The ‘Famous’ Blind Musicians of Sheffield

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Preramble
A number of writers have undertaken to draw attention to the musical diversity within the city of Sheffield. Many of these have developed theses focussing on the discrete aspects of that musical life. In most of these works there is brief mention of the fact that there were ‘famous’ blind musicians in the town during the period of the Regency. These references all echo one another yet show little elaboration on the subject of this group of musicians.

Discovery
A programme from the Sheffield Assemblies of 1810 sheds some light on the ‘blind musicians’, elsewhere described as ‘fiddlers’ revealing the names, James Knight, Samuel Hawkes, Eleazar Clayton and Tom Booth. These are described in the programme as representative of the six ‘principal’ blind musicians. Tantalising glimpses of the lives of others, Blind Stephen, John Gibbons by name, are to be found in local folklore and anecdotes relating to the sans-culotte poet Joseph Mather. In most sources mention is made of a public house which served as a meeting place but detail seems scarce beyond the name of publican Samuel Goodlad. This sparse information often originates from the writings of R.E. Leader, much quoted newspaper editor of the latter half of the 19th century. Beyond this there is little to attest to these men and their way of life.

The Sheffield City Archives provide access to baptismal registers and parish records together with a number of diaries kept by local worthies. The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent, Leader’s newspaper carries a series of short articles and correspondence during the early 1870s, which further fill out the picture.

Investigations
There exists, in private hands, a manuscript notebook of melodies dated 1841 and compiled by one Joshua Burnett of Worsborough near Barnsley. The book, discovered in a violin case with an instrument by Martin of London contains a number of melodies, chiefly ‘cut-time’ hornpipes. The melodies are unusual for their genre and date being written for the violin but using a surprising number of flat keys not usually associated with folk melodies in this country. They are also tunes of greater technical demand than those commonly associated with traditional melody. One of these is noted as, ‘A hornpipe by James Knight, a blindman’.

James Knight was born in Owlerton on the outskirts of the town in 1786. Knight is recorded in census returns as ‘blind musician’. He married in 1810 and seems to have provided for his wife and daughter on the proceeds of his music. From the writings of William Wragg, a correspondent in the Sheffield & Rotherham Independent, it may be discovered that Knight associated with five others, Samuel Hawkes, Joseph Ward, Tom Booth, Alexander Clayton and George Smith. Each of these is recorded in the city’s archive.

Hawkes is found in the trades directory of 1833 as a music teacher. He was baptised in June 1876 and we might therefore surmise he was of an age with Knight. Ward

was born in 1789 and lost his sight at around the age of four years. He too is recorded by profession as a ‘blind musician’ and the diary of Joseph Skelton 1844 reveals that he died in that year and was an exceptional performer on the violin. Booth, similarly registered in the census was older being born in 1776 and having married twice raising one daughter.

The remaining two are interesting, however, since there is some dispute over their names. Other correspondents insist that it was Eleazar Clayton, not Alexander and that the sixth was actually William Brumby not George Smith. Examination of parish records revealed that Alexander Clayton was indeed a blind musician living in Trinity Street in 1819 and the mistake is easy to understand. It was Eleazer, eldest son of the broker J. Clayton, resident in Paradise Square who was the blind musician who sang tenor in the 1810 concert at the assemblies and who played the violin. As for George Smith, he was indeed blind and a musician but his son, also George was baptised in 1796 by which it may be inferred that George senior was older than the other blind musicians at the time. Finally it might be said that Brumby, Brumely or Bromley has yet to be identified in any documentary source. His inclusion is purely anecdotal.

There then remain those contemporaries of George Smith, Blind Stephen and John Gibbons together with a number of others named and occasionally identified, such as Blind Fox, noted in the diary of Thomas Ward who, in 1807 paid the blind musician to go away.

Organisation

The evidence of newspaper and archival records points to there having been a group of blind musicians who met at a public house called the ‘Q in the Corner’ in Paradise Square near to the parish church. These men seem to have operated over a very long period from the 1780s through to the 1840s. Closer examination reveals that they comprised two generations, the Blind Stephen group and the younger James Knight group. Leader speaks of them as an ‘institution’ and the demarcation of six as ‘principals’ may indicate an organisation which monitored its own members and resources.These operated, in effect, as a single group with an ad hoc organisational headquarters.

