



Waits

By Ian Gilchrist

A living tradition that (almost) never went away

Last year I was browsing through a book on Georgian Bath when my eye was caught by a reference to some musicians and the more I looked, the more fascinating this appeared. It seems there was a band of musicians who were employed to greet important visitors to the city, which at that period frequently included royals and other dignitaries of varying rank. The name of these musicians was the City Waits and as it turns out they are well documented in both factual record and fictional form. For example, the Bath Council minutes for March 26 1733 records that it was agreed that, *"the City Waits, now established by this Corporation, whose business is to attend the Corporation on all occasions shall have 4 guineas p.ann. for their trouble."*

The Bath Waits were obviously a mixed blessing and there are many recorded cases of them being paid, basically, to go away. The book *A Step To Bath* (Edward Ward, 1700) notes, *"In the morning we were saluted by the whole fraternity of cat-gut scrapers and could not get rid of them without the assistance of an Angel,"* (an Angel was a coin worth varying amounts but about 10 shillings).

By 1774, the city corporation decided that it too had had enough of the waits and ordered them to disband on the grounds of being *"vagrants and extortioners"*. This edict was obviously disregarded by the waits because, in 1796, a further request was published in the local newspaper that no money should be given to the waits by visitors.

This all sounded rather intriguing and as various ideas started to formulate in my mind, I looked more closely into the subject of what the waits were, where they had come from and what they played. It soon became clear that this was far from a uniquely Bath phenomenon.

From medieval times onwards, most towns in Britain had a waits band, whose purpose typically was to play at civic occasions, to mark the hours of night and to wake people in the mornings and to welcome important visitors.

One guess at the origin of the name waits (or waites) seems to make a connection with 'watch', as in watchmen, though this is disputed. They were not exclusively a British phenomenon but existed also in many European countries, especially Germany. In Britain, they flourished right through our Tudor, Stuart and Georgian periods, but by 1835 it seems that the nation had had enough of them and the Municipal Corporations Act was passed which brought about the abolition of most existing bands. The name 'waits' was then appropriated by busking carol singers who got known as Christmas Waits. But that, however, was far from the

it is also known as the 'wait-pipe'. It is the forerunner of the modern oboe having a double reed. A plausible explanation for the introduction of the shawm into British life is that it was brought back by the crusaders, as similar instruments with similar names can be found in the Middle East and further afield. A quieter variant suitable for indoor playing was the crumhorn, while a bass variant called the dulcian or curtal became the forerunner of the modern bassoon. Shawms were often partnered for good effect outdoors with sackbuts, which were the antecedent of the modern trombone. Most of the instruments existed in 'families'

session a year and to be host to a round of refreshments. This too was agreed.

As regards the actual music, it has to be stated that we come nowhere near a literal interpretation of what a 'true' waits band should be; sadly I know no shawm or sackbut players. My intention however was more to recreate the spirit of a waits band, which involved using whichever local musicians might be available and being able to draw on a repertoire of tunes of approximately the right era but not (initially anyway) going for an exact recreation of a typical 'old' waits sound. These conditions were all met in the fortnightly gatherings of the Full English traditional music sessions held at the Royal Oak pub in Bath. The instruments and tunes were as one would expect and perfectly fitted the sound I wanted to create for the purpose intended. I advertised for members to become waits and was soon rewarded with over 20 responses, which is a very good pool from which to draw a band.

In our first year, we fulfilled our three engagements for the Mayor's office, the Mayor met his obligation to attend a practice session at the Royal Oak and the season culminated in August with performances at the local summer opera venue (Iford Manor) and also a gig at the Bath Folk Festival. For the latter two performances, we even added a couple of songs from the 'old' waits era and incorporated some 'old' tunes including one from a local composer of the Georgian period, William Herschel. So, I consider we've got off to a good start, but if there are any shawm or sackbut players out there who'd like to get in touch I'd be pleased to hear from them!

www.townwaits.org.uk

www.bathcityjubileewaits.org.uk



The Bath City Jubilee Waits at Iford in August 2013

end of the story, because in this country the 1970s brought about a revival and there now exist active waits bands in towns such as Leeds, London, York, Oxford, Doncaster and Gloucester. In fact the list is rather long.

What instruments did they and do they play? While it was apparent to me from the historical evidence that the Bath Waits in the 18th century seemed to favour fiddles and similar instruments ('cat-gut scrapers'), the generality of waits bands originally comprised wind instruments because of the greater sound they made in the open air, which was/is their main arena.

The shawm is the archetypical waits instrument, to the extent that

playing a variety of musical registers.

Bringing it back to Bath, through my mayoral connections I had been able to organise a couple of nice musical events in the Mayor's Parlour, which seemed to go down well. This was encouraging, so the next step was to ask if the Mayor might be willing to support the idea of a 'new' waits band to re-establish the tradition. Since this was the Jubilee year (2012), I suggested calling the new waits the Bath City Jubilee Waits and to my delight the idea was accepted. The terms were that the Mayor would become the waits' Patron and in return we would play (for free) at three mayoral events in the year. It was also a requirement for the Mayor to attend one practice

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