

Timpani and Side Drums in England in the 16th and 17th Centuries

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From this period we have, so far as I know, only three and a half instruments surviving in England, plus a good deal of documentation, much due to the indefatigable labours of Andrew Ashbee in the Court Records,¹ and with them much frustration, both then and now.

The instruments we have are three side drums, one of them foreign, and the remains of a tabor. The tabor, which was found in the wreck of Henry VIII's warship, the *Mary Rose*, is outside my subject today but its beater is interesting and I have a replica of it.² We have no timpani at all, so far as I know. I do have to repeat 'so far as I know' because nobody knows what may be lurking in the attics, cellars, and stables of country houses all over Britain, least of all their owners (I am assured that there is nothing in royal palaces by relevant authorities, but I take that also with some scepticism). There are too, in many such houses and palaces, displays of arms and armour high on the walls, and there may well be drums, probably of wholly indeterminate date, among them. To find them is a matter of chance, usually by visiting those that are open to the public, and even then there are always some rooms excluded from the public gaze, or else by picking up gossip from colleagues.

We are talking of what in England are known as the Tudor and Stuart periods. In 1500, Henry VII was still on the throne, an usurper who was ruthless in disposing of the remnants of the older ruling house of York and who was notorious as a miser. By 1700, James II, the last male Stuart, had fled the country and

¹ Andrew Ashbee, *Records of English Court Music*, vols. I-IX, initially published by the author from 1986 onwards, then by Scolar Press, now all available from Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing.

² Jeremy Montagu, *Percussion Instruments*, in: Julie Gardiner with Michael J. Allen, *Before the Mast: Life and Death Aboard the Mary Rose*, Portsmouth, The Mary Rose Trust, 2005, pp. 230–232.

Dutch William was ruling, the widower of one Stuart daughter, Mary who had ruled jointly with him, and with the last of the Stuarts, Queen Anne, still to come. After her death, in 1714, the Hanoverians took over with resulting changes in musical and instrumental styles. Not that Britain was free of foreign musical influence before that date. The Court records of Henry VIII's time are littered with foreign names, Dutch, French, German, and Italian, as musicians and instrument makers, drummers among them. He was always keen to get the best available in whatever field might glorify his court, including timpani, as we shall see, though there without success.

In Henry VII's time we have many references to minstrels, both quiet and loud, and to trumpeters, sackbutters and shawmers. Also to pipers, who were often called Phyfers, and some of whom were also drumslades. In the Court records, musicians were customarily grouped by instruments, and the trumpets are always distinct from these drumslades and fifers. This strongly suggests that the drums in question were side drums. This grouping continues right through the Cromwellian Interregnum, until the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 and the preparations for the coronation ceremonies of Charles II in the following year. Then, for the first time, we have a mention of the kettle drummers, who always thereafter appear at the end of the list of trumpeters.

Our first reference to the side drummers comes in 1491 when "ij Sweches grete tabarers" were paid 40s.³ 'Sweche' I take to be an attempt at Swiss, then the leaders on that instrument, as in some side-drumming styles they still are today. And the 'grete tabar' must be a distinction between the side drum and the normal, and much smaller, tabor. The tabor was still an important instrument. As I have already mentioned we have one surviving from Henry VIII's time, and his elder daughter, Princess Mary, had two 'tabrettes' at her court for the Christmas revels in 1521.⁴ Taborers went on appearing on the court lists well into the seventeenth century. Thereafter we have references from time to time of Morrisises and other such dancing, and since the tabor was still being used by Morris dancers when Cecil Sharp was collecting their music and dances in the early twentieth century, we may assume that taborers were employed at court even into the eighteenth

³ Ashbee, vol. VII, p. 151, for 5 January, 1491.

⁴ Ashbee, vol. VII, p. 57, for 30 September, 1521.

century. The tabor, with its pipe, is still alive and well in revival folk music in England, and in continuous tradition in southern France and northern Spain, and probably elsewhere also.

