

XIII.—THE DUCAL PIPERS AT ALNWICK CASTLE, NORTHUMBERLAND

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This paper is limited to the Ducal Pipers at Alnwick Castle who held or hold the Patent or Warrant *Piper to the Duchess*, or as it is now known, *Piper to the Duke*.

The House of Northumberland is the only noble family in England to employ a piper as a family retainer, and it is largely due to their influence that the small pipes have survived in this county. Whereas in Scotland the piper was a powerful person and ranked next to the Chief or Laird and sometimes had his own retinue, in England this was not so.

Percy's Reliques of Ancient English Poetry contains the following passage: "As the household of Northumberland had anciently three minstrels attending on them in their Castle in Yorkshire, so they still retain them in their Service in Northumberland. They wear the badge of the family, a silver crescent on the right arm, and are thus distributed, viz. one for the Barony of Prudhoe and two for the Barony of Rothbury. These attend Court Leets and Fairs held for the Lord and pay their annual Suit and Service at Alnwick Castle; their instrument being the ancient Northumbrian Bagpipe."

Walpole in 1752, writing of the Percy family, states: "They are building at Northumberland House, at Sion, at Stanwick and at Alnwick and Warkworth Castles. They live by the etiquette of the Peerage, have Swiss porters, the Countess has her pipers, and in short they will soon have no estate."¹

From the *Life of Allan*² we learn that in 1746 or 1747 the

Countess requested the attendance at Alnwick Castle of James Allan, as she was a great admirer of the Northumbrian small pipes and their ancient music. Soon Allan became one of the musicians at the Castle. He was born in the Gypsy Camp in Rothbury Forest in 1729: Baptised at Rothbury in 1734, therefore, he was about eighteen years of age when he was installed as one of the Castle musicians. Here he remained for about two years, when he requested leave to supply and remedy the defects of his education. About this time the Countess,³ on account of Allan's correct conduct and behaviour at the Castle, presented him with a set of ivory small pipes mounted with silver.

The first piper to be officially appointed as such was one Joseph Turnbull. A native of Newburn, he kept the post office at Alnwick.

In Alnwick Castle hangs a painting of Turnbull which is labelled *Joseph Turnbull. Piper to the Duchess of Northumberland 1756*. As the Dukedom was not created until 1766 the label should read *Piper to the Countess*. It is possible that Turnbull was appointed in 1756 and painted then, with the label added some ten years later, after the creation of the Dukedom. This painting depicts Turnbull playing an ivory set of small pipes with a plain chanter. Among the people he taught to play the pipes was his post boy William Cant, who later kept the Blue Bell Inn, at the Head of the Side, Newcastle.

William Green, a Ducal Piper, in his minutes dated 1856 to Mr. Kell, Secretary of the Ancient Melodies Committee,⁴ states "Joe Turnbull was first Piper at Alnwick Castle—that ever was!" There is no clear cut date when Turnbull ceased to hold the Warrant of Piper.

By 1760 James Allan was back at Alnwick Castle and accompanied the Countess to the Coronation of George III in London,⁵ but was dismissed for thieving shortly after the return to Alnwick. About this time he became a Substitute Piper in the Northumberland Militia.⁶ This regiment always kept a piper or two and Allan's ability caused him to be



1. JOSEPH TURNBULL 1756.



2. JAMES HALL, STAGSHAWBANK FAIR, 1920.

appointed Regimental Piper. A short time after his appointment he deserted.

In 1766 he was back in favour again and wore the Crusade Trophy of the Percys on his right arm, the Saracen's Crescent in silver, upon the creation of the Dukedom.³

Allan played not only the small pipes, but also a Scottish form of the Irish Union pipes. His instrument was included in the Exhibition in the Black Gate held in 1961. James Reid of North Shields mentions Allan as playing both instruments.