It was observed recently that these men must, like their peers in Bradford at the time, have held office as waits. This is not the case however, the waits were a fiercely contested position, held at this point in history by the Bingham family. These official musicians clearly tolerated the blind musicians of the town which itself is unusual. The blind musicians seem to have had some sort of organisation and Leader describes them as having ‘allotted’ circuits which took them out of the town to the outlying villages during the day, and returned them to town in the evening. Thus days were spent playing on the circuit and evenings were spent at the Q in the Corner. Generally their modus operandi was to proceed in pairs. One would play first part and the other second. Effectively they operated as duos. Mather points out in one of his poems that these circuits were fiercely guarded and describes a fight between Blind Stephen and Johnny Gibbons on the one hand, and two other blind musicians un-named by Mather, on the other.

There is no concrete evidence that they employed sighted guides like the blind bluesmen of the southern United States or the Ukranian blind minstrels. It seems probable that wives may have played some part in their peregrinations. This was true of one Blind John whose wife occasionally joined him singing hymns.

Repertoire and performance

The town of Sheffield had an unusually large number of public houses in the 19th century. This was due to two factors, the first was poor sanitation which reduced the quality of water for drinking. Beer was simply safer and added to which the basic employment was grinding cutlery, a job which encouraged a great thirst which needed regular attention. Thus it was said locally that there was, a pub on every corner.

Taking this into consideration it must be noted that these blind men bypassed a large number of watering holes in order to converge on the one pub noted for its music. As an aside, there is no evidence from documentary sources in Sheffield that playing music in pubs was a general rule. The explanation for this single occurrence lies in the person of its publican Sam Goodlad. This genial individual was sighted, relatively well off and an excellent player of the violin. Goodlad and his wife had no surviving offspring but had lost a number of children to a variety of illnesses over the time of their marriage. The couple seem to have had a special affection for the blind musicians which would account for the numerous anecdotes which centre them in this particular public house.

The manner of acquisition of repertoire is of interest since the visual imparement of these individuals prevents any degree of sight reading. Aural learning is therefore the obvious norm. As shown in the case of O'Carolan in Ireland, there is no reason to suppose that a hitherto unidentified sighted person could not have taught these players. In this context Sam Goodlad can be shown to be the single most important sighted person in the milieu of the Blind musicians of the early 19th century.

It seems likely that Goodlad is a prime mover in the situation of these musicians. Several anecdotes referring to these men mention Sam and his geniality as host of the musical gatherings at the 'Q in the Corner' in Paradise Square. As noted earlier, Goodlad was a violinist of some local reputation and played as leader of the Assemblies orchestra for all fashionable events in the rooms on Norfolk Street where his parents appear to have been the caretakers. As a player of some skill it seems likely that Goodlad would have had a hand in the development of musicianship amongst the blind players. This is supported by local anecdotal evidence. However, it should be noted that Goodlad died just as the 'six principals' were born and therefore could have had no direct influence upon them. It therefore remains that these were second generation players. It is likely that George Smith, Blind Stephen and John Gibbons would have been the vectors of transmission of high levels of performance skill. This is analogous with the unprecedented levels of musicianship seen in the early 21st century amongst the second generation of traditional musicians following the so called 'folk-revival' of the mid 20th century. Here high levels of technical ability are the norm whereas amongst the former generation they were the exception.
The influence of Sam Goodlad, a man who prided himself on quality playing was, therefore, felt by the younger blind musicians whose playing was considered so remarkable in their time

The repertoires of these performers seems to have been varied and chosen according to circumstance. There are four contexts noted regarding the playing of these musicians.

Playing on the circuit, according to the reminiscences published by Leader, involved popular tunes and hymns. The act of earning on a circuit is illustrated in one of the newspaper articles in which it is pointed out that the musician does not request money. An unspoken understanding exists in the exchange in which the blind musician asks, “Are any of you gentlemen mindful of a tune?” The affirmative causes the musician to play for a while until he points out that he must move on. He then asks to be ‘released’ from his current situation. This triggers a collection of pennies which are given to him in gratitude. He then thanks the assembly and leaves. There is something formulaic about this exchange which protects the musician from being considered a beggar. Blind musicians seem to have been proud of their status and their abilities seemingly ensuring that they remained sober whilst working. One of the several stories concerning Blind Stephen reveals his contempt for drunkards. He maintains that should one bump into him his fiddle could be broken and then, he states, “I should be ruined”.

