

TWO MEDIEVAL WHISTLES FROM GLOUCESTER

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Fig 1. Southgate Street Whistle (Site 3/89, Context 498, Find 5561), Scale 3:4



Fig 2. Park Street Whistle (Site 2/84, Context 83, Finds 23, 35 & 40), Scale 3:4

The Southgate Street Whistle

In 1989 excavations were carried out on the west side of Southgate Street between Kimbrose Way and the entrance to Gloucester Docks (Atkin 1990 and 1991). This work revealed evidence of Roman, Saxon and medieval buildings on the street frontage, as well as burials from the former church of St Owen. Among the many objects found during the excavation was a medieval whistle made of bird bone.

The whistle was made using the hollow shaft from the ulna of a goose, but is missing the block or fipple. On the outer surface it has a sub-oval opening with a ledge forming the voicing lip some 11mm from the top of the shaft. At the opposite end are three roughly circular finger holes approximately 6mm in diameter and 12mm apart. The whistle measures 139mm in length with an average width of 9mm. Following the example of previous work (Megaw 1975) a new fipple was made using Plasticine. It was decided not to test the possible extended range of the whistle by over blowing, as this could have put a strain on the instrument and caused irreparable damage. The sequence of notes below was produced while successively opening each of the three fingerholes-

e", f#" , a" , c#" "

Following the notational system where Middle C = c' and a' = 440 Hertz (cycles per second).

The Park Street Whistle

In 1984 excavations were carried out at 35-41 Park Street, Gloucester by the Western Archaeological Trust (Isserlin 1985). This work revealed evidence of a substantial 3rd century Roman building and later 17th century timber-framed buildings with stone footings. Of the finds made during the excavation were three fragments of a medieval whistle made of animal bone.

The whistle was made using the hollowed out shaft from the tibia of a dog, but is again missing the block or fipple. On the outer surface it has a sub-oval opening with a ledge forming the voicing lip 10mm from the top of the shaft. At the opposite end are three circular finger holes approximately 4mm in diameter and 16mm to 22mm apart. The whistle measures 195mm in length with an average width of 12mm. Unfortunately, due to the fragmentary nature of the whistle, it was not possible to test all the notes it would have produced. However, the distance from the fipple to end of the tube would have been 185mm, putting the whistle approximately in the key of a".

Discussion

Similar medieval whistles with three finger holes have been found in Thetford (Megaw 1960), Canterbury (Megaw 1969) and Southampton (Megaw 1975). These instruments may represent early examples of a three holed whistle known as the

Tabor Pipe. The pipe was designed to be played with one hand, normally the left, leaving the right hand free to play a tabor (drum). In Gloucester Cathedral two pieces of 14th century sculpture depict angels playing the pipe and tabor. The first is a slightly damaged boss in the roof of the choir, above the high altar. The second (see below) is in better condition and is located on the south wall of the choir near the high altar.

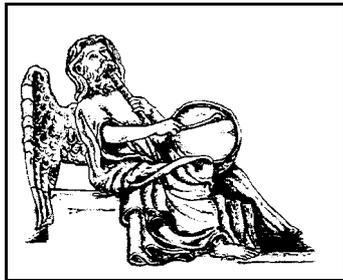


Fig 3. Sculpture from Gloucester Cathedral

The pipe and tabor (or Wit and Dub) was long used in England to accompany Morris Dancing. In 1600 William Kemp the famous Shakespearean actor published an account of how he danced from London to Norwich accompanied by his taborer Thomas Slye, who is shown on the title page (below) with a long tabor pipe.

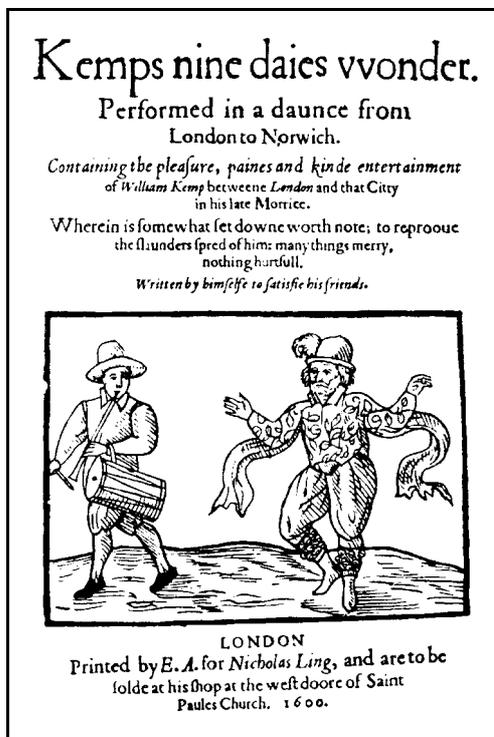


Fig 4. Kemp's Nine Days Wonder (1600)

A Morris Dancing pipe was donated to Gloucester Folk Museum in 1958 by Miss Witts of the Manor, Upper Slaughter. It is a 32cm long pipe turned and bored from a single piece of mahogany, with six finger holes on the front. Later it was converted into a tabor pipe by blocking the top four finger holes (the lowest of these has now lost its blocking), and by adding a thumb hole at the back. A parchment label tied to the pipe states that it belonged to a family in Chipping Camden, and was used by the Morris Dancers during the reign of George II (1727-1760). If this information is correct, then the pipe is probably the oldest surviving instrument known to have been used for Morris Dancing.

With three finger holes the tabor pipe can produce only four fundamental (lowest) tones, however, by progressively over-blowing the pitch can be raised through the harmonic series. It can therefore play a full scale through more than one and a half octaves, depending on the skill of the player. Most modern instruments have two finger holes on the front, and one thumb hole on the back. Other European examples are the Galoubet in the south of France (Provence), and the Txistu in the Basque region of Spain.

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Illustrations

Figures 1, 2 and 3 drawn by Wayne Laughlin.