In Tate's *History of Alnwick*, we read that in 1769 "The Chamberlain and Four and Twenty ordered that James Allan be and is hereby appointed one of the town's waits and musicians and to have a new livery, that as the rest, which is intended to serve three years, and that if he goes away or misbehaves before the end of that term, that then he shall give up the same to the then Chamberlains."⁷ He was also given the sum of two shillings and sixpence on his day of appointment, for performing his musical skill in the Town Hall before the Chamberlains. Eleven months later, after Michaelmas, the twenty-ninth of September 1770, he was dismissed and ordered to give up his livery, hat and badge for having misbehaved himself. About the same time he was dismissed from Alnwick Castle.

It is of interest that the Town's waits were the watchmen for keeping the watch and ward.⁸ They piped the hour and were thus employed publicly until 1639 when they were superseded by violins or fiddles. In 1632 an account was payable to the waits of nine shillings and ten shillings for the *pypers coat*. After this period the pipers were only employed as ordinary musicians in the town. Their livery for such occasions was a coat of blue broadcloth faced with yellow cloth and trimmed with silver lace, the buttons having on them the town's arms. Attached to the sleeve was the town badge of silver with St. Michael slaying the dragon. The vest was yellow and trimmed like the coat, the breeches were of yellow plush and the hat was adorned with cockade

and silver lace. It is very difficult to imagine Allan with all his rascality, dressed up in such finery.

James then wandered the country and the world, or so his published *Life* would have us to believe, but by 1777 was back in favour at Alnwick, as we know he was then presented with a second set of ivory small pipes by the Duchess.⁹ After this he left the service of the Duchess and roamed the world again, but returning to Durham in 1803, at about the age of 70, he was convicted at the Assizes for horse-stealing. He was spared the gallows and transportation on account of his infirmities and perhaps by reason of his fame; and was confined to the House of Correction at Durham. It was on 13th November 1810 at the age of seventy-seven that this notorious and celebrated piper died. His fame had spread to London, and the Prince Regent, upon his appointment to the Regency, put one of his first signatures on a Free Pardon for Allan, but it arrived two days too late.

Dates and ages given by different writers concerning Allan cannot be made to agree.

In about 1780 William Lamshaw (Senior) was appointed *Piper to the Duchess*; he remained in this post until about 1800. William Lamshaw (Senior) was a native of Morpeth. According to Green writing in 1857, he played the small pipes in the French Wars.⁴

In 1800, at the age of eighteen years, William Lamshaw (Junior), a nephew according to Green⁴ of old William, or a grandson according to *Life of Allan*,¹⁰ became *Piper to the Duchess*. Shortly after his appointment he won a piping match held at Elsdon Fair in which he beat James Allan. This piper held the warrant for the next six years, when in 1806 at the age of twenty-five he died from tuberculosis and was buried in North Shields churchyard. A head stone was erected in the churchyard by a *gentleman amateur*.

In 1806 William Green, who was owner and host of the Seven Stars at Morpeth, was appointed *Piper to the Duchess*. In the French Wars he played the small pipes along with old Lamshaw and was a Pipe Major in the army. He im-

proved the pipes and drones, and in this period the first keys were added to the chanter by Peacock, of Newcastle.

A deputy piper for William Green was his nephew, a boy by the name of Robert Nicholson. Nicholson was about twelve and a half years old when he became his uncle's deputy. He played at the North Shields and Tynemouth Fairs.¹² It was reported that "he performed some of the soft fascinating Northern and Border Airs with a correctness of ear and execution of finger truly wonderful".

In 1849 William Thomas Green, son of the previous Piper Green, was appointed. As a boy at the age of twelve years he played at a banquet during the Coronation of Queen Victoria and again many years later at Cragside, Rothbury, before the future Edward VII.

He was piper to three successive Duchesses. Duchess Eleanor gave him a set of ivory and silver small pipes.

