

IV.

NOTICE OF A MAHOGANY PITCHPIPE FORMERLY USED IN CULTS PARISH CHURCH, FIFE. BY GEORGE LEITCH, M.A., CULTS SCHOOLHOUSE, LADYBANK.

This quaint instrument of music is an important relic of Scottish Church psalmody. It is of considerable age, and until recently was the property of a Pitlessie octogenarian, Mr James Speed, who bought it about the year 1845, at the sale of the goods and chattels of the Parish Church precentor. At that time there was a keen competition amongst the various Fife leaders of psalmody for the possession of what even then was considered an interesting memento of the past.

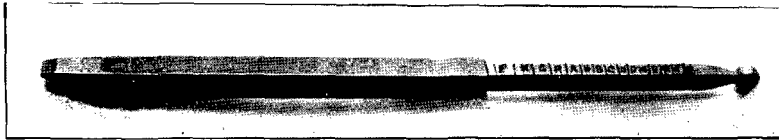


Fig. 1. Mahogany Pitchpipe formerly used in Cults Parish Church, Fife.

The instrument was shown to several nonagenarians, and one—Mr William Arthur of Monimail—pronounced it to be an old-fashioned pitchpipe, used at Cults, over a hundred years ago, to regulate the pitch or leading tone of the tune.

“In the Auld Kirk, in my younger days,” said Mr Arthur, “there was neither choir nor organ. The musical service then was not a kind of performance or concert. On William Durie—the old precentor—sounding the keynote from his whistle, immediately all the people joined in, and, keeping time to the evolutions of the pitchpipe, they sang together with great sound and evident pleasure.”

The sterner spirits, however, regarded the use of this instrument in the house of God with great abhorrence. Sir Walter Scott tells that, on his first interview with “Old Mortality,” he found that the spirit of the sturdy Covenanter had been sorely vexed by hearing in a certain

kirk the psalmody directed by a pitchpipe, which to him was the abomination of abominations.

The pitchpipe now presented to the Museum (fig. 1) is made of mahogany, and, considering its age, is in excellent preservation. It consists of a long stopped diapason pipe, fitted with a movable graduated stopper, adjustable to any note of the scale. By pushing the stopper inwards, or pulling it outwards, an adept could play a tune: only, the tone being somewhat strident and coercive, it is better adapted as a prelude to the singing of the Psalms in the house of God. Directly attacking the nervous system, the shrill notes of the pitchpipe roused the sleepers when everything else had failed, and at the same time indicated the keynote to the congregation.

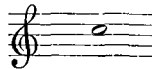
The dimensions of the pitchpipe are as follows:—

Length of pipe	13 $\frac{3}{8}$	inches.
Length of stopper	11 $\frac{3}{8}$	„
Length extended	21 $\frac{5}{8}$	„
Pipe	$\frac{7}{8}$	„ square.
Length of scale	5 $\frac{5}{8}$	„

on which the following notes are marked:—

F	#	G	#	A	#	B	C	#	D	#	E	F	#	G
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Mr Herbert Diggle, Cupar, a member of the Pianoforte Tuners' Association, tested the pitch of this unique instrument, and found that the note C



corresponded with the Society of Arts standard pitch, the vibrations of which are 530 per second. Mr Diggle regards the pitchpipe as a great curiosity, and said he had never before seen such an old-fashioned device.

Alongside the older and more formidable-looking instrument may be placed a specimen of Eardley's patent chromatic pitchpipe, which consists of a small reed pipe of the free species in which the length of the

vibrating portion of metal is controlled by a rotating spiral. As may be seen, it is less bulky than the more ancient contrivance, but as regards pitch the two coincide, both corresponding with the Society of Arts standard pitch.

In Cooper's novel, *The Last of the Mohicans*, the ancient pitchpipe plays a conspicuous part. David Gamut, a half-witted musician, is introduced, treasuring beneath the flap of an enormous pocket an unknown engine, which turns out to be the beloved pitchpipe of the master of song. Throughout the tale, David repeatedly essays the virtues of his much-prized instrument. Performing the indispensable preliminaries, the singer produces from it a high, shrill sound, followed by its lower octave from his own voice. Then, without circumlocution or apology, he sings a psalm in such full and melodious tones that the surrounding savages are astounded by the upliftings of his mighty voice. David accompanies the delivery of the skilful rhymes by the regular rise and fall of his right hand, his fingers dwelling at the descent on the leaves of his psalm-book; and on the ascent there ensues such a flourish of the arms, that none but the initiated could ever hope to imitate. David believed that his immunity from death at the massacre of William Henry was due to the saving virtues of his pitchpipe and power of song. Both of these he exerted to the utmost in the hour of danger, pouring forth a strain so powerful as to be heard even amid the din of that bloody field. But Hawk-Eye the scout expressed the truth when he remarked, as he significantly tapped his forehead: "The Indians never harm a non-composer."

The history of the pitchpipe now under consideration is lost in the obscurity of the early part of last century; but without doubt this obsolete instrument, now superseded by wonderful inventions, has often sounded the prelude of the joyous voicing of congregations long since gone from this earth. That it was used in the Kirk of Cults through the early years of last century is indisputable, and that Sir David Wilkie often heard it in his youth, follows as a matter of course. Had Wilkie done for the old Precentor what he did for the "Blind Fiddler," or

"Pitlessie Fair," the story of this quaint old instrument might have ranked among the classics of our land.

The following note is added by Mr F. R. Coles :—" In October 1899, among other curious objects, a wooden pitchpipe was left with me by Mr J. Falconer, of Dundee. In general, it resembles the pipe above described, being of mahogany, and measuring, when closed, $13\frac{1}{8}$ inches, with a horizontal breadth of $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches, and a vertical thickness of $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The bar carrying the scale was kept from being pulled entirely out of the tube by a small wooden peg plugged into the bottom of the pipe, and over which there ran a slot in the bar. Into the upper surface of the scale-bar, a thin piece of white wood (possibly willow?) had been inlaid, so as to throw up into greater relief the horizontal lines marking the scale; and these lines, as well as the names of the notes, were neatly cut and darkened with some blackish pigment. But the greatest difference between the Cults pitchpipe and this one from Dundee is to be observed in the scales. In the Cults pipe the scale begins on the note F, the first space on the treble clef, and ends on the upper G, ascending by semitones. In the Dundee pipe, the scale is from D below the clef to the octave above, also ascending by semitones, but not having the semitones correctly named. Another minute difference is that, in the Dundee pipe, instead of the sign \sharp in common usage to designate a sharp, the maker has cut a neat double-lined St Andrew's cross. And either he, or the owner of the pitchpipe, has cut the initials W C within a deeply cut oblong cavity just below the air-hole.

"I learn from Mr R. Milne, formerly of the Third Battalion Royal Scots Regiment, now an attendant in the Museum, that pitchpipes of a similar kind were sent down from Pimlico to the regiment, in order to keep the pitch correctly for the bagpipes.

"The approximate date of any of these pitchpipes can best be computed by a careful comparison of the difference between their pitch and that of the modern standard 'concert-pitch.' In the absence, however, of a sufficiently varied number of pitchpipes, it will be safe to assert only that, the lower the pitch is, the older is the pipe likely to be."