



LEICESTER TOWNE WAYTES

by Jonathan E. O. Wilshire

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Introduction

"Three o'clock. Frosty morning." The hourly nocturnal time-check and occasional weather report or "all's well", provided by the perambulating watchmen, was a reassuring feature of life in towns and the larger country houses, which, for many centuries, enabled the inhabitants to "sleep secure". Watchmen continued their duties until the introduction of nineteenth-century police, but long before this, waits enjoyed a separate existence.¹

The frequency, from the thirteenth century onwards, of the surnames, *Wait(e)*, *Wakeman*, and their variants, including the Norman-French derivative, *Gait(e)*, provides ample evidence of a virile "profession". Indeed, many capable musicians and composers rose from the ranks of the waits. John Ravenscroft, the early seventeenth century composer, was a wait of Tower Hamlets; Thomas Farmer, Mus.Bac., became a London wait; Ferdinando (wait of Lincoln) and the more famous Orlando were sons of William Gibbons (1540-1595), who was admitted a wait of Cambridge in 1567. Charles Avison (c. 1709-1770), a well-known composer and instrumentalist of his day and the "founder" of musical criticism, was the son of a wait of Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

This history of the Leicester waits, through four and a half centuries, is largely, but not exclusively, based on references in W. Kelly's *Notices of the Drama* (1865), Mrs. A. Fielding Johnson's *Glimpses of Ancient Leicester* (revised edition, 1906), and the published volumes of the Leicester Borough Records. Manuscript sources in Leicester City Museum Archives Department have also been consulted.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The photographs of the Town Waits (from the painting by H. R. Steer, R.I.) and the Wait's Badge (c. 1685) are reproduced by permission of Leicester City Museums.

¹ In Leicester two Bellmen were appointed in 1706 "to go nightly through the borough from ten of the clock at night till six of the clock in the morning". The office was not abolished until 1836.



The Waits' badge of office (c. 1685).

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The word "wait" derives from the Anglo-Saxon *wacian*,¹ meaning watch or guard, and many corporate towns possessed waits at an early date, York (1272) and Norwich (1288) being among the first recorded. A musical tradition quickly grew up and three waits were included in the Royal band of Edward III (1327-77). The Norwich waits, for several centuries, were probably the most accomplished in England, as is evidenced by their accompanying Edward IV to France in 1475 and Drake a century later in his expedition against Lisbon. It was one of their functions on such trips to provide meal-time music.

Leicester was one of several Midland towns to have long-established waits: Chesterfield, Coventry, Derby, Grantham, Lincoln, Newark, Northampton, Nottingham, Stamford and Worksop were others within a reasonable radius, thus illustrating that Waits held a valued place in medieval town-life.

The first mention of a musician in Leicester occurs in 1314, when Hugh the Trumpeter was admitted a Freeman of the town, upon payment of a gold sovereign as fine. His "official" duties, if any, are not known, but it seems reasonably certain he was put to some use by the Corporation, though he is unlikely to have been a wait as such. Hugh and other musicians were probably in the employ of the Dukes of Lancaster as minstrels at Leicester Castle, where it is thought that a harp was also in use by 1308. The name of a harper, Henry Howman, is not found in Leicester until 1481, but by this time Leicester Castle was no longer a ducal residence.

A payment of 6s. 8d. provides the earliest reference to waits in Leicester in 1499 and Thomas Wylkyns, Wayte, is mentioned the same year. It is known that the waits' duties originally comprised "watching" in the town between Ascension Eve and Michaelmas in accordance with an old tradition reinforced by the Statute of Westminster. On Ascension Eve each year they were charged by the mayor and sworn in by the Constable.² After becoming primarily "musical" waits, it is uncertain

¹ Some cite, as a preferable origin, old High German *Wahta* or the German *Wacht*.

² In Norwich in 1440 a band of three Waits was required to watch from the Feast of All Saints (1 November) to the Feast of the Purification (2 February); in some other towns the watch was from Michaelmas to Shrove Tuesday.

whether they continued with their watching duties; perhaps, the two functions became merged, the musical side ultimately ousting the watching aspect. In time, they were to enjoy the dignity of monopoly, attending the mayor on all important civic occasions, and playing in the town for the pleasure of the inhabitants, each morning and night, winter and summer. In 1499, the body of Councillors, known as the Forty-Eight, were each taxed 2*d.* a quarter for the Waits' wages. This produced 32*s.* in a full year.

