

# Get to Grips

with the **Fife and Drum**





## Foreword

Music tradition is a very important aspect of Ulster-Scots culture and heritage.

The fife is a traditional instrument made of hardwood and has a high pitched tone. It is the traditional accompaniment to the Lambeg drum. Its high-pitched sound can be heard above the volume of the great drum.

Fifes are hand-made by skilled artisans and they and the music associated with them, are important aspects of our Ulster-Scots culture, heritage and identity. Typically hornpipes and jigs are played on the fife which are a perfect accompaniment to the rhythms of the Lambeg drum.

The Ulster-Scots Agency supports the fifing and drumming community and helps develop new talent through tuition programmes and support, ensuring a vibrant future of this tradition. The rich Ulster-Scots music heritage is to be celebrated whether your interest is in learning to play or just enjoying the listening and cultural experience.

This book is one of a series that supports the Ulster-Scots Agency music tuition programmes. There are opportunities for the young and not so young to enjoy the experience of learning new fifing and drumming skills and I trust that this book will help you on that journey, supported by expert tutors and tuition programmes provided by the Ulster-Scots Agency.

**Richard Hanna**

Director of Education and Language

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## 1. History and Background of the Fife

Fifes and drums have been a major part of European armies from around the **13th century**, where they were used to keep large groups of soldiers marching at a steady speed. These drums were more like **field drums** (pictured below) and would resemble a modern-day **snare drum**, without the snare of course.

As well as this, they were often used to rally the troops for battle and, in some cases, demoralise the enemy with their mighty sound.

We believe that slightly larger drums arrived in **Ireland** along with **William, Prince of Orange** in the late **1600s**. His best soldiers were called **the Dutch Blues**, and we think it was these specific soldiers who used drums in this manner.





Later on, armies took up **flutes** or **fifes** to be used along with the drums.

These small wooden fifes were usually played in the musical pitch of either **Bb** or **C#**. This became the standard arrangement in European armies for around 500 years.



The Lambeg drum is an **indigenous** instrument, meaning it is found **nowhere else** in the world. A **drumming association** is a group of Lambeg drum enthusiasts who come together on a weekly basis.



Tutor Comments:



## 2. Manufacturing of the Fife



In this picture, we can see greenheart, European boxwood and Japanese boxwood. Boxwood would have been abundant in Ulster in the 18th and 19th centuries, as it was widely used for spindles on the looms in the linen industry. The piece of Japanese boxwood shown here (pale block of wood) came from an extremely old tree, well over a thousand years old.



This is Wilby Wilson, an expert **fife** maker from Larne, Co. Antrim, demonstrating how African blackwood looks at different stages of fife production. African blackwood is a very dense timber that is used in the production of many woodwind instruments, including the **Highland bagpipes** and the **flutes** used by many of Ulster's **marching bands**. The blackwood comes to Wilby in long rectangular blocks. He then removes the sharp corners (a process he describes as 'dressing') to allow the block to be turned on the **lathe**. The block furthest to the left in the picture is ready to be turned. The rod in the middle has been turned on the lathe but not bored, and the finished fife shows how the blackwood will eventually look at the end of the process.





Here, Wilby is **dressing** a piece of greenheart with a hatchet, in preparation for turning it on the lathe. Greenheart is used in marine structures such as piers, as it is dense, strong and naturally resistant to submersion in water. This piece of greenheart was salvaged from Larne harbour, although the tree is native to **Central and South America**.



Once the internal bore of the fife has been completed, it is then time to drill the **finger holes** and **embouchure** (mouth hole). Wilby secures the fife into a block of wood with a 'V' shaped groove using gaffer tape before positioning the drill.





Once the ferrules have been added, the fife is submerged for three days in a light **olive oil**. The wood absorbs some of the oil in this time, which will stop it from **drying out** in the long term and enable the instrument to be played and last for many years.

The final task required to complete the fife involves a small **cork** plug being cut and inserted at the **embouchure** end (blow hole end) to seal it off completely. Care has to be taken to ensure that the cork is positioned in the same place for every fife, as any difference in the length from the bottom of the fife to the cork can lead to slight differences in **pitch**. This can make several fifes playing in unison sound out of tune.



Tutor Comments:



### 3. Playing Styles and Association with the Lambeg Drum



Time drumming is where drummers play set rhythms to a musical tune played on the **fife**. The main area for this type of drumming is North Antrim. In bygone days, tunes were mostly passed down from generation to generation by **whistling** or learning by **ear**. However, there are some early records of **musical notation** dating from the early 1900s onwards.

In some parts of the province, mainly Co. **Down**, the **fife** and **rattly** is played along with the Lambeg drum. The **fife** and **rattly** is a throwback to the early fifes and drums talked about at the start of this booklet.





Different parts of the country have their own rhythms. Larne, Ballymoney and Ballymena are popular fifeing and drumming areas, and each location has its own unique drumming times.

**Single time** is popular around the Ballymena area and has been traditionally drummed to the fifeing tune '**100 Pipers**'.



In places like Co. **Armagh**, the drummers will play their rhythm without fifes. They have their own version of single time, but there are no fifes involved.





## Competition Drumming

This is where drummers compete against each other to see who has the best drum.



Each drum goes in front of the judges usually three times. These are called **rounds**. Drumming matches or competitions take place every week, usually on a Saturday, from late February until November.

Judges are looking for a drum that has a nice high pitch, yet has a solid '**middle**' sound and nice **tone**. Both skins need to have as close to the same sound as possible. This process is called **levelling**.





The aim of the game at competition drumming is to get the drum as **tight** as possible without it **bursting** or **breaking** to achieve the best sound possible.

The drums are tightened in a machine called a **press**. This **squeezes** the **skins** and allows the operator to gather **slack** rope when the **tension** is increased.



Tutor Comments:



## Acknowledgements

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