Tom attended the following Fairs and Courts where the Duke of Northumberland was Lord of the Manor: Corbridge, Ovingham, Newburn, Stagshawbank, Warkworth, Harbottle, North Shields, Tynemouth, Bellingham, Elsdon, Wark, Alnwick and Rothbury. He always did the journey on foot, often a return distance of fifty or sixty miles. He never failed an appointment but in the year 1888 during the great snow storm, he left Rothbury for Alnwick and nearly perished on Rimside Moor.¹³

Being a very zealous piper and retainer he occasionally attended functions to which the Duke had been invited but not himself. One occasion is recalled when Algernon, the fourth Duke of Northumberland, was going to Rothbury in 1887, to open a building which is thought to have been the Jubilee Hall. Green was not invited to play but instead a band was hired to play the Ducal party and procession. As soon as the Duke was suitably met and greeted by the local dignitaries and the procession formed up, Green in all his regalia stepped in front of the Duke and commenced to play the procession in their walk. The band, fearing that they would cause offence to the Duke if they struck up and

drowned the piper's music, had to walk in solemn silence.

We have another anecdote of when Green was asked by Dr. Bruce to play at one of his Pipe and Ballad lectures before an assembly of about 1,000 people. Green was to play pieces to illustrate the lecture. His turn came and he began to play, continuing to do so at great length. Dr. Bruce tried to stop him but he would not be stopped; he kept winking at the audience and played on and on. At last he was persuaded to stop. The lecture proceeded and his next turn arrived. On this occasion he declined to stop altogether, so that the remainder of the lecture had to be abandoned.

Due to failing health he resigned in 1892 and died in 1898 at the age of seventy-three years.

It was during Tom Green's time that a second piper was appointed at Alnwick, namely James Reid of North Shields in 1857.⁴ In 1855 the Ancient Melodies Committee was formed to collect the old melodies and songs of Northumberland, under the patronage of their Graces the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland. At the annual meeting of the Ancient Melodies Committee on the 19th November 1857 the Ducal Pipers Green and Reid played a selection of the airs so far collected.

A year later in 1858 the Ancient Melodies Committee proposed to the Duke that in order to preserve the small pipes and promote interest in them he might appoint pipers in each of his Baronies. This suggestion was welcomed in May 1858 and the Committee was asked to submit names of suitable candidates.

Reid, although already referred to in the minutes of the Ancient Melodies Committee as being one of the pipers to their Graces, wrote in a letter to Mr. Kell, dated 24th May 1858, asking about the advertisement which had appeared—so he had heard—in one of the local papers, for the situation of *Piper to the Duke*. It was some five days later, 29th May, that Mr. Hugh Taylor, the secretary at Alnwick Castle, wrote to Dr. Bruce confirming the proposal for the establishment of pipers in the Baronies. It would seem as though

Reid had had inside information as no advertisement has been found in the papers of this period.

It is difficult to determine the actual date Reid became a piper at Alnwick; probably 1857, if one goes by his letter to Mr. Kell. He was a piper until his death in 1874.

It was about this period that the title *Piper to the Duchess* began to be changed to that of *Piper to the Duke*. Tom Green in 1890 wrote of himself as *Piper to the Duke*.

William Thomas Green retired early in 1892. James Hall was appointed after open competition on the 8th October of that year, for a trial period of twelve months, after that his appointment could be reconsidered.

His salary was £30 per annum, plus £1 when attending the Castle and on other unusual occasions. His livery and plaid were provided but he had to provide his own pipes and pay his own travelling expenses.

In a letter from Mr. Wheeler—Commissioner to the Duke—to Hall we learn the exact duties of piper. He sets out a list of various Fairs, Courts etc. held in his Bailiwicks at which the piper attends, and from this I quote.

In 1892:

Stagshawbank—Saturday before Whitsun.

Stagshawbank—Midsummer, 4th July.

Meet at Corbridge—proceed to Stagshawbank.

Rothbury—Whitmonday.

Rothbury—October 2nd and November 1st.

As no fairs are now held the proclamation is only read to the

Whitsun Fair. Meet at 12 o'clock. Discontinued after 1930.

