

LINES OF TRANSMISSION

TRACING THE NORTHUMBRIAN FIDDLE TRADITION

The Northumbrian Fiddle tradition is one of the most prominent and long lasting in the English folk scene, with many scholars noting that Northumberland was one of few regions in which there was no notable folk revival – since there was no need! The Northumbrian Fiddle tradition can be traced back several centuries, with a rich tapestry of influences and roots, ranging from Scotland to Scandinavia, in addition to the close relationship it has always shared with the Northumbrian Piping tradition.

One of the early exponents of the Northumbrian Fiddle tradition was Robert Whinham, born in 1814, in Morpeth, Northumberland, to Robert and Elizabeth Whinham (nee Cross), the fourth of five children. Whilst his exact date of birth is unknown, he was

baptised on 14th April 1814 in St Mary's Church, Morpeth.

Whinham began taking violin lessons aged 8, from a local music teacher, Mr William Banks. However, due to his reportedly exceptional musical abilities, he was soon taken on by a German music master in Newcastle. This did not prevent his engagement with local musical traditions; Whinham was heavily involved in both the brass band and fiddle traditions, in addition to his involvement in local dance traditions.

Whilst there are few written sources from Whinham, perhaps due to his upbringing as the son of a gardener (a social status that would have largely prohibit extensive formal education in the 19th century), Whinham clearly held strong and influential ideas about Northumbrian Music and Style. Following experience playing in

dance bands in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Whinham brought with him strong influences from Scotland, evident in his composition of Strathspeys, a typically Scottish dance/tune type. Alongside this, his work as a clog dancer and dancing master was another key source of inspiration, as evidenced in Whinham's prolific hornpipe writing, the most common clog dance tune during this period.

Whilst Whinham's tunes are recorded extensively in local manuscripts, the oral tradition plays a far more significant role in contemporary knowledge of Whinham's work.

George Hepple, a fiddle player from Haltwhistle, is a key source of information about Whinham, particularly as his grandfather and uncle were both friends and pupils of Whinham. Hepple claims that Whinham had a very particular style of playing the fiddle, which he refers to as "the old Northumbrian way", this is to

say, he plays the fiddle on his shoulder, not under his chin. Whinham passed this style on to his pupils; Hepple recalls his uncle who was taught by Whinham playing this way also. Through interviews with Hepple, we also learn of Whinham's views around folk dance. These mostly pertain to clog dance, which Whinham taught to individuals as a solo dance. Hepple recalls his father and grandfather dancing in clogs.

Hepple himself was, in turn, another key figure in the development of the Northumbrian Fiddle tradition. Born near Haltwhistle in 1904, the Hepples were a musical family, and regularly hosted evenings of music – it is safe to say that George Hepple was raised at the heart of the Northumbrian Music scene of the time, and naturally developed as a fiddle player, taking up the fiddle aged 8. Largely self-taught, the influences of Whinham, through the elder generations of the Hepple family would have formed the core of George Hepple's style. It is said that George Hepple employed the

"Newcastle style" of bowing, slurring across the beat – creating an uplift to the tune, particularly suitable for dancing. Additionally, it is noted that Hepple preferred a more staccato playing style – an influence likely gleaned from the closely connected

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Northumbrian Piping tradition, in which staccato playing is necessitated by the closed finger system of the chanter.

Growing up at the epicentre of the Northumbrian Music scene, it is only natural that Hepple enjoyed close relationships with other key musicians. Perhaps most notable was his relationship to Joe Hutton, one of the foremost Northumbrian

Pipers of the 20th century, who lived fairly locally to Hepple, at Gilsland. Hutton later played regularly with Willy Taylor and Will Atkinson as "The Shepherds"; undoubtedly the three musicians epitomising the Northumbrian Music tradition of the 20th century. Hepple was known to join the Shepherds on occasion, and the four enjoyed a close relationship, in addition to working closely with many other contemporaries.

The Shepherds, as some of the foremost influences of the 20th century for Northumbrian music, provided key inspiration and influence for many contemporary players, perhaps most notably Alistair Anderson and Kathryn Tickell, two of the most influential contemporary Northumbrian musicians.

Through these valuable insights afforded by the oral tradition, we see a traceable line of transmission between fiddle players emerging. From Whinham to Hepple, the Shepherds to Anderson and Tickell, and onwards through their extensive work in education, we can trace ►





close to two centuries of one strand of the Northumbrian Fiddle tradition. Doubtless, just as Whinham enjoyed many influences, those he influenced in turn had many different influences on their playing – and I’m sure we could have traced as many lines of transmission as there are contemporary players! The Northumbrian Fiddle tradition is so rich, thanks to this diversity of influences – whilst also managing to retain the distinctly Northumbrian style. It will be interesting to observe the future lines of transmission, in this ever-changing world – and to see if the influences of Robert Whinham and his like will remain as strong and present as they are now in another 50 years’ time ■

Charly Curry Brown

*Overleaf: Northumbrian landscape near Hadrian’s Wall
© Megan Wisdom*

Left: Willy Taylor and Alistair Anderson, Morpeth Town Hall © Veteran Photographic Archive

ARCHIVE APPEAL

ON BEHALF OF THE VETERAN ARCHIVE

The Veteran Archive is appealing for copies of the original cassette albums released by the label, especially early albums released under the **Vintage Tapes** imprint. The label’s own archive is missing copies of several of these important releases. The content of these early recordings is safe, but the Archivist is a purist and a completist, and would very much like to see the collection have a complete set of the physical cassettes.

If you have any of these cassettes, and may be willing to part with them in exchange for digital or CD copies, please contact Mossy via email: info@veteran.co.uk

