

A Note on the History and Archaeology of Jew's Harps in Ireland

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This brief survey represents a summary of a more extensive study which is shortly to be published elsewhere.¹ The only previous investigation of the topic was carried out by Etienne Rynne in the course of a discussion of a jew's harp which he excavated at 'Thady's Fort', Ballycally, Shannon Airport in 1959.² It is timely to pursue the history of the instrument in Ireland in greater detail as, in the last eight years alone, twenty-eight new examples have come to light, so much so that one could now say that jew's harps are frequently found in post-medieval sites.

The only publication to pre-date the Shannon Airport report is that concerning Site J,



Fig. 1.

¹Ann Buckley, "Jew's Harps in Irish Archaeology", *Festschrift Ernst Emsheimer* (C. S. Lund, ed.), Stockholm. Forthcoming.

²Etienne Rynne, "Some Destroyed Sites at Shannon Airport, Co. Clare", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 63, C(1964), 257.

Lough Gur, Knockadoon, Co. Limerick.³ As for hitherto unpublished material, two instruments are housed in the National Museum of Ireland for which no catalogued information exists, and it is highly possible that there are others awaiting identification among collections of metal objects there and in other museums. The remainder of the material discussed in this survey is from recent excavations which have been or are shortly to be published.

At the time of writing, the total number of jew's harps from Irish contexts appears to be thirty-two,⁴ of which about thirty are dated to between the 13th/14th centuries and the 17th/18th, but the great majority are from the 16th and 17th centuries. Of these thirty, all are made of iron and their geographical distribution is wide (Fig. 1). Dating presents a problem in most cases as the finds are often 'stray' (*i.e.*, without any clear context of time or social use), but where pottery sherds or identifiable stratigraphy can provide firm evidence, the instruments may be dated by association to within a hundred years or sometimes less. However, it is necessary to bear in mind that these objects of metal cannot be dated to the time of their manufacture, thus the closest dating concerns their context when re-discovered by archaeologists. Any conclusions as to correlations between date, location and type would be rash at this stage, since their number is small and they must be regarded as random finds—random, that is, as far as surviving artifacts are concerned, for there is copious information from other sources which indicate that jew's harps were in large-scale commercial and social use from at least the late 16th century to the late 19th. The English customs rates for 1545 contain a taxation for these instruments by the gross, *i.e.* boxes of twelve dozen.

Average length ranges from 5.5cm. to 7cm. but two smaller examples exist, the smallest being that from Rôchestown, Co. Tipperary,⁵ which is 4.2cm. The largest is 7.6cm., but an even larger brass instrument (Reg. no. X.1954) exists in the National Museum without any catalogued information. This is most likely of late 19th century English origin. Such a type was cast in moulds and widely used at the time. Thus it may not be the result of an archaeological excavation, but it qualifies for our survey on organological and socio-historical grounds.

Standardised factory-made jew's harps are well known in contemporary Ireland where they were swept in on the crest of the folk revival wave which emanated from the United States in the 1960s and widely influenced the new folk music of Western Europe in the last twenty years. As an older folk instrument, however, little seems to be known about its use in Ireland. This is a typical problem in the historical research of folk music instruments. Usually of simple technology, and used by the poor townsfolk and the peasantry, they were often overlooked by chroniclers and other writers as unworthy of attention and any information we can glean from the distance of the late twentieth century is usually the result of chance rather than of systematic search. Travellers' accounts are the most fertile ground for such information, and the impressions recorded by visitors (whether official Crown representatives or casual sightseers) from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries provide many insights into the history of Irish society.

³ S. P. Ó Riordáin and C. Ó Danachair, "Lough Gur Excavations: Site J, Knockadoon", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 77(1947), 49 and Fig. 4:3.

⁴ The present writer would be grateful to receive details of any instruments not accounted for here.

⁵ *The Archaeology of the Cork-Dublin Natural Gas Pipeline Report 1983* (a pre-publication report by the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork), p. 157, Fig. 8:4.

