

Nelson's Praise

The legacy of music associated with Admiral Nelson

by Gavin Atkin



'Saturday Night at Sea' by George Cruikshank

As the recent international Spithead review showed, Admiral Lord Nelson in 2005 still casts a shadow as long as his London column is tall. And the party isn't over yet, for the bicentenary of his death at the Battle of Trafalgar doesn't actually take place until the 21st of October. If you haven't organised your event yet, there's still time, just about...

Anniversaries on this scale make us wonder what people – sailors and landsmen and women – played and danced to two hundred years ago, and to wonder also how much of what they knew then we still know today. Reading around the subject, two themes come bubbling to the top: tunes and dances with names associated with Nelson, and the dances for which his sailors were famous.

Without today's mass media, the music and dance scene of the late 18th and early 19th centuries was very different to the one we know now. Tune-books kept by old-time fiddle players show that two hundred years ago tunes regularly appeared in books published in the big cities and rapidly spread across the British Isles. Some musicians must have copied them from published books, while some learned them from

other players and noted them down in their personal tune-books. This was also the period when the modern 4/4 hornpipe became popular and several of the tunes named after Nelson are of this type.

Some of the tunes came into wide use and have come down to us through the tradition, while others are still being rediscovered – many of today's bands well known for playing for country dancing, such as The Old Swan Band, The Bismarcks, The Committee Band and Florida play a great deal of material from these old tune collections.

Tunes named after Nelson

Imagine what a towering figure Nelson must have been when he and Wellington were the heroes who together succeeded in keeping the mighty Napoleon out of these islands. It's not surprising, then, that musicians quickly started honouring his name – or was it exploiting his popularity?

Composed as Napoleon and his armies rampaged across Europe, Haydn's 'Missa in Angustiis' ('Mass in Straitened Times') was quickly renamed 'The Nelson Mass' after Nelson and his ships smashed the French fleet at Aboukir – and no doubt gained some

popularity as a result. The same kind of process seems to have taken place at the level of popular music, for no fewer than seven tunes that have come down to us today bear the great admiral's name, and at least three bear several other names as well!

Perhaps the most striking example, and probably the one best known to English-style musicians, is the tune known by the name of 'The Bridge of Lodi' and also as 'Lord Nelson's Hornpipe'. The Bridge of Lodi was in fact the site of a famous early victory for Napoleon in Italy, and I can't help but wonder how it came to be renamed – perhaps some wise musician changed its name in a hurry one night to avoid attracting the wrath of some whiskered English patron.

Another example of a Nelsonian tune with multiple names is 'Admiral Nelson', also known as 'Miss' or 'Mrs Baker's Hornpipe'. The version I've given here is from the William Mittel manuscript from Kent, dated 1799.

In fact, the Scots play 'Admiral Nelson' as a reel, and there's even a four-couple longways set dance named 'Admiral Nelson' to go with it in Book 19 of *The Scottish Country Dance Book*. The Scots also have a slow air by

The Fallen Hero

(from the collections published by Gow)



Nelson's Praise (from Ilmington)



Nelson Hornpipe (from the Leadley ms)**Nelson** (from the Jackson ms)**Sailor's Hornpipe**

(standard version, also known as the College Hornpipe)

**Miss Baker's Hornpipe**

(from the Mittel ms, also known as Admiral Nelson)

**Bridge of Lodi**

(standard version, also known as Lord Nelson's Hornpipe)



Nathaniel Gow, entitled 'The Fallen Hero (Nelson)'. It's notable that Gow's instruction for the tempo reads 'Pathetically slow'.

Still another hornpipe, the 'Nelson Hornpipe', comes to us via the notebook of the Helperby, Yorkshire, fiddler, Lawrence Leadley, who lived from 1827 to 1897.

The Jackson notebook of tunes dated 1823 also has a tune called 'Nelson', but whether this is truly connected with the Admiral, or whether it is named after the small Lancashire town of the same name is not clear.

England also has the Ilmington Morris tune 'Nelson's Praise'.

Going further afield, the Irish have a couple with Nelsonian titles. Various collections going back to 1888 have included yet another hornpipe, 'Nelson's Victory', and 'Nelson's Pillar', which appears in *Ceol Rince na hÉireann IV* collected by Breandán Breathnach.

But what did the sailors play?

What about the music and dancing of Nelson's own heroes, the men of the fighting ships? Contemporary paintings include fiddle players, flautists and pipe and tabor players, and fiddle players are also shown playing for men pushing the

capstan round. Yet this must be one of the most frustrating areas for study, for although there are a great many references to the importance of music in maintaining morale and to dancing as a means of keeping the men fit, there's very little that clearly explains what the music was, or what the dances were.

From the letters of a Private Wheeler travelling during the opening phase of the Peninsular War, for example, we learn that on board ship in 1811, 'Two evenings a week is devoted to amusement... The crew instantly distribute themselves, some dancing to a fiddle, others to a fife...'

David Proctor, author of *The Maritime Museum's book Music of the Sea* reports that despite the Navy's iron discipline – silence was the rule when the ship was being manoeuvred so that orders could be heard – on board the *Minerva* in 1793, 'On certain nights a lantern was hung up on deck and a fiddler seated on the topsail sheet bits, and there would be dancing for those that cared.' Naval ships of the era had fiddle players in place of the shantymen found on merchant ships.

