

## Keepinge the Night Watches

JAMES MERRYWEATHER

### Abstract

An introduction to the town waits, discovering an unlikely nocturnal custom, and revealing the meaning of some obscure words in a favourite Christmas carol.

How would you like it if, at three or four in the morning, a small group of musicians with wind instruments came along your street playing loud music? Have we misunderstood the town records or did the waits really *keepe the night watches* in this noisy manner, playing as they went their rounds? It seems they did.

The waits<sup>1</sup> (or *waites*, *waytes*, *wates*, *waightes*, *town musicke*, *the music*, etc.) were professional musicians who provided entertainment in every town and city of note in Britain, indeed throughout Europe, from early medieval times right up to the year before Queen Victoria began her reign. They were ordinary tradesmen, freemen of their home towns, who were council officers appointed to work alongside the bellmen, bailiffs, constables and tipstaffs, all of whom were concerned with law, order and public safety.

This is where the waits' night watches come in, for as well as providing the music at dinners, dances, processions and the public announcement of news, they rose early in the morning to patrol the streets, perhaps not so much as a defensive measure, but more on the lookout for any danger, to assure the sleeping population that all was well. We are familiar enough with the cry of the old night watchman with his bell: "Three o'clock, and all's well." If a town could afford them, waits replaced the watchman and performed his duties. Their cry is found in several sources, in York: "Past three, fair frosty morn. Good morrow, my masters all."

Surely that too is familiar? Of course, the Christmas carol, *Past three o'clock and a cold frosty morning. Good morrow, masters all*. George Ratcliffe Woodward constructed this carol out of several fragments for publication in 1924. Nearly a hundred years earlier the Victorian tune collector William Chappell had made his own version, taking for his tune a dance called *The Waits* from the 1657 edition of John Playford's *The Dancing Master*. He ingeniously fitted the London waits' night watch call, which could still be remembered at the time, to the refrain and added his own verses. Woodward created his own texts for the verses and composed harmonies in the seventeenth century style. The juxtaposition of the old waits' cry and the Christmas story seems totally incongruous unless one remembers that the waits' night watch season lasted throughout the Christmas period.

Exeter, 1590: "They shall yerely playe in the wynter from Alhallowe tyde vntil Candlemas on everye mornynge from three of the Clock vntill they have gone through the Whole Citie vpon everye Daye of the weeke except Sondayes hollydayes and ffrydayes."

The waits could and did play soft music in private on recorder, lute and viol, but their instruments of office were loud wind instruments. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they played *shawms* and *saggbuts*, respectively the precursors of the oboe family and trombones. Instrument design and taste in music changed, so around 1600 they upgraded to *cornetts* and *saggbuts* with the bass line played on the ancestor of the bassoon, the *double curtal*. The cornett, now extinct, was a wooden soprano instrument, sounded with a cup mouthpiece but, unlike modern members of the brass family, it had finger holes. In a few towns, the waits also had the curvaceous *lysarden* or *lisserdine*, which was the unwieldy tenor member of the cornett family of instruments. The eighteenth century again saw progress and change, and the newfangled oboes and bassoons, popular in France, became the standard.

The picture is clearly illustrated in verses written by a Mr Durden around 1700, words to a hornpipe entitled *York Waits*:

In a Winters night, by Moon or Lanthorn light,  
Through Hail, Rain, Frost or Snow, Their rounds the Musick go.  
Clad each in frize or blanket, for either heav'ns be thanked,  
Lin'd with wine a quart, or ale a double tankard.  
Burglars scudd away, and bar guests dare not stay.

Candles four in the pound, lead up the jolly round.  
Whilst cornett shrill i' th' middle marches, and merry fiddle;  
Curtal with deep hum hum, cries we come, we come, we come,  
And theorbe loudly answers, thrum, thrum, thrum, thrum.  
But their fingers frost nipt, so many notes are o'er slipt . . .  
PAST THREE FAIR FROSTY MORN,  
GOOD MORROW MY MASTERS ALL!

There is nothing anywhere in the records to suggest that the waits were instructed to play softly at night; indeed the 1558 will of York wait William Hill contains the evidence for the exact opposite: "Item. I give to Robert Hustwaite my red jacket and the loude treble pipe with the blaicke end that the said Robert hathe plaide the morn watches with."

We are forced to consider that customs and attitudes in those far off times must have been very different from today's. With no police force or fire brigade it would have been impossible to rest entirely at one's ease through the night. We must conclude that the people were accustomed to a burst of loud music in the night. Perhaps, with their loud instruments, the waits would play at a limited number of suitable street corners so that they could be heard throughout largish sectors of a town, a very present yet distant sound to most peoples' ears, if to the disturbance of those citizens under whose bedroom window they chose to play. Far from the outrage we might express today, their attitude would have been one of trust and comfort as they were reassured that someone – playing loud music – was out in the cold, dark streets, keeping watch on their behalf. Fire was the major hazard and it wiped out a large part of central London in 1666. Were the Westminster waits doing their rounds at the time and did they raise the alarm, albeit unsuccessfully?

The old waits died out in the early 1800s, but a small number of enthusiasts have reinstated them. Several towns now boast their own waits: Canterbury, Colchester, Doncaster, King's Lynn, Leeds, Norwich and Oxford, but the first successfully to recreate a band of waits and perform their archaic duties were The York Waits. Of course, they are modern musicians so, unlike their ancestors, they give concerts, and they have performed all over Europe for twenty eight years. However, in order to experiment with their own history and for sheer pleasure, they re-enact the waits duties whenever they can. They dare not play loudly in the dead of night, but they have done most other things it is recorded the old waits did, including the occasional drunken misdemeanour! They have played soberly for visiting Royalty and, in the manner and costume of their predecessors, led many processions in their home city for the Lord Mayors of York, Guilds of Freeman, and the Mystery Play pageant wagons.

They provide period music annually at the Venison Feast of the ancient company of The Merchant Adventurers in their Guildhall, and on several 1st Augusts, have led the Yorkshire Society and Mayors of Yorkshire in Yorkshire Day processions through towns and cities about the region. In the summer of 2000, they proudly played on a *scaffield* high on Micklegate Bar, York's grand entrance gateway, to welcome their monarch. This is precisely what the original waits did on 16th April 1603 for King James I and VI when he visited York on his way from Edinburgh to London for his coronation.

Every 21st December, The York Waits accompany the Standard Bearer, the City Guard, Criers, and the Sheriff of York around the city for the proclamation of the *Yoole-girthol*:

“We command that the peace of our lady the Queene be well kepted and mayntayned by night and by day. Also that all manner of whores, thieves, dice-players, and all other unthrifty folk be welcome to the towne, whether they come late or early, at the reverence of the high feast of Yoole, till the twelve dayes be passed. God save the Queene!”

The York Waits lead the colourful procession, playing their loud instruments – their shawms, saggbuts and drums – and they play *verye loudlie*, to the delight of the citizens and the astonished bewilderment of passing tourists.

#### **Note**

For further information about waits past and present please visit The Waits Website: [www.waits.org.uk](http://www.waits.org.uk)