Thomas Dineley, also known as Dingley (c. 1640-1690), gave the following account in his *Irish Itinerary* of 1681:⁶

They [the Irish] are at this day much addicted (on holidayes, after the bagpipe, Irish harpe, or Jews harpe) to dance after their countrey fashion, (that is) the long dance one after another of all condiçons, master, m^{rs}, servants, &c.

Another reference is afforded by the travelogue of Leitch Ritchie, an Englishman who made a tour of Ireland in the 1830s and was evidently shocked and surprised at the levels of poverty he witnessed among the peasantry. He experienced the following while travelling through Co. Wicklow:⁷

It was almost dark before I reached the Roundwood road; and this was in part the fault of a harp whose plaintive tones allured me into a cottage. In the annexed engraving the reader will see both harp and harper, the latter a young peasant girl, and the former an instrument composed of iron, with a steel tongue, and about two inches long, by an inch and a half at its greatest breadth. This may be said to be now the only musical instrument of the Irish peasant, and it exemplifies in a striking manner the degradation of his country.

The engraving (Fig. 2) was made from a drawing by Daniel Maclise⁸ (1808-1870), who was born and educated in Cork but spent his adult life in England, deriving some of his income there from providing illustrations for publishers. The drawing is an idealised romantic interpretation. Ritchie was incorrect in his assessment of the lack of musical instruments among the Irish peasantry of his time. There was indeed dire poverty and destitution but there was no shortage of pipers, fiddlers and dancing masters (many of whom were, of course, members of that peasantry) right up to the end of the nineteenth century. However, the incident he described may be taken as authentic and his description of the jew's harp both useful and unusually detailed. He appears not to have been familiar with such an instrument although it was well-known both in England and Scotland at that time.

Sir Jonah Barrington (1760-1834), who became a judge in the court of admiralty in Ireland and was also a Member of Grattan's Parliament, mentioned the jew's harp in his personal memoirs. He was born and brought up at Knapton near Abbeyleix, Co. Laois (then Queen's County). In describing the education he received at home from the age of four until he went to school several years later, he stated that by the time he was eight years old he could read, write, draw, make bullets, pens, "... dance a jig, sing a cronane, and play the Jew's harp".⁹ This is clearly an account of usual skills and interests of a country boy of his time.

Although archaeological evidence is insufficient for conclusions about the earliest date of arrival of jew's harps in Ireland, the late 13th century finds could well represent the first uses of the instrument here. Information about its presence in Britain points to a similar situation, and it is relevant to note that a tax was levied for the importation of jew's harps

⁶E. P. Shirley, "Extracts from the Journal of Thomas Dineley, esquire, giving some account of his visit to Ireland in the reign of Charles II", *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 4(1856-57), 182.

⁷Leitch Ritchie, "Ireland Picturesque and Romantic", *Heath's Picturesque Annual for 1837: Ireland*, vol. I, London 1837, p. 65.

⁸The Scottish spelling, *McClise*, appears on the engraving, as Maclise's grandfather was a Highlander, but he himself ceased to use that form after 1835. One is therefore led to consider whether the drawing was made several years prior to publication. I acknowledge with thanks the assistance of Professor Anne Crookshank, Trinity College, Dublin, and Professor John Turpin, National College of Art and Design, Dublin, on this point.

⁹(Sir) Jonah Barrington, *Personal Sketches of his own Times*, vol. I, London 1827, p. 56.



Fig. 2. Young Irish girl playing a jew's harp (an engraving after Daniel Maclise published in 1837).

into Ireland and upon their sale within the country in the early 17th century.¹⁰ They were listed as early as 1545 in customs rates for England and, although they were not specified in Irish rates until 1631 (the 1608 lists do not contain them), it is relevant to bear in mind that Irish rates followed those of England unless otherwise recommended.

There is no term for the instrument in medieval Irish while the word 'trumpa' is used in modern Irish—a loan-word from the English 'trump' (the term usual in Northern England and Scotland) which is derived from the French 'trompe'.¹¹ 'Ní fiú trumpa gan teanga é'

¹⁰*The Rates of Merchandizes as they are set down in the Booke of Rates*, London 1631, k1.