A few years before Nelson's heyday, on Admiral Boscawen's flagship sailing westward across the Atlantic in 1755 the

men danced nightly to fiddle, fife and drum, according to N.A.M. Rodger, a leading scholar of the Georgian Navy. Boscawen is reported as writing to his wife that the sound of their music reminded him of dancing with her when they were younger.

Again, the Maritime Museum has preserved the barrel organ taken by Rear Admiral Parry in 1819 to entertain his sailors during his pioneering Polar expeditions. Surviving barrels reveal a mixture of popular classics and dance tunes some of which we recognise easily today, including 'The Devil Among the Tailors', 'Speed the Plough' and 'Paddy Carey'.

From this scant information, and from the knowledge that sailors are usually landsmen before they are sailors and that in port they would often dance with local women on board ship and elsewhere (there are engravings and paintings showing this), it seems reasonable to suppose that the tunes sea-going musicians played had a lot in common with those found on land during the same period – no doubt many of today's matelots enjoy Hip Hop and House.

If you want to find out about the dance music of the time, there are some

great sources available today, including reprints of musicians' tune-books, and websites such as the Village Music Project, which makes 18th and 19th century musicians' tune-books available in the convenient abc format. Another website is the Fiddler's Companion which is a wonderful compendium of tunes from all over the British Isles, with additional information including their histories, alternative titles and the links between different versions.

It's striking that none of the surviving barrels from Parry's barrel organ appear to have included hornpipes. While it's true that one could dance the 'Sailor's Hornpipe' to reels instead, this omission seems surprising – unless, of course, the cheesy, overly stagey dance we all know from televised military tattoos and Highland dancing competitions was never a true sailor's dance.

In fact, this seems to be very likely. From reading an article by George S. Emmerson published in the *Folk Music Journal* of 1970, it seems probable that the 'Sailor's Hornpipe' we recognise today originated not as a genuine sailor's dance but as a theatrical entertainment usually performed to a tune we now often call the 'Sailor's Hornpipe', but which used to be known as the 'College Hornpipe'. Emmerson reveals that although hornpipes were being performed in Drury Lane, London, from an earlier date, it's not until 1740 that finally a dancer is billed to dance a hornpipe 'in the character of Jacky Tar'. After that it seems to have been danced increasingly often as a stage sailor's dance by both women and men, including the celebrated American dancer John Durang.

Interestingly, a record of Durang's steps made by his son shows almost no nautical references, and it seems likely that the very stagey steps and actions symbolising various sea-borne activities we know today – climbing the rigging, looking out to sea and so on – were introduced as the 19th century progressed.

It is possible that the stage 'Sailor's Hornpipe' may have become popular with sailors themselves after it came to be a feature of the London stage, and it may even have been imposed on them by their commanding officers – but I haven't yet found any evidence to say so. So aside from the stage, where did this whole idea of the 'Sailor's Hornpipe' come about?

Perhaps the greatest clue lies in Emmerson's own paper. He quotes two informants talking about step-dancing as a popular pastime in many parts of Britain. What his informants described is

very similar to that occasionally seen in the farming and fishing communities of East Anglia, the West Country and among Gypsies even in the present day: men, and sometimes women, taking it in turns to perform free-form steps of their own devising, and occasionally stepping together. It's not exactly a formal contest, but often involves a dash of healthy male posturing. The tunes are hornpipes, but played quickly and usually with less dotting than is normal.

That the hale and hearty fishermen and landsmen pressed into service in Nelson's Navy were often likely to be step-dancers can't really be called a speculation for some of them surely would have been step-dancers. My guess – and here I am guessing – is that these swaggering, macho, hard-drinking sailors probably did a lot of this kind of step-dancing, and that at some point the Navy gained a reputation for it. If so, perhaps actors on the London stage found they could gain some kudos and a little of the exotic by advertising their rather different and altogether more showy step-dancing as being a 'Sailor's Hornpipe'.

So if you want to get a grip on the real 'Sailor's Hornpipe', perhaps it's right to go back to East Anglian, West Country and Gypsy step-dancing. And it just happens that if you go to the EFDSS homepage on the web and follow the links to the on-line shop, you'll find an excellent video on sale of East Anglian step-dancer Dick Hewitt dancing to the wonderful old-time melodeon playing of Percy Brown.



Nelson and his tars recreating after the glorious Battle of the Nile by Thomas Rowlandson

Further reading and information:

The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: free to members, and if you tell them you are coming, they may find what you want before you ever arrive.

The Village Music Project's web page <http://www.village-music-project.org.uk/> includes music noted by playing musicians during the late 18th and 19th centuries.

The Fiddler's Companion's web page <http://www.ceolas.org/tunes/fc/> has a huge bank of tunes, their history and details of how they connect with each other.

N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World*, (London: Fontana Press 1988). A readable but authoritative description of life in the Georgian Navy.

David Proctor and Richard Baker, *Music of the Sea* (Greenwich, London: Maritime Publishing, 2005). A very general introduction to music making associated with the sea.

J.S. Bratton, 'Dancing a Hornpipe in Fetters', *Folk Music Journal*, 1990. More information on the stage 'Sailor's Hornpipe' in the 19th century.

I'd like to offer my huge thanks to Peta Webb of the Vaughan Williams Library at Cecil Sharp House, who found much of this material for me and provided some important clues about tune transmission that later turned out to be exactly right; and to the Tradtunes Yahoogroup members, particularly fiddler and scholar Paul Roberts, and anglo-concertina player and step-dancer Sarah Crofts.