



British Regimental Drums And Those Who Play Them

James H. Hillestad explores the history and traditions behind British military percussionists

TEXT AND PHOTOS: JAMES H. HILLESTAD



Above: A miniature Grenadier Guards Corps of Drums by W. Britain marches atop a regimental rope tension side drum. Top: An 80-mm Black Watch drummer by Charles C. Stadden.



British line infantry regiment drummer boy uniform with a home service helmet. Note the red Tudor crown lace on the sleeves.

*What price glory? Heaven knows!
We're just a bunch of chums
Who're marching onto who know where
Until we hear the drums.*

(Unknown Poet)

Look at a toy soldier band and the most prominent thing someone will see is the drum and the drummer. Perhaps because of its size, its elaborate painting, or the distinctive sound that is associated with it, the drum always attracts attention. The entire band marches to the beat of the drummer.

The drum is possibly the oldest of all military musical instruments, dating back to the Crusades. Its original purpose was to keep the troops not just in step, but also on the move.

In England, drums and fifes came in about the time of the reign of King Henry VIII. Later, drums were introduced into military bands and became in that regard "musical" instruments.

TYPES OF DRUMS

There are four types of drums: bass, tenor, side (also known as snare), and the cavalry kettledrum. The main focus of this article is the British military side drum.

At the time of 1815's Battle of Waterloo, the size of the side drum had been reduced from 18 inches by 18 inches to 16 inches by 16 inches. This drum had a wooden shell. The hoops at the top and bottom of the

shell were made of ash wood, 2 inches in height.

By mid-19th century, the drum head was 14 inches across, the shell was brass and the head was calfskin (vellum), tensioned by white hemp rope. Strips of catgut across the bottom, called snares (perhaps because of their resemblance to snares set for small game), gave the drum exceptional resonance and a distinctive sound.

ELABORATE EMBLAZONING

Up until the mid-18th century, British Army regiments were known by their colonel's name. The painted (emblazoned) elements on a drum reflected the colonel's choice. All this changed in 1747, when the regimental numbers, which indicated seniority or precedence (such as 1st Regiment of Foot), were given formal status.

In 1741, a Royal Warrant had decreed that the face of the drum was to be painted to match the colour of the facings of the regiment. Facings date back to the Restoration, when the all-red coat of the King's men was relieved by Royal blue facings – the lining of the coat which showed when the cuffs were turned back and the collar turned down.

The facings took on a life of their own as they were chosen to represent a particular association by "non-royal" regiments (for example, sea green for Catherine of Braganza or yellow for the Duke of York). To the background colour of the drum



A drum major's silver staff.



British side drums and uniforms are lined up on parade outside the writer's Toy Soldier Museum.

was added the King's Cypher, Crown and the number of the regiment.

In 1881, as a result of the Cardwell reforms, "territorial" names were given to regiments. These new territorial names were emphasized in preference to the old numbers. Territorial names (Lincolnshire, Berkshire, etc.) were prominently displayed on uniforms, banners and drums.

CURRENT CONSTRUCTION

To bring this percussion chronicle

to the present day, a further change must be mentioned.

Calfskin drum heads were susceptible to moisture. Rain or even humidity caused the skin to slacken, which changed the drum's pitch. To rectify this problem, the drum was surrounded by rope cording threaded through the wooden hoops. Leather thongs or slides were positioned on the cording such that when pushed down they contracted the roping, in turn tightening or "tensing" the drum head.

Unfortunately, the rope and wooden hoop, being organic, exacerbated the problem, as both were sensitive to dampness. Adding to the dilemma, in hot, dry weather, the process reversed, with the drum head contracting and the ropes loosening.

The adjustment and readjustment process was long and laborious, and the results often did not achieve the pitch desired (a significant problem when all drummers were to sound as one). To overcome the issue (and



Close-up of the ornate head of the silver staff carried by a drum major.



Coldstream Guards tunic, bearskin, bugle and regimental side drum. Note how the tunic is adorned with Royal lace, dotted with blue fleur-de-lis.

Why French Flower On British Uniform?

The use of the French fleur-de-lis in British heraldry dates back to King Charles II and the Restoration. The iconic, stylized lily is a relic of the time when English monarchs claimed sovereignty over France. In 1801, British King George III finally accepted that he was no longer able to justify the title "King of France."

—James H. Hillestad



Dress tunic of an Irish Guards drum major. Note the spacing of the buttons and the inverted chevrons.



Close-up of a richly-embroidered Irish Guards baldric. Note the miniature drumsticks and distinctive shamrocks.



Musician's State Dress with embroidered Royal Cypher and Crown, belt with sword slings, and jockey cap.

much to the chagrin of traditionalists), the Army switched to drums with plastic heads and adjustable steel tension rods in the 1950s.

DRUMMER'S ROLE

The role of the drummer was to beat out commands to the front line in battle to reassure soldiers their regimental colours were still safe, to raise morale on the march, to stir the spirits on ceremonial parade and to announce the events of the day (reville, assembly, retreat and tattoo).