¹¹The earliest record of 'trumpa' is in *An English-Irish Dictionary* by C. Ó Beaglaoich, Paris 1732.

is a proverb which still exists in Connemara, and there is also a triad which makes reference to this instrument:

Na trí rud is lú a bhfuil úsáid iontu: trumpa gan teanga, cnaipe gan lúbán, madra alla gan fiacail.

The three most useless things (are): a jew's harp without a tongue, a button without a loop, a fox without teeth.¹²

'Trump' has also been recorded in recent years in the north and midlands of Ireland,¹³ while a variant, 'trumph', was said to be used in Ulster at the turn of this century.¹⁴

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The following table represents a summary of provenance, number of instruments, museum registration numbers and approximate datings of all the instruments at present known to the writer. With the exception of the Carrickfergus material, which is housed in the Ulster Museum, Belfast, all the registration numbers refer to the National Museum of Ireland.

Provenance	No. of Items	Reg. No.	Approx. Date
Carrickfergus	6	CF V 125	13th/14th c.
		CF I 1097	?14th/15th c.
		CF I 1180	?14th/15th c.
		CF V 58	17th c.
		CF VI 1509	17th c.
		CF VI 1577	17th c.
Clontuskert	4	E99:8	16th c.
		E99:41	16th c.
		E99:60	16th c.
		E99:92	16th c.
Drumlummin	2	E219:259	17th c.
		E219:297	17th c.
Dunboy	2	E150:932	17th c.
		E150:1232	17th c.
Glanworth	1	E236:1173	?16th/17th c.
Kells	7	E110:3670	post-15th c.
		E110:278	pre-17th c.
		E110:1741	post-17th c.
		E110:14100	post-17th c.
		E110:7991	?
		E110:7558	?
		E110:7346	?

¹²I gratefully acknowledge assistance from Professor Tomás de Bhaldraithe, University College, Dublin, with information on the uses of 'trumpa'.

¹³Michael Traynor, *The English Dialect of Co. Donegal*, Dublin 1953.

¹⁴Joseph Wright, ed., *The English Dialect Dictionary*, vol. VI, London 1905: *Trump*. Note, however, only the form 'trump' in W. Hugh Patterson, *A Glossary of Words in use in the Counties of Antrim and Down*, London 1880.

Provenance	No. of Items	Reg. No.	Approx. Date
Knockadoon	1	?	early 17th c.
Lough Gur	2	E174:237 E174:550	17th c. 17th c.
Nevinstown	1	E162:21	?17th/18th c.
Rochestown	1	E244:57	17th c.
Shannon Airport	1	E32:13	?16th c.
Trim Castle	2	E94:4598 E94:4993	early 14th c. early 14th c.
Ireland?	2	X.1953 X.1954	? ?late 19th c.

Notes on the above table

Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim. Six jew's harps were found on this site, two in the medieval market place and four in the Irish Quarter. The first two are dated probably to the 14th/15th centuries, while one from the Irish Quarter is from the 13th/14th century and the remaining three are 17th century.¹⁵

Clontuskert, Co. Galway. Four jew's harps were found in the south range of the priory and are dated to the 16th century.¹⁶

Drumlummin, Co. Tipperary. Two jew's harps were found here in a 17th century house-site during excavation of the path of the Cork-Dublin Natural Gas Pipeline.¹⁷

Dunboy Castle, Co. Cork. Two jew's harps of uncertain location as Dr. Fahy, the excavator, died before all the information had been recorded. Dated to the 17th century.¹⁸

Glanworth Castle, Co. Cork. One jew's harp from a farmhouse site, which may probably be dated to between the 16th and 18th centuries.¹⁹

Kells, Co. Kilkenny. Seven jew's harps, one dating to post-15th century, one to pre-17th century; two post-17th century were found, respectively, underneath and above the 17th century cobble stones, while three remain undated at present.²⁰

¹⁵M. L. Simpson and A. Dickson, "Excavations in Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, 1972-79", *Medieval Archaeol.*, 25(1981), 80 and 87.