Returning to the Tudors, the drumslades appear frequently in the records, not only in the domestic events of the court but travelling with embassies and so forth, as was common throughout Europe. In 1513, six foreign drumslades were enrolled, noticeably as a group, Hans van Rydelyng, Melgyer van Harop, Gery van Ambroke, Leonard van Osbroke, Windell van Febrewyke, and Stephen van Frebroke.⁵ Although more English names also appear, it is clear that Henry VIII was by then finding it necessary to import experts from abroad, apparently mainly from the Low Countries.

In 1515, at the May Day revels at Greenwich (one of Henry's favourite palaces) "they jousted for three hours to the constant sound of trumpets and drums".⁶ This is the first instance of our most serious frustration. Anywhere else in Europe, we would take this to be trumpets and timpani, but nowhere in Henry's records do we find reference to a kettle drummer, always to the drumslades, and, with the support of an entry for the revels earlier that year when jackets were provided for a Joust of Honour at Greenwich for 9 drombyllslades and for trumpeters,⁷ we can only conclude that these were side drummers playing with the trumpeters.

In 1539, on 13th December, the Earl of Southampton wrote to the King from Calais about the impending arrival of his wife-to-be, Anne of Cleves: "Furthermore it may please Your Majestie to understande, that here is with my Ladyes Grace, sent by the Duke of Saxony, 13 trompettes, and oon that playes upon two thinges as drommys, made of a straunge facion; who played befor Her Grace at her entrye into this towne; and they bee desiroux to goo over into England to see Your Majestie: wherfore, and forasmoch as I perceyve that my Ladyes Grace is contented they shuld so doo, I have condiscended therunto."⁸ They duly arrived,

⁵ Ashbee, vol. VII, p. 204, for 17 April, 1513.

⁶ Ashbee, vol. VII, p. 46, for 1 May, 1515.

⁷ Ashbee, vol. VII, p. 403, for 3 February, 1514/15.

⁸ James Gairdner and R H Brodie, arranged and catalogued, *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII*, vol. XVII, London, HMSO, 1900, Reprint Vaduz, Kraus, 1965, p.208 ff, for 13 December 1539.

for on 3rd January, when Henry met her at Blackheath, “Fyrst her Trompettes went forwarde, whiche were twelve in nomber besyde two kettle Drommes on horsebacke, then followed the Kynges Trompettes.”⁹ They did not stay for long (nor did Anne, referred to from her appearance as the Flanders Mare – the marriage was annulled in July), because Anne’s brother-in-law, the Duke of Saxony, asked for his band back, but they were paid quite a lot of money for those days, 20 marks or £6. 13s. 4d each.

It was their visit that stirred Henry’s interest in timpani, for on 29 August 1542, two and half years later, he wrote to Sir Thomas Seymour, who was then in Budapest fighting the Turks: “Further our plesure is, that you shall travaill to conduct and hier there for us, at suche wages as you shall think mete, ten taborynes on horsbak, after the Hungaryons facion; and if it be possible, whatsoever We paye for them, to get oone or twoo of that sorte that can both skilfully make the sayd taborynes and use them; and likewise We wolde you shuld provyde us of ten good dromes, and asmany fifers. For the prest and setting forward of whiche persons you maye receyve, what money you desire, of our servaunt Guidenfingre Willing you earnestly to travaill that these taborynes, drummes, and fyfers, or asmany of them as you can get, may repayre hither with as good spede as you can convenyently dyvyse, wherin you shall administre unto Us thankfull pleasure.”¹⁰

Note the distinction here between the “taborynes on horsbak, after the Hungaryons facion” and the normal “drummes and fyfers.”

Seymour wrote back from Vienna on 12 october: “the segge beyng lewed from beforre the towne of Pest the 7th day of October ... I ... came to this towne the 11th day of this moneth, where I ded reseve Your Heynes letter ... by the wyche I perseve Your Heynes plesur ... that Your Heynes wolde retayne, the dromes and fyffes, the ketyll dromes, with your plesur for my retorne; wyche I shall with all my delegant study folow ... and have sent a man with delegece to the campe to provyde the dromes and fyffes ... and as I passe thorow the contre, I shall inquire for the ketell dromes that You wolde have provyded, for in the

⁹ Edward Halle, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and Yorke*, London, Richard Grafton, 1548 and 1550, Facsimile Menston, Scolar Press, 1970, f.239b, for 3 January, 1539/40.