Bellingham Fair on Saturday after 15th September.

Elsdon Fair—26th August.

The above Fairs have ceased to exist yet hitherto the proclamation is read and the boundaries ridden. Meet 12 o'clock.

Ovingham Fair, 26th April and 26th October—long been obsolete but are still proclaimed. No piper required.

North Shields Fair—last Friday in April and Friday before the 11th November. Meet at New Quay 12 o'clock.

Tynemouth Manor Court held in the months of April and October—the days fixed by the Steward—intimation thereof given to the Piper.

Alnwick Fair—last Monday in July.

Warkworth Fair—about third week in November.

Other Courts Leet and Courts Baron in my district are only held at an interval of years.

In every case the Piper has been supplied with refreshments.

In 1895, owing to the decline of droving of cattle and sheep through the county and the taking of them direct by train or boat, the following Fairs were discontinued: Rothbury, Harbottle, Elsdon, North Shields, thus leaving only the Fairs at Stagshawbank, Bellingham, Alnwick, Warkworth, Shrove Tuesday (Alnwick) and the Tynemouth Manor Courts. These were held until about 1930, when the Duke having died on the 23rd August, the Elsdon Riding, Fair and Manor Court were cancelled.

In 1930 Manor Courts were held at Corbridge, Prudhoe, Redesdale and Wark, with Fairs at Bellingham and Ovingham.

At Alnwick on the first Monday in July 1930, the Riding of the bounds was held; it was to be held again ten years later, but this did not take place owing to the Second World War.

The *Newcastle Journal* on the 4th October 1910 reports that at Rothbury Fair Riding and also at the Courts Leet and Baron a Mr. Grey of Harehope deputised for James Hall.

James Hall was piper to three successive Dukes of Northumberland, and also played before the Royal Family on their various visits. He retired in 1931.

James Byrnes became piper in that year, and a newspaper cutting from the *Alnwick Gazette* recalls his appearance as a "picturesque figure in the Percy Livery of full length Grey Coat; Silver Buttons and Glengarry". At this time the various Courts etc. listed above were discontinued, the public appearances of the piper being limited to the Shrove Tuesday Football Game.

We now come to the present holder of the Warrant—Jack Armstrong—appointed in November 1949. His only public duty as Piper is to play at the Shrove Tuesday Football Game.

He also plays for any private events at Alnwick, such as Royal Visits, Christenings and Banquets.

In 1958, Thomas Matthews deputised for Jack Armstrong, who was in hospital, at the Shrove Tuesday event. The match was cancelled in 1962 as there had been a fall of snow to a depth of one foot.

The Northumbrian small pipes were not known outside the county at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as is shown in a letter to Mr. Kell in 1857.⁴ William Green writes that on a visit to Edinburgh in 1810 he was asked by Niel Gow, who was a famous Scottish Piper and Fiddler, what instrument he was playing. But now through the medium of radio, television and films the small pipes are known and played throughout the whole world. For this we have to thank the ancient Lords Percy and their descendants for the interest they have displayed, without which the Northumbrian small pipes might not have survived.

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REFERENCES

1. Tate, *History of Alnwick*, Vol. I, p. 359.
2. *Life of Allan*, 1818, pp. 12 and 13.
3. *Life of Allan*, 1818, p. 21.
4. Letters to Ancient Melodies Committee.
5. *Life of Allan*, 1818, p. 315.

6. Extracts from Services of the 27th Northumberland Light Infantry Militia.
(3rd Battalion Northumberland Fusiliers.)
7. Tate, *History of Alnwick*, Vol. I, pp. 427/8.
8. Tate, *History of Alnwick*, Vol. I, p. 424.
9. *Life of Allan*, 1828, p. 471.
10. *Life of Allan*, 1818, p. 643.
11. *Life of Allan*, 1828, p. 470.
12. *Newcastle Courant*, 4.5.1811.
13. D. D. Dixon, *Upper Coquetdale*, p. 382.