¹⁶Thomas Fanning, "Excavations at Clontuskert Priory, Co. Galway", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 76, C(1976), 139-140 and Fig. 14:8.

¹⁷"The Archaeology of the Cork-Dublin Natural Gas Pipeline Report" *op. cit.* (note 5), p. 94, Fig. 6:15, and p. 97. I thank Ms. R. M. Cleary, University College, Cork, for enabling me to have details prior to the official publication.

¹⁸Margaret Gowen, "Dunboy Castle, Co. Cork", *J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc.*, 83(1978), 24, Fig. 6:932 and :1232; on p. 27 these are both listed as "key remains". However, Ms. Gowen has informed the writer that she had always regarded them as jew's harps but was opposed in this view when presenting the material for publication.

¹⁹This has been suggested to me by Mr. Con Manning, Office of Public Works, who excavated the site in 1983, and whose assistance I gratefully acknowledge in enabling me to view the material in advance of his official report.

²⁰Mr. Tom Fanning, University College, Galway, kindly permitted me to examine this material in advance of his own report.

Knockadoon, Limerick. One jew's harp was found among the remains of a house in Site J, and has been dated by the excavators to the early 17th century.²¹

Lough Gur, Co. Limerick. Two jew's harps, one (237) from stray material in the humus layer on the lakeshore, the other (550) in a trench near a drain from the metal-working area. The excavator has judged them both to date from the 16th/17th centuries.²²

Nevinstown, Co. Meath. One jew's harp found in the topsoil of a mound full of stray material during May 1977. Dating is impossible as the finds range from neolithic materials to 18th century pottery. In view of the majority of jew's harps found to date, the likelihood is 17th/18th centuries.

Rochestown, Co. Tipperary. The Gas Pipeline excavation yielded one jew's harp from that site, making a total of 3 for the entire project. A date of c. 17th century has been suggested.²⁴

Shannon Airport, Co. Clare. One jew's harp was found among the fallen wall-stones of a 16th century house.²⁵

Trim Castle, Co. Meath. Two jew's harps emerged from this excavation, one (4993) from the West Section of the Fosse, the other (4598) from the top of the fosse, West Section. The latter has been dated to the early 14th century and, with no. CFV 125 from the Market Place at Carrickfergus, represents the earliest Irish example found to date.²⁶

Finally, two instruments of unknown provenance in the National Museum of Ireland, one of bronze (X.1953)²⁷ which may well be the result of an excavation, the other of brass (X.1954), probably of English manufacture dating from around the end of the nineteenth century.

POSTSCRIPT

Since this article was written, I have been informed of a jew's harp find during excavations at Ballyman, Co. Dublin. Made of iron, it was located in the cobbled layer of the medieval section of the site and could be of late 14th/early 15th century date. It is of average size, being 6 cm. in length. Its National Museum registration number is E182:1437.²⁸

²¹Ó Ríordáin and Ó Danachair, *op. cit.* (note 3).

²²R. M. Cleary, "Excavations at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, 1977-78", *J. Cork Hist. Archaeol. Soc.*, 87(1982), 12 and Fig. 11:237, and pp. 91-92 and Fig. 7:550.

²³I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Ms. Mary Cahill, National Museum of Ireland, who brought this object to my attention and allowed me to examine it in advance of her excavation report.

²⁴David McLeod, Dept. of Archaeology, University College, Cork, kindly allowed me to examine this in advance of the Gas Pipeline published report, *op. cit.* (note 3), p. 157, Fig. 8:4 and p. 158.

²⁵Rynne, *op. cit.*, p. 254 and Fig. 7:13.

²⁶David Sweetman, "Archaeological Excavations at Trim Castle, Co. Meath, 1971-74", *Proc. Roy. Irish Acad.*, 78, C(1978), 178, Fig. 23:29 and p. 184.

²⁷Rynne, *op. cit.*, p. 257.

²⁸Elizabeth O'Brien, *Excavations at Ballyman Co. Dublin: Report on 1984 Season's Excavation* (unpublished typescript, 1985), p. 10 and Fig. 5a.