Documentary evidence suggests that Nottingham Waits, first referred to in 1464, were older-established than those at Leicester. It is intriguing to note that in 1500, the Leicester Waits received 6*s.* 8*d.* from the Nottingham Chamberlains for performing before the mayor of that town on the Feast of Pentecost. There is no mention of a return visit and it is tempting to suggest that the rival town wanted first-hand knowledge of the ability of Leicester's Waits, particularly in view of the evidence that they may only just have been established or re-constituted.

John Clement, on 13 January 1504, handed over four silver collars, presumably for three waits and an apprentice, to the mayor, William Frisley. Two sureties were required for the safe return of each collar, in the event of the death or dismissal of the wait. These badges or chains of office, known as scutcheons, engraved with the town's cinquefoil crest, were required to total 23 *oz.* Troy Weight and consequently had often to be repaired. There are frequent payments in the Borough accounts to goldsmiths' work on them. For example, Thomas Goldsmith was paid 3*s.* 4*d.* in 1541 and 1*s.* 8*d.* in 1555 for mending the collars. This latter amount represented the cost of an ounce of silver. There are also regular payments, usually to William Gyllott, for the Waits' liveries; three such amounts were 16*s.* in 1524, 24*s.* in 1541 and 36*s.* 6*d.* in 1548.¹ Twenty-five years later, when new Waits were appointed, the maximum price to be paid for the Waits' gowns was fixed at 7*s.* a yard. About this time, James Ellys appears to have supplied new liveries to the Waits every other year at a cost which sometimes reached 55*s.* In 1562 the names of the Waits are given as Messrs. Edwards, Harby and Cooke. A full description of the Waits' clothes, "cotes of orringe color and the sincke file (i.e. the cinquefoil badge) on there sleeves" occurs in 1577 and in 1583 the boys' gowns had "green ribbons or laces about the neck".

In 1581, a fresh attempt was made to define the Waits' monopoly and to pay them fixed wages instead of gratuities. The Twenty-Four (Aldermen) and the Forty-Eight (Councillors) were each required to pay one shilling and sixpence per quarter respectively, and the other inhabitants "of reasonable ability" were to be taxed at the mayor's discretion. At a Common Hall the following year, it was ordered that "noe strangers,

¹ St. Martin's Churchwardens' Accounts for 1547-8 contain a payment of 12*d.* to "Richard Birkett the Wayte".

being mewzicians or Waytes, or other persons whatsoever being either muzicians or players, although they doe or shall dwell within the towne of Leicester and bee not of the companye of the Towne Waytes shall be suffered to playe within the aforesaid towne of Leicester att anye tyme or tymes in the year, att or in a man's housse, dore, wyndowe, or att anye weddings or bryde howses (the time of the general assyses within the towne of Leicester only excepted, and then to playe but only to strangers). Provided always that the said towne Waytes, shall keepe the towne, and doe there dutye in playinge aboute the towne boethe eveninge and morninge contynuallye and orderlye at reasonable and season(able) tymes". The concession that musicians not of the Town Waits could play "*only to strangers*" during the Assizes would appear impracticable to effect. The Waits' appearances at outside engagements were limited to fairs and weddings and then only by licence of the mayor. Their attendance upon the mayor and corporation on the great civic days each year was of course still required.

"Mr. Gryffyn's Servantes" were appointed Town Waits on 19 July 1583 and there were five in the company by 1595. Three years later, 8½ yards of tawny broad cloth for the Waits' and Beadle's coats cost £5 15s. from Thomas Chettell, woollen draper. Disputes between the members of this body of Waits reached a head in 1601, after difficulties had arisen between George Rid(g)ley and Thomas Poyner over which of the Waits' sons was to play the bass viol. Poyner petitioned the mayor, stating that if Ridgley would sign the memorial he had drawn up, he would overlook the past insults to which he had been subjected. Harmony in their relations was short-lived and on 21 September 1602 "the Waits, because they cannot agree together are therefore now dismissed from being the town's Waits from henceforth". That was not quite the end of the matter. On 28 January 1603, George Ridgley and his company, five in the whole, were "from henceforth, upon his good behaviour, admitted the town Waits having a lawful and sufficient company, skilful in the knowledge and art of music". The Twenty-Four and Forty-Eight were each to be taxed quarterly at 6d. and 3d. respectively and other inhabitants of the town at discretion. Thomas Poyner obviously did not take kindly to the re-appointment of his past colleague; two years later, there is a complaint by Ridgley that Thomas Poyner and his company "not only daylie intrude themselves to play before strangers at Common Innes but also at weddings". The outcome is unrecorded.

Payments for the Waits' coats, ribbons for the boys to hang their scutcheons on and repairs to the collars and chains continue. In successive years, 1617-8, 7½ yards and 6¾ yards of "Tawney Cloth" cost £3 17s. and £3 16s. respectively. In 1621, two yards of ribbon for the Waits'

boys cost 1s. 2d. There were further complaints of negligent service in 1627 when Thomas Pollard was leader of the Waits.¹

By 1642, the Waits' liveries were of bastard scarlet, trimmed with gold or silver; 13 yards at 11s. a yard totalled £7 3s. The Civil War disturbances in Leicester in 1645 caused suspension of the Waits' services and they were not officially re-appointed until 4 July 1663 when they comprised four men and a boy. They were to have new cloaks (@ 11s. a yard) every other year and collective wages of 4 nobles (26s. 8d.) per quarter. In 1668 the "Scarlet" days are defined; these were the civic occasions, known as the "usual and accustomed days", when those of the Twenty-Four, who had been mayors, were required to wear their Scarlet gowns. The Waits would have taken part in any processions on these days, which were enumerated as May day and Michaelmas day when they were required "to walke the faire", Christmas Day, Easter Day, Easter Monday, Whit Sunday and Monday, 29 May, St. Matthew's Day, and the Monday after Martinmas.

In 1670, Robert Rowe's Company received £1 10s. at Michaelmas and £2 10s. on "feast day", but the Waits were again dismissed the following year and the Corporation had to pay £4 to the Northampton Waits for attendance on Easter Monday and May Day. Thomas Bonner's Company was later appointed Waits. In 1674 it was reiterated that nothing was to be paid for the Waits attendance at fairs or other public meetings. Three years later cloth, lace and trimming for the Waits' liveries cost £10 17s. 8d., and the next year the Waits' collective salary was £5. In 1683, out of a total of £6 13s. 4d. (20 nobles), John Alsop had £2 3s. 4d., and the three others, Robert Scarborough, Henry² and Thomas³ Follentine £1 10s. each. These last two were ancestors of the Valentines, several of them Waits, who were to play an important part in Leicester's music, a century and more later. William Gardiner recalls in Volume I of his autobiography, *Music and Friends*, that five members of the Valentine family⁴ were each paid 2s. 6d. a night during

¹ In 1612, Edmund Pollard, musician, second son of Thomas Pollard, husbandman, was made a Freeman of Leicester, so perhaps this Wait was the elder son. The Waits' wages were to be withheld and their scutcheons surrendered. Difficulties were evidently overcome for within a week after this order (25 April) the Waits received 6s. 8d. for their performance on May Day.

² The organist of St. Martin's church in 1701 was a Henry Valentine.

³ Thomas Valentine, who died in 1685, lived on the west side of Gallowtree Gate, near the Corn Wall (site of Marshall and Snelgrove). His Probate Inventory mentions an item of £16 10s. for an organ and three tables "in the new chamber". There is a separate amount of £5 for "small musicall instruments". The Probate Inventory (1721) of another Thomas Valentine mentions "one violling, one bass viol, one curtill [a bassoon] 10s."

⁴ The Valentines had organised an earlier series of Subscription Concerts in 1762.

Leicester's series of Subscription Concerts in 1785, when the orchestra comprised only 14 players. John, Henry, and Robert junior with Misses Ann and Fanny were the five Valentine professionals involved.

Despite constant reminders that the Waits were to receive no "perks", they were given in 1688, "on the mayor's order", 10s. for each appearance at three feasts held at the *Angel* or the Guildhall and at the celebrations for the Coronation of William and Mary. Disharmony again caused the Waits to be discharged in 1696 and their scutcheons and cloaks surrendered. A new body, chosen on 15 January 1697, was reminded that they were to have "no allowance or gratuity from this day for playing any Feast over and above their Sallarys". There was a further threat of dismissal "for their neglect of Duty" on 20 September that same year. There are fewer references to the Waits during the eighteenth century. Their collective salary remained at £6 13s. 4d., but by 1780 the Waits were receiving 15s. each a quarter, and from this time until 1813 they normally numbered three and occasionally four.

A committee was appointed on 31 January 1816, "to take into consideration the state of the town Waits and to report their opinion and recommendations thereon", but it was three years later, 17 February 1819, before their suggestions that the number of Waits be increased from four to six from Michaelmas 1816, at an increased salary of £5 each per annum, were considered. They were also to have "Gowns according to ancient usage". Wind instruments were to be substituted for the violins that had been surprisingly adhered to in the past. Most Waits' bodies are known to have had wind instruments in the sixteenth century; for example, in Norwich the instruments in use, in addition to violin, were shawm, cornett, hautboy, recorder and sackbut. Leicester's Waits were occasionally augmented by the trumpeters of some visiting nobleman, or by drummers, as on 29 May 1666.¹

On 26 August 1819, the Leicester Waits petitioned successfully for their new instruments, and an item of £35 9s. for wind instruments, duly marked as Corporation property, from Samuel Deacon², appears in the Corporation accounts. An early opportunity to display their new instruments occurred on 2 February 1820, when the Town Waits preceded a procession comprising the High Sheriff, Javelin Men, Sheriff's Officers, the Mayor and Corporation on the death of George III. In 1826, the Waits were only allowed new cloaks every sixth year instead of every three. Between 1831 and 1834, a new "Clarionet" was purchased for £3 3s. and £4 11s. was paid for other instruments.

As was the case with many other Corporations, the 1836 Reform Act caused the disbandment of the Waits, along with such officers as the macebearer and molecatcher. In Nottingham, the Waits appealed

¹ Anniversary of the Restoration of the monarchy (i.e. "Oak Apple" or "Royal Oak" day).

² Musical instrument dealer, Gallowtree Gate, Leicester.

against dismissal, but they were deemed to hold office at pleasure, though they were allowed £2 compensation and retention of their cloaks but not their badges.

In Leicester, the Waits' effects, comprising three silver badges¹, two horns, two clarinets, four piccolos and a bassoon, were among the Town property auctioned. Subsequently, the Waits were revived each year in the immediate pre-Christmas weeks, when they epitomised the Victorian concept of lantern-holding waits with their instruments and carol-books perambulating the snow-strewn streets, in their colourful cloaks. Sixteen permits survive in Leicester Museum covering the period 1842-1876. These show that on 9 or 10 November each year application was made by the Waits for permission from the Mayor "to play round the town". In 1842, the names of the waits are given as Thos. Watts, Chas. Newcombe, John Ralphs, Samuel Smith, Thos. Taylor and Robt. Ralphs. By 1847, the Company comprised John Ralphs, Robert Ralphs, Thomas Preston, William Sarson and Solomon Foister. By 1855, Samuel Smith appears again as the sixth member of the band, whose personnel then appears to have remained the same till 1870. Samuel Smith was leader of the Waits in 1872 and Thomas Preston in 1876. By 1925, the Waits' appearances were restricted to the pre-Christmas fortnight. The number of Waits dwindled to three playing old brass instruments and the tradition ceased when the Waits disbanded in the early 1950s, the Leicester repertoire then being confined to little more than "Silent Night".

Nothing is known of the actual music played by the Leicester Waits in the earlier centuries. Most Waits had their own signature-tune, but no "Leicester Waits" music has yet been discovered written down. Some Waits had their own carols for different seasons (for example, a special May Day composition) but a blank has so far been drawn for Leicester. It seems certain, though, that the universally popular "Greensleeves" would have been a regular item, both at New Year and other times.

Waits are too often and quite wrongly associated only with Christmas time. This short history of the many interesting aspects of Leicester's Waits has, it is hoped, rekindled a small age-old facet of Corporation life, now forgotten, but which for centuries, provided daily enjoyment to townspeople through rain or shine.

¹ William Derbyshire, silversmith, of Gallowtree Gate, Leicester, paid £5 14s. for these, including the silver chains. He later presented one of the badges to the Museum.