The material in the Burnett book reflects the sort of material associated with playing in a social context and suggests the evening session in the pub where tunes were exchanged and rehearsed. The practice of playing in such surroundings is still very much part of the social music scene even in the 21st century. These gatherings occur now, as then, in a select minority of premises and are publicised chiefly by word of mouth being available only to the cogniscenti and do not constitute public entertainment. In these ‘sessions’ there is a great deal of social interaction which lies beyond normal conversation and at times acts as a surrogate for close friendship. Studies of modern manifestations of this form of musical activity have shown them to consist of a complex group of interchanges forming the gestalt which is the session. These conditions would have ideally suited blind musicians as a means of learning and refining new repertoire.

There existed, in local oral tradition a song called, ‘The Cocktail Reel’. In this we learn of a social occasion at which it is intended dancing should take place. Here Blind Stephen had been employed to play for the festivities. The employment of a fiddler to play in this context is venerable and unremarkable. It is mentioned by Dickens and actually practiced by Thomas Hardy, himself a fiddler of some reputation in his native Wessex. This indicates a further means whereby these players earned their money. There is much in the poem to suggest that payment was in advance for the festivities. Local researchers have asserted that this factual yet riotous account of a dance interrupted by the escape of a number of domestic animals, took place in Rotherham and suggests by location that the reputation of these musicians extended well beyond the town’s limits.

The fourth context is unusual and probably peculiar to this group.
Formal performance in the concert hall is not generally one which is associated with traditional musicians. The repertoire in this situation is listed in the programme for the event on May 3rd 1810. Here we see a selection of classical, popular, comic and self-penned material. A duet by Handel lies comfortably alongside Dibdinesque patriotic

songs and the blind musicians show themselves to be singers as well as competent performers on the flute in addition to the violin. This programme is unashamedly jingoistic and it is worth noting that it was performed at a time when the Peninsular campaign was beginning to swing in favour of the allies. One surmises that Clayton's rendition of 'Total Eclipse' from 'Samson', an actual blind man playing the part of the sightless smiter of Philistines must have been greeted with a fair degree of emotion.

Taking the programme as a whole we can observe that about half of the material is self-penned or locally produced. The two patriotic songs are by local writer John Knott and several of the melodies appear to be by the performers. This points to some deliberate creation of material, a fact which 19th century folklorists conveniently ignored in order to fabricate a somewhat different picture of traditional music making. The combining of melodic material into 'sets' must be remarked upon here. Several pieces are here performed in pairings. This associating of two or more tunes together can be shown to have, not only musical motivation, but also a social function. In playing in sessions the musicans follow one melody with another and over time this becomes habit. The one tune serving as a mnemonic for the other. In some cases there is evidence that these groupings occasionally stand in for a member of the group in their absence, a phenomenon not dissimilar to the function of the pizmonim of the Syrian jews in modern New York. (Kaufman-Shelemay)

Social life

An examination of the conditions under which the blind lived in Sheffield at this time reveals that the musicians were all male. Female blind persons are recorded as such and they are most frequently employed in manual work such as basket making or oakum picking. The musicians seem to have married and raised children on the proceeds of their playing. It is also notable that these individuals are not generally from working class families. Knight's parents were of the lower middle class, as were those of Hawkes whilst Clayton's family were comparatively wealthy, owning several properties in the town. There are no instances of musicians with other disabilities and this exclusivity of trade amongst blind males suggests either a widespread social attitude or once again points to some form of organisation amongst these individuals.

Summary

To summarise, therefore, Sheffield was blessed with the presence of a large group of sight impared musicians during the period 1780 to 1850. These were all men who used a high level of musical skill to maintain themselves and their families. They were well thought of in the town and well known in the area. Their music was varied and eclectic and they were in several cases, multi-instrumentalists. They came, generally, from a middle class background and were well organised in their professional lives. Several seem to have owned property whilst others lived in rented accommