



A Boy Drummer of the Grenadier Guards, 1896

THE *HISTORY* OF THE DRUM

Origins and Developments

The drum is nearly as 'old as Adam' and is believed to have evolved from the biblical 'timbrel'. Sir J Gardiner Wickinson stated that martial music occupied an important place in Egyptian affairs about 1600 BC in which the drums would be included. In the Chinese army of the fifth century BC the drum was used for giving signals during battle and, to ensure that the drummer was in his place in difficult situations and when he was most urgently required, Spau Wu, the Master advised that "the drum" should be given "to the bold".

The credit for having introduced the drum into Europe is generally given to the Crusaders who, having seen how the Saracens used it brought the idea home. However a man called James Blades once wrote that the drum was actually introduced to England by the Romans in the form of the tabor. These differed in size from that of the tambourine to that of a bass drum and early documentation suggests that some were even fitted with some type of snare mechanism. Some later tabors were rather like a large side drum with rope tension and snares and eventually slung around the player's neck and supported with one hand whilst being struck with a single stick in the other hand. At about the mid-sixteenth century, the player began to sling the drum diagonally across the body, controlling it with his leg, thus freeing both of his hands to beat the drum. Since the drum was now at the side of the body, it was not unnaturally called 'the side drum'. Originally drums were made out of hollowed out tree stems, open at the bottom. To make them easier to carry, the depth of the rim was diminished.

Employment

The most savage type of music in vogue with civilized people has to be that of the drum and fife band. Drums have been covered with human skins. Tom-toms have been so covered and human skulls tied to them. They were beaten to drown the cries of the victims in the festival of Jagannatha. The Bohemian nobleman, Ziska,

who fought with the English at Agincourt, ordered his skin at death to be made into drumheads.

Being a loud instrument, it was used to beat calls for military formations, to signal commands and to beat the charge. Its rhythmic beat was also admirably adapted for regulating the movement of soldiers on the line of March. The marching speeds or tempi were:

1. *Ordinary time.* 72 – 75 paces to the minute. The standard pace for all drill movements and, in the eighteenth century, the usual speed on what passed for roads at the time
2. *Quick time.* 100 paces to the minute. Used when forming from column of route into line, i.e., deploying; also used by small parties on the march on good roads, hence the term 'quick step' used to describe a march time.
3. *Double time.* 120 paces to the minute. Used when a line was required to change direction by forming or wheeling.

The double three-paced roll of the drums that start a march was the marching beat of the Lanz-Knecht or Free Companies of Germany; famous for their drummers during the sixteenth century. Adventurous Britons, returning home from the wars, took a hand in the training of the Militia at home bringing the continental pikeman's drumbeat with them. The roll they played on the march as well as other drumbeats of theirs is exactly the same as those still used in the Army today. It is presumed that the five-paced roll used by the Foot Guards is simply a variation of the three-paced roll. Also, all routine and tactical orders were passed by beat of drums. Three routine beatings still survive in the form of 'Officers Mess Beatings', 'Retreat' and 'Drummers Call'.

The first occasion on which the drum was first used on service on British soil appears to be at the Battle of Halidon Hill (1333). A few years later Edward III had

drummers in the forefront of his triumphant entry into Calais (1347).

Association with the Colours

Drums obtained through Ordnance bear no embellishments whatsoever. Drums purchased privately are painted in the old facing colour of the regiment. Each drum is embellished with the battalion title, e.g., 1st Battalion, 2nd Battalion, etc., the regimental crest and the same battle honours as those borne on the Regimental and Queen's Colours. The emblazoning is paid for at private expense.

In earlier days a company had its own Colour and drummer, thus providing its own visual and audible rallying points in close battle. In the Foot Guards, and in some Infantry Regiments, company Colours still exist and each company has a drummer attached to it. A further link to the past is the company bugle call used in the Foot Guards and in some line battalions. Each company has its own call, which is documented and printed in Regimental Standing Orders.

Originally drummers stood round the standard to assure the fighting men that the flag, although perhaps hidden from their view in the din and dust of conflict, was still flying. In this we see the origin of our own drummers in the past accompanying the Colours in battle.

The drums of a battalion are as cherished and as closely guarded as the Colours. When the Highland Division was about to be captured at St Valery in 1940 the drums of the famous Scottish Regiments were buried in the hope that they would be recovered later, rather than allow them to fall into the hands of the Germans. The drums were in fact recovered with much ceremony after the war. In the retreat to Dunkirk in 1940 the 2nd Battalion The Wiltshire Regiment buried their drums too but unfortunately only two were recovered after the war, one coming from Denmark.

Evolution of the Drum

The mid-seventeenth century would be a good time from which to start to trace the evolution of the present day side drum as used by the British Army. When the Royal Regiment of Guards (Grenadier Guards) returned from France in 1662 they were authorized to paint their new drums and a warrant to this effect still exists, though it is vague as to the actual appearance of the drums which would most likely have measured 22 inches deep x 19 ½ inches wide, the shell and hoops being made of ash wood. The vellum heads were no doubt thicker than those in later use. The whole thing was tensioned by means of cord which, as we see in old paintings, was not as white as we are used to seeing. Braces were in use though these could have been either of rope or buff, tied in a sort of bow knot. As to the existence of snares, there is little or no evidence that they were in use at this time. Engravings of drummers at Monks funeral in 1670

show the drums quite clearly but there are no snares to be seen and there are no drag ropes evident either. The actual ash shell of the drum was joined together by means of nails or tacks. This area of the join, which was normally to the drummer's right, had by this time assumed the most ornate appearance with the nails used to join the shell being arranged in elaborate patterns. This area became known as the 'Nail Board' and still exists today on bass and tenor drums, being now a coloured panel on the left hand side of the drum, the colour being one of the unit's regimental colours. The front half of the shell was painted, even at this date, with the facing colour of dark blue and emblazoned with, in the case of the Foot Guards, with the full Royal Arms only. The hoops were painted plain red and accounted for two and a half inches of the overall size of the drum. The side drum of most other Regiments of Foot would have been much the same, though obviously the facing colour was appropriate to the regiment as was the emblazoning on it. Regiments of Foot carried the Royal Cypher CR and crown with sometimes a number or other device below it.



A Typical Nail board

Paintings show very heavy sticks to have been in use at this time and generally there were no drag ropes. The drum already described was, with little alteration, to remain in use with the British Army until modern times. The changes in the intervening years were mainly in the size of the shell. Generally by the last quarter of the eighteenth century a reduction in size took place to an overall size of 18 inches x 18 inches, the hoop size being down to 2 inches.

Around about the Waterloo period, the size of the drum decreased again to roughly 16 inches x 16 inches overall, though the drums carried by the Guards and some other regiments at Waterloo were of the older, larger size. It was probably about the time of this reduction that the shells were changed to brass.

In general, drums were issued from Ordnance and were probably not as good as they might have been. About 1810 an ex Drum Major of the Coldstream Guards established a private company to supply a superior drum, which regiments could purchase at their own expense. It is fair to assume that from this period Corps of Drums began to acquire the extras at their own expense and the drums improved in appearance and general manufacture. Fine gut snares were now in use, which gave a new sound to the brass-shelled drums. The drag rope established probably at the beginning of the eighteenth century and used to carry the drum over the shoulder on the march was now universal in the British Army. By the outbreak of the Crimean War of

1854 the Foot Guards had firmly settled on a drum of 14 inches x 11 ½ inches brass shell with two inch ash hoops, calfskin heads, white hemp rope and eight buff braces and six or more gut strand snares. Apart from a one-inch variation in the 1900s the Guards stuck rigidly to this drum and it became known as the 'Guards Regulation Pattern Drum'.

It might be as well to make a mention here of the evolution of the bass and tenor drums. The bass drum had started life as a massive version of the side drum worn around the neck with the vellum (heads) pointing to the left and right of the drummer. Over the years the width of the bass drum decreased dramatically. Before World War II an average bass drum shell might have been 30 inches x 16 inches. Today the average Corps of Drums bass drum could measure 28 inches x 12 inches.

The tenor drum was larger than the ordinary side drum. It was also played with felt or soft headed drumsticks, which contributed to the special tonal character of the drum which was due, not only to its size, but to the fact that the lower head had no snares. It has generally been accepted that the tenor drum superseded the small kettle drums that were used by the marching regiments in the eighteenth century, and we can see the latter in a well known engraving of a band of a regiment of Foot Guards mounting guard at St James's Palace about 1790. The earliest record of a tenor drum being used is in 1834 by the Royal Artillery band.

In the early 1960s the most dramatic and far reaching change to affect the design of the drum was the introduction of the rod-tensioned drum. It was not exactly a new idea but the technique had never really been perfected. Now with modern engineering methods a simple rod tensioned drum was designed. The Scottish Pipe Bands were the first to use them and within the Brigade of Guards it was the Scots Guards Pipes and Drums who first used them for public duties. Many regiments at first tried to retain the traditional appearance of the drums by heaving special rings attached to the top of the rod through which a rope could be passed. Though the rope was obviously of no use in the tensioning of the drum, this style of rod/rope seems to have all but died away.

Drum Emblazoning

From about the turn of the century, regiments began to go to great lengths to ensure a smart appearance for the Corps of Drums. They purchased many extra items for the drums at regimental expense. The wooden counter hoops were often painted at considerable cost with such devices as heraldic roses in the case of the Lancashire Fusiliers and for the Cheshire Regiment, the regimental No.22 in Roman numerals all around the hoops.

Since the rope used to assemble and tension a drum was one long piece, the habit developed very early of winding the spare unused end round the lower hoops of the drum, often finger-plaited into what is sometimes called "drummer's plaits" and gradually this became an

accepted decorative part of a drum finishing and was called flashing.

The old Royal Arms, which had been painted on the drums for years by all regiments gradually, began to be replaced, by Regiments of the Line, with enlarged regimental badges, which is still the practice today.

The emblazoning of drums is best carried out by experts due to the many operations involved; nothing looks worse than a badly emblazoned drum. The front panel of the drum should be of the unit's facing colour.

The emblazoning details for the Guards Division are laid down in Standing Orders and are strictly adhered to. Basically for side drums these consist of:

"The Royal Arms upon a stand of the Queen's and Regimental Colours. Below this are the badges, mottoes and devices as applicable; laid out down each side of this are the battle honours as borne on the Colours. The whole is surmounted by the regimental title ribbon. The whole upon a very dark blue ground."

For Regiments of the Line, the heraldry is usually traditional but can be decided by the Commanding Officer. This consists of either, in the case of some Royal Regiments, the Royal Arms or more often, the enlarged regimental badge in full colour with the additional mottoes and devices of the regiment. Below and down each side are the battle honours as borne on the Colours. The whole surmounted by the regimental title ribbon.



On the bass drum the layout is slightly different but the Royal Arms should always be carried, the golden rule being that nothing is placed above the Royal Arms except the regimental title ribbon.



Hoops of regimental pattern are an obvious attraction and these are normally traditional.

Where side drums are professionally emblazoned, all gold work is in 22-carat gold leaf, which adds greatly to the appearance, and all colours are in finest oils, the heraldry is finished with a covering of coach varnish.

Drake's Drum

Undoubtedly, the most famous drum in the world is Drake's drum. Legend has it that it beats spontaneously whenever Great Britain is in danger, and her old owner (Sir Francis Drake) returns from the port of Heaven to drum her enemies up the Channel as he drummed them long ago. For over four hundred years, the drum has been kept at Buckland Abbey near Plymouth, where Drake directed it should go in his will. The drum is 24 inches in diameter by 21 inches deep and made of ash wood.