowgaitt and all" every day at noon "to blaw and play ane certaine spaice upon any pairt of the stepill the baillies plesis" and between six and seven in the evening "betwix the Castelhill and Netherbow". An act of 15 June 1608, orders payment to be made for the mould of the silver badges for John Orley and his four companions. For two centuries the "schalme" or shawm – the primitive form of the French hautbois or Scots howboyes – was the principal instrument performing "the town's music".

The Council Records of 31 October 1679 grants warrant to James Smith, music-master in the Canongate and his servants "to play everie morning (excepting the Saboth) throwth the city as waitts upon ther Cornets and uther instruments". The Treasurer was also authorised to furnish "coats in the touns liverie and appoynt ther master to...play constantly throw the streets and vennels each morning excepting as said .. from the first of November to the first of March nixt". The payment for this service was £5 sterling.

The livery of the Waits was gorgeous in many English towns. Those of London at the end of the 16th century wore "blue gowns, red sleeves and caps, every one having his silver collar about his neck". The Edinburgh Records of 7 November 1694 appointed "John Swanstoun to be principall waite", and he and his four companions were ordered each "a gray cloak with black and whyte lace as the touns livery to be worne only within the Toun". It is much to be regretted that we have no pictorial record of these waits. The City of Norwich is fortunate in possessing two of the "silver collars" dating from 1535 constituting the Waits' chains and badges, and similar curios are preserved at Bristol, Beverley, Wakefield and Stamford.

A feature suggestive of the "signature tunes" of modern days was the Wait-Tune. Each group had its particular melody and we have several of these still preserved to us, e.g. "London Waits" (two versions), "Tower Hamlets" and "York Waits" both hornpipes – Stamford Waits, Warrington Waits – a charming little minuet – and Oxford Waits, a gavotte.

The association of the term Waits with itinerant musicians of a very inferior order is most unjustified for the medieval Waits were highly-skilled musicians. In Germany they constituted the 'Stadtpeiferei' – guilds which furnished many celebrated musicians. Johann Sebastian Bach was the son of a Stadtpeifer, and in England Orlando Gibbons was the son of a Cambridge Wait, and his brother Ferdinando was a Lincoln Wait. Evidence of a test of musicianship is afforded by the Edinburgh Records of 17 April 1696, where John Monroe and Malcolme McGibbone were appointed players on "the French hautboyes and double curtles" being found compleat masters of playing upon the said.....instruments", which were considered far more proper for the town's waits than the instruments they now play upon. The Waits varied in number from nine as in London to four as in Edinburgh "or five at the most who shall all be obliged to play upon the French hautboyes one always playing on the double curtles for the bass". An interesting sidelight is afforded by the decision "that the said Malcolm McGibbone be allowed to keep a schooll within the town to teach that sort of musick and be allowed to play to gentlemen at seasonable tymes when imployed". The double curtles, which was evidently McGibbon's instrument, was the Scots designation for the curtal, (Fr. Courtaut), as the Bassoon was known from the close of the 16th century until the middle of the 18th century. Each Wait had often an apprentice, and these pupils were strictly examined before admission as Waits.

In 1701 the Edinburgh Waits petitioned the Council for new liveries, with the result that "Gilbert Somervell present deacon of the Taylors" was appointed "to cause provyde the petitioners cloaks and other furniture therto belonging".

A century passes apparently uneventfully, unless perchance the waits became less and less appreciated in a period of considerable social development. James McGlashan was the last Wait to have his appointment recorded – in 1800 – and although a petition by "the Cities Wakes" for increased remuneration was granted by the Council on 15th February 1804 we may surmise that their office did not survive long. Indeed a study of the meagre extracts relating to the Waits in English towns shows that the dawn of the 19th century, which was to bring such revolutionary developments in wind instruments of both wood and brass, saw the passing in Scotland of a class of time-honoured musicians. The English Church-bands of the first half of last century indeed offered an opportunity which might have kept the Waits with us in another capacity. Thomas Hardy in "Under the Greenwood Tree" has given a charming picture of this period, which, however, was brought to a conclusion with the introduction of the organ. In Scotland, the precentor with pitch pipe or fork, brooked no interference from meddling musicians, however competent, and since much has been written concerning this phase of our national musical life, let us hope that the records of other Scottish cities may yet throw much light upon those Waits, whose simple music-making charmed our forefathers three hundred years and more ago.