

Notes on the "Crwth" and "Pibcorn"

BY DR. JOSEPH C. BRIDGE, M.A.

THE Harp was not the only stringed instrument used in Wales. There was another called the Crwth; and though it is lightly treated by Welsh writers, who say that it acted as an accompaniment to the Harp, it seems very likely that it was almost as old, and quite as popular.

It is, as far as we know, the oldest stringed instrument played with a bow, and probably came from the East. In Europe it seems to have been limited to England and (especially) to Wales.

We find it mentioned as early as 609, by Venantius Fortunatus, Bishop of Poitiers, who had evidently heard it so often in this country, that he thought it was the National Instrument. He says:—

“Romanusque lyra plaudat tibi, Barbarus harpa,
Græcus achilliaca, *Chrotta* Britanna canat.”

In England it was called a *Crowd*; hence the word *Crowder* or *Crowderer*, signifying a fiddler.

We are indebted for valuable knowledge concerning this instrument to the Hon. Daines Barrington, an enthusiastic amateur musician and antiquary. Being Puisne Judge for Wales, he spent a great deal of time

in the Principality, and at Chester. In 1770 he sent to the Society of Antiquaries in London a Crwth for their inspection, and says in the letter which accompanied it—
 "It is now, perhaps, on the very point of being entirely lost, as there is but one person in the whole Principality who can now play upon it. His name is John Morgan, of Newborough, in the Island of Anglesey, who is now fifty-nine years of age, so that the instrument will probably die with him in a few years."¹

Barrington was not far wrong; but another traveller, Bingley, says he heard it played at Carnarvon in 1801—probably by an inhabitant of Newborough, which lies just on the other side of the Menai Straits.²

This is the last we hear of the ancient instrument, and three specimens are all that are known to exist—one in the South Kensington Museum, one in the Warrington Museum, and one in the possession of Colonel Wynne-Finch, of Pentre Voelas.

The peculiarities of the Crwth were:—

I.—Six strings—four of which were played by the bow, and the other two by the thumb of the left hand.

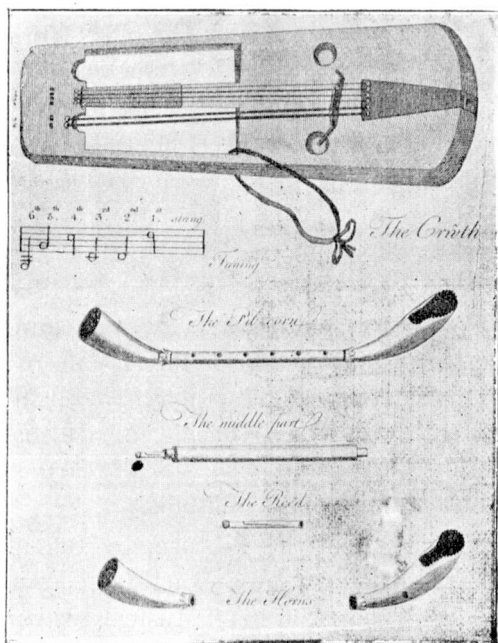
II.—The Bridge was perfectly flat, and the four strings must therefore have been struck together.

(There may, however, have been some knack by which only those tuned in octaves were struck together, especially as Barrington says, the bow "was an awkward one.")

III.—The Bridge did not stand straight, but inclined to the right, and the left foot was much longer than the right, passed through the sound-hole, and rested on the back of the instrument, thus acting the part of a sound-post in a Violin.

¹ *Vide* *Archæologia*, 1779, from which the accompanying illustration is copied.

² *Vide* Bingley, "Musical Biography," 1814.



The strings were tuned:—

According to Barrington—

	For the Thumb.	For the Bow.

According to Bingley—

	Thumb.	Bow.

The dimensions of Colonel Wynne-Finch's Crwth are—length $22\frac{1}{2}$ inches, width at bottom $10\frac{1}{2}$, at top 9 inches, depth 2 inches.

Although the Welsh never adopted the Bag-pipes as a national instrument, they were, nevertheless, partial to a wind instrument called a

Pibell, Pib, or Pibcorn;

or, as it is sometimes spelt

Pibgorn or Piccorn.

This Pibcorn is identical with the old "Hornpipe" or "Cornpipe." The Welsh "Pib" (Gaelic *Piob*; French *Pipeau*, etc.), meaning Pipe and "Corn," Horn.

We are again indebted to the Hon. Daines Barrington for a description of the instrument. He says, "I send herewith also another very rude instrument, which is scarcely used in any other part of North Wales, except the Isle of Anglesey, where it is called the Pibcorn, and where Mr. Wynn, of Penhescedd, gives an annual prize for the best performer. I heard, lately, one of the lads (who had obtained this honour) play several tunes upon this instrument. The tone, considering the materials of which the Pibcorn is composed, is really very tolerable, and resembles an indifferent hautbois."

The representation of the Pibcorn, by Barrington, in the "Archæologia" is almost exactly the same as one described by Carl Engel in his "Musical Instruments in the South Kensington Museum," of 1872.

"It was of horn, about 18 inches long, had six finger-holes in front, and one at the back (like a Recorder). At one end there was a bell of horn, with the outer edge serrated, and at the other a wide mouthpiece of horn which concealed and protected the delicate reed."

It was lent to the Museum by Colonel Wynne-Finch, and was said to be of early 18th Century.

** An admirable "copy" of the Pibcorn shown by Barrington, was made for the lecture by the Rev. J. Louis Bedford, and played by him with excellent effect.

P.S.—Since this lecture was given another Crwth has come to light. It was sold by auction amongst the effects of the late Colonel Heywood, Crosswood, near Welshpool, on Thursday, July 14th, 1898, and fetched £30. Length 20½ inches, breadth 8¼ inches; quite plain, and badly worm-eaten.

J. C. B.