¹⁰ Gairdner & Brodie, p. 138, for 29 August 1542.

camp thar warre but 2, the on was with the Hongeryns, and the other with the Generall.”¹¹

Henry never did get his ketell dromes, for there is no further mention of them, nor do they ever appear in any of the court records. There has been confusion over this in the past because Percival Kirby read only part of this story and says that Henry got his timpani and confirmed this error by conflating it with the account of the arrival of Anne of Cleves, assuming that these were Henry’s trumpeters and kettle-drummers, whereas it is clear that she had brought them with her, borrowed from her sister’s husband, to make a greater impression.¹²

Nor do they appear in court records for later Tudor reigns. However, kettledrums were around in England, for there is one reference for the Christmas Revels of 1552/3, in the reign of Henry’s son, Edward VI, when in a letter, the Master of the Revels, George Fferrers, wrote: “I haue provided one to plaie vpon a kettell drom with his boye and a nother drome with a fyffe whiche must be apparelled like turkes garmentes according to the patornes I send you herwith on St Stephens daie.”¹³ It is a temptation to think that what the boy was for, was to carry the kettell drom on his back, as we shall see in a moment. But in fact we have no other evidence for timpani in England in Edward VI’s reign, nor do we have any idea of where Fferrers got this timpanist from. Nor, for that matter, why he had ‘a’ kettell drom, though this may be a matter of kettell drom implying a pair.

We do have evidence, though, two years later, when the Catholic Queen Mary had succeeded her brother on the throne, for Edward had died young. In 1554, the diarist Henry Machyn wrote: “The sam day, the wyche was Sunday, at afternon, the Kyngs grace and my lord F[itz]water and dyvers Spaneards dyd ryd in dyvers colars, the Kyng in red, and som [in] yellow, sum in gren, sum in whyt, sum in bluw, and with targets and canes in ther hand, herlyng of rods on a-nodur, and

¹¹ Gairdner & Brodie, p. 201, for 12 October 1542.

¹² Percival R. Kirby, *The Kettle-Drums: A Book for Composers, Conductors and Kettle-Drummers*, London, Oxford University Press, 1930, pp. 7–8.

¹³ Albert Feuillerat, *Documents relating to the Revels at Court in the time of King Edward VI and Queen Mary (the Loseley Manuscripts)*, in W. Bang, ed., *Materialien zur Kunde des älteren Englischen Dramas*, Bd XLIV, Louvain, A. Uystpruyst, 1914, p. 89, line 20 ff.

thruppets in the sam colars, and drummes mad of ketylles, and banars in the sam colars.” and a fortnight later the Spaniards are mentioned again with: “viiij trumpeters blohyng; and when they had don plahyng, and then begane the sagbottes plahyng; and when they had don theyr was on that cared ij drummes on ys bake, and on cam after playng.”¹⁴ It is clear that these were the Spaniards’ musicians, who had come in the train of Philip of Spain when he married the queen – he was never given the title ‘Kyng’ in England, but Machyn was a strong Catholic and was very much on his side. To him, Philip as the Queen’s husband was rightfully the King. Machyn went on with his diary into Queen Elizabeth’s reign, but he never mentioned ‘drumes mad of ketylles’ again – all his later references are clearly to side drums and fifes. But the ‘on that cared ij drummes on ys bake’ takes us back to King Edward’s revels of 1552/3, and does strongly suggest that that boy, too, did indeed have a pair of kettle drums and not just the one.

The one significant reference in Queen Elizabeth’s time is from a travel writer, Paul Hentzner. He visited England in 1598 (and here Kirby misleads us again, for he printed the date as 1548). In Kirby’s text, she was “regaled during dinner by ... an ensemble of ‘twelve trumpets and two kettle-drums; which together with fifes, cornets and side-drums, made the hall ring for half an hour together’”.¹⁵ He was quoting, but also amplifying without justification, Walpole’s translation, which reads: “twelve trumpets and two kettledrums made the hall ring, etc.”¹⁶ The trouble is that Hentzner wrote in Latin, and what *he* said was: “XII. Tubicines, & duo Tympanistæ, qui tubis, buccinis, & tympanis magno sonitu per sesqui horam clangebant.”¹⁷ Here we have the curse of the Tower of Babel, for in Latin tympanis never did mean timpani – it just meant drums. There really is no excuse for Kirby, for Walpole published Hentzner bilingually, Latin and his English transla-

¹⁴ Henry Machyn, *The diary of Henry Machyn, Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, from A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1563*, ed. John Gough Nichols, London, Camden Society, 1848, p. 76 for 25 November, 1554, and p. 78 for 8 December.

¹⁵ Kirby, p. 8.

¹⁶ Hugh Walpole, ed, *A Journey into England by Paul Hentzner In the Year M.D.XC. VIII*, (Twickenham, Strawberry Hill, 1757), p. 53.

¹⁷ Paul Hentzner, *Itinerarium Germaniæ, Galliæ, Angliæ, Italiæ, Norinbergæ*, 1612, p. 137, for September, 1598 in Greenwich.

tion on facing pages. What is more, Hentzner makes it perfectly clear that all this was in the state rooms – the Queen herself dined privately in her own chamber.

There are some further references to foreign kettledrums visiting England. For example, Farmer refers to “the King of Denmark’s drume, riding upon a horse, with two drummes, one on each side of the horse’s necke, whereon hee strooke two little mallets of wood.”¹⁸ But still there is nothing resident.

Now, we all know that timpani were in these periods the perquisites of royalty and high estate, so if we are to find evidence of their use in Britain, it must be in the accounts of the royal courts – like everything else, if they had been there they must have been paid for, just as Henry VIII paid the Duke of Saxony’s kettle Drommes and Trompettes for the short time they were in England. The first reference that we can find in these accounts comes in 1660, immediately on the restoration of Charles II to the English throne, when in June a whole string of musicians were being sworn in: “Drumes Fife, Tedder a patent, John Maugridg Drummajor, John Barteeske ye Kettle Drummer.”¹⁹ Barteeske is clearly a foreign name, probably Dutch or Flemish, and presumably Charles brought him with him when he returned to England from the Low Countries.²⁰ Thereafter, kettle-drummers are a constant item in the records, with drums, liveries, banners, and so forth being provided regularly. They are also sent off with missions, allocated to regiments, even to the fleet, exactly as they have been ever since. None of the drums seems to have been preserved. We have plenty from the nineteenth century in various regimental museums and other such places, but nothing that I know of identifiably earlier. Even Handel’s famous double drums, for which he indented from time to time from the Tower of London, were burned in a fire.²¹ These were artillery drums, which because they were mounted on chariots rather than horseback could be twice the normal size – hence their name of double

¹⁸ Henry George Farmer, *The Turkish Influence on Military Music*, pp. 41–6, in his *Handel’s Kettledrums and other Papers on Military Music*, London, Hinrichsen, 2nd edn, 1960, p. 42, citing without full reference Nichols, *Progresses, Processions and Festivities of James I*.

¹⁹ Ashbee, vol. I, p. 4, for 20 June, 1660.

²⁰ For a portrait of him playing in procession, see Edmund A. Bowles, *Musical Ensembles in Festival Books 1500–1800: An Iconographical & Documentary Study*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1989, p. 296.

²¹ Henry George Farmer, *The Great Kettledrums of the Artillery*, pp. 85–96, in his *Handel’s Kettledrums and other Papers on Military Music*, London, Hinrichsen, 2nd edn, 1960, p. 96.

drums. The earliest references to artillery drums in the British army come from Marlborough's campaigns in Flanders around 1690. I have a pair of double drums, which so far as I know are the only surviving pair in Britain, but I'd be reluctant to date them much earlier than 1800. Their diameters are 84.0 and 69.8 cm and their depths 54 and 47 cm. I have used them, with considerable effect, in performances of Handel's music, including a *Messiah* on the tercentenary of the composer's birth. They are headed with appropriately thick skins and, because of their size, sticks of normal weight fail to draw out their full tone. I therefore turned a pair of suitable weight myself.

As for the timpani's musical use, distinct from ceremonial, we have very little evidence much before the end of the seventeenth century, though as always there is a good deal of frustration. There are references to their use in some of the Masques, but they appear in none of the surviving scores. Looking at the texts, they seem to have been stage effects, off-stage warlike noises and so forth. The earliest possible use (and it remains only a possibility) is in Matthew Locke's *Psyche* dating from or shortly before 1675. The librettist, Thomas Shadwell, specified a "Consort of Martial Musick accompanied in the Chorus with Kettle Drums" but unfortunately they don't appear in the score. The modern edition, by Michael Tilmouth, does have parts for them, but these are his reconstructions. Henry Purcell scored timpani in *The Fairy Queen* of 1692 and *The Indian Queen* of around 1695 but not in any of his court odes, though many of them might have been suitable for them, as their bass parts indicate. The question is whether, when basses are steady on tonic and dominant, did timpani play them? These were court odes, formal music for royal birthdays and similar occasions, and court timpanists and trumpeters were available, but did they join in? We simply do not know. There is nothing helpful in the Court Records, nor do any parts for them survive.

I have already mentioned a good deal of evidence for the use of side drums in England. Here, at least, we do have survivors. As I said earlier, we have three. The earliest is Drake's drum, probably, but not provably, from 1595, when Drake bought thirteen drums.²² The second is Dutch, dated at my instigation

²² Cynthia Gaskell Brown, *The Battles' Sound: Drake's Drum and the Drake Flags*, Tiverton, Devon Books, 1996, pp. 10 and 12–20. NB that the photograph of the Oxford drum on p. 15 is mine and not Byrne's as credited there.

by dendro-chronology to 1630–45, captured in one of the Dutch Wars though we don't know which, converted into a longdrum (as the bass drum was then known) in or before the reign of William IV in the early nineteenth century. It has his monogram on it, placed to be read when held horizontally, as a bass drum, across the player's chest. It is now in the Royal Armouries spin-off museum in Leeds, though it was still in the Tower of London when Jimmy Blades and I examined, measured, and photographed it. The third was bought by a Fellow of All Souls College in Oxford when the Oxford Volunteer force was raised during Monmouth's rebellion in 1685. It now resides in the Bursar's office in that College where, again I examined, measured, and photographed it.

Diameters are 55.4 and 54.3 cm for the Dutch and Oxford drums, and 62.0 cm for Drake's (larger than the others, as one would expect if it were 100 years earlier), heights 49.5, 52.0, and 62.0 cm. The wood thicknesses are 3.2, 4.2, and 3.2 mm, and the materials are oak for the Dutch (which is how they could date it, by comparison with panel paintings) and walnut for Drake (which is why dendro-chronology was not available – walnut does not have identifiable growth rings). The Oxford drum is painted all over and the Bursar did not allow me to remove the heads to look at the inside, so I don't know what it was made of. All three have a roughly cut snare bed and none shows any sign of a snare tensioning device. This is typical of English drums, even into the nineteenth-century Georgian period; the snare was simply knotted and caught between the flesh and counter hoops. A very elaborate knot of this type can be seen in Rembrandt's painting of *The Night Watch*. All three have a wide overlap of the shell, 30.5 cm for the Tower, about 15.0 for Oxford, and about 25.5 cm for Drake's. Oxford's overlap is the smallest because the sheet of wood was not long enough and it had to be patched with an extra piece to produce the desired diameter (unless perhaps that patch replaces a segment damaged in action). All three have an ornamental pattern of nails securing the overlap, more elaborately on the two English drums than on the Dutch. A full table of measurements is given in my book on *Timpani & Percussion*; Cynthia Brown gives a brief summary of measurements of Drake's drum and illustrates all three drums.²³

²³ Jeremy Montagu, *Timpani & Percussion*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2002, p. 63, and Brown, p. 1.

We have plenty of information on how the side drum was used in England from the Tudor period onwards, all of it fairly obvious and all of it fairly uniform over the whole of Europe. An excellent small book by Hugh Barty-King, *The Drum*, covers it very comprehensively.²⁴ These uses must be familiar to all of us, camp and battle signals, embassies to opposing forces, accompaniment to the march, and so on, so that there is no need to go into them here. One point is of some interest and that is the national march. It was the custom for each country to have its own traditional march, partly it would seem as a matter of national pride, and partly so that an approaching cloud of dust could be identified from afar, for in those days roads were not tarred, and any marching body was enveloped, and its identity concealed, in the dust raised by its feet. The English and nine other national marches were certainly known by 1587, for according to Maurice Byrne, in July of that year Gawen Smythe, a prospective candidate for a court side drummer, claimed to know them all, listing them one by one.²⁵ There seems to be an error of date here, for he appears in the Court accounts from 12 January 1575/6 (though not until May 1576 was he sworn in as “one of her Majesty’s drum-players” at “12d. a day, during life”), so perhaps 1575 is more likely than 1587 if he was then “a prospective candidate”.²⁶ He is likely to have played for the coronation of James I on 25 July 1603, but he had retired by 9 January at the end of that year, a career of 28 years.²⁷

Despite Gawen Smythe’s expertise in the English March, it is clear that there was a good deal of incompetence and confusion in its performance and that to some extent at least drummers were making it up as they went along, or busking it. In 1632 Charles I, or some influential member of his court, determined to sort things out, and the King issued a warrant which included an official version of the march that had been played to his brother in 1610 and which thenceforth was to be played “exactly and precisely to preserve the same...without any addition or alteration whatsoever”. The trouble is that the notation is basically onomatopoeic,

²⁴ Hugh Barty-King, *The Drum: A Royal Tournament Tribute to the Military Drum*, London, The Royal Tournament, 1988.

²⁵ Maurice Byrne, *The English March and Early Drum Notation*, *Galpin Society Journal* 50, 1997, pp. 43–80, specifically p. 49.

²⁶ Ashbee, vol. VI, pp. 189 and 32.

²⁷ Ashbee, vol. IV, p. 6, for 29 September in accounts for liveries for 1603 and for 9 January 1603/4.

consisting of Pou tou Pou tou Poug, with an occasional R, underlying a stave mostly in equal note values, with a final petang. While Pou and tou were doubtless self-explanatory to the drummers of the day, and R seems very likely to have indicated a roll, these words leave us little the wiser today. There are several other seventeenth-century versions in notations even more arcane, though one of them, found by Byrne in a manuscript in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, does have some explanations. Byrne has produced a modern version, derived by collating all known notations, which is reasonably convincing, but its accuracy must remain conjectural.²⁸

The basic problem, one which we have all encountered, is that drum notation from the earliest times to the present day, is always basically onomatopoeic and is usually taught by ear and by rote. In 1636, John Rudd, one of his Majesty's drummers, petitioned the King "for letter to the lord lieutenants whereby he and his deputies may have the teaching of persons desirous to learn truly to beat the English march", which was granted in June of that year.²⁹ Doubtless he taught it by Pou and tou, just as we teach these things today. I used English place names as examples. I taught my pupils to play flam, not Fulham, the drag as drrum, not Durham, and so on. Any aspiring pop drummer today listens to other drummers and follows their example, just as I did for jazz, swing, and rock in my younger days when I was playing in reviews and pantomimes in the late 1940s and early 1950s. What little notation there was, was of very little help to us, and in fact I got the sack from one show when, being told to play what was exactly on the paper, I did so. My replacement, to the full satisfaction of the employers, played totally differently. He knew that tradition, busking it happily, whereas, having been trained mainly as an orchestral musician, I didn't. Even in our orchestral performances, tradition has a good deal of influence. There are many instances, throughout the repertoire, where we know what to play even when that's not what's on the paper.

So, coming back to where I was, on seventeenth-century side drum military performance, I rather doubt whether anyone of that period would have been wholly convinced by Maurice Byrne's version of the English March. It's a good

²⁸ Byrne, p. 72.

²⁹ Ashbee, vol. VIII, p. 118, for April or May 1636.

deal more staid than any drummer is likely to have played it. But then, maybe I'd be as guilty as any of the drummers who were accused by King Charles of that "negligence and carelessness [that] so altered and changed [it] from the ancient gravitie and majestie thereof."

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