In the heat of the battle, the commanding officer could not be heard. He relied on the drummers to beat out his orders. Additionally, drummers provided a much-needed service – to act as a plenipotentiary



Kettledrummer, 6th Inniskilling Dragoons, by Drill Square.

to seek a parley with an enemy. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, drummers were required to speak a foreign language, thus enabling them to discuss surrender terms.

At one time during the reign of Henry VIII, the drummer also played the fife and did both at the same time! The fife, stuck in the mouth, was played with the left hand. The drum, slung over the shoulder, was beaten with a stick held in the right hand. To the troops, the fife added a lilt to the starkness of the drumbeat.

When a fife is modified with keys, it becomes a flute.

DRUMMER BOYS

Traditionally, regimental drummers were all young boys who often traveled with their regiments into battle. However, atrocities committed by Zulu warriors at 1879's Battle of Isandlwana horrified the British authorities and public to such an extent that never again would boys accompany their regiments onto fields of battle.

The youngest drummer was Joseph Eliot, who enlisted during the reign of King George III in 1804. He was 4 years old! His companion was Joseph Brome, age 8, who rose to become a lieutenant general. Those lads were unusually young – the normal age range was between 10 and 12!

BUGLES SOUND OFF

About the time of Waterloo, bugles took over from drums as the means of broadcasting commands. They could be heard more easily, could sound more than one note and would not be mistaken for musket fire.

By the time British regiments were sent to the Crimea in 1854, most military drummers were also buglers. Today's drummers also carry bugles on cording hung from their right shoulders.

CORPS OF DRUMS

Drummers/buglers, fifers and bagpipers are the components of a corps of drums.

Supervised by drum majors and pipe majors, a corps of drums is separate from a regimental band, which is headed by a band sergeant major. When both a corps of drums and regimental band parade together, the drum major takes precedence.

Drummers and pipers of a corps of drums are trained soldiers who take their place with the remainder of the regiment in times of conflict. Bandsmen are trained in basic military skills and undergo specialist medical training, which enables them to act as medical orderlies and stretcher-bearers.



Drum major and side drummer of The King's Own Royal Border Regiment on parade, with a French drum captured at the Spanish village of Arroyo Los Molinos in 1811. Figures by HM of Great Britain. Bone china souvenir miniature drum by Michael Suttly.



Drum major, side drummer, tenor drummer and bass drummer of the Royal Welsh Fusiliers by Ducal Models.



A steel-rod tension side drum of The London Regiment.

DISTINCTIVE DRESS

The drummers and fifers of the Foot Guards wear royal livery: a red tunic with blue facings adorned with Royal Lace, dotted with blue fleur-de-lis. The lace continues down the front of the tunic and is arranged across the chest according to the button distribution of the regiments (Coldstream Guards two rows of buttons, Scots Guards three rows, etc.). On the sleeves, the lace is in the form of inverted chevronel.

For drum majors, the lace is replaced with gold braid. Musicians in a regimental band do not wear decorative lace.

Drummers and fifers of line regiments wear crown lace (white lace dotted with red Tudor crowns) on a tunic with the facings of the regiment.

The drummers and bandsmen of

the Foot Guards wear bearskins. This usage stems from the defeat of French Emperor Napoleon I's Imperial Guard at Waterloo. The line infantry regiments wear dark blue cloth helmets with brass spikes (this Germanic-looking headdress was the inspiration for the U.S. Army helmet of 1881-1902).

DRUM MAJOR ATTIRE

Drum majors wear a sash, known as the baldrick, on which the battle honours and badges of the regiment are embroidered, in addition to the Royal Cypher and Crown. The sash also displays a pair of miniature drumsticks to remind the wearer that he was once a side drum beater.

Drum majors wear white gauntlets and carry an ornate staff, not a "mace" which is reserved for Lord Mayors. The staff is not a theatrical prop, but a means of giving commands to drummers and musicians.

Drum majors of the Foot Guards on State occasions (in the presence of the Queen or close members of her family) wear a tunic of Tudor design. It is of crimson velvet, laced with gold braid. It weighs 25 pounds.

Embroidered on the breast of the tunic and on the back is the Royal Cypher and Crown. The headpiece is a blue cloth jockey cap, facetiously referred to as the first crash helmet. Its origin has been traced back to King Charles II and his affection for horse racing.

The drum major has another unique uniform distinction: he wears on his lower right arm four inverted chev-

rons. For this writer, after four months of research and conversations with numerous authorities, the reason for reversing the chevrons remains an enigma.

One suggestion is that "drum major" is an appointment carrying no authority outside the individual's direct responsibility. The drum major might in fact be a corporal bugler, sergeant or warrant officer.

I hope this article contributes to readers' enjoyment of British military bands – both real ones and miniature models. It is more than pageantry -- it's history! ■

Selected References

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 Jack Cassin-Scott, "Military Bands and Their Uniforms."
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Scottish Twist

Bagpipes were authorized for the Scottish regiments in 1854. Pipes and drums soon replaced fifes and drums. Scotsmen, incidentally, hold a side drum vertically at the knee while Englishmen carry theirs tipped at an angle.

—James H. Hillestad



ABOUT THE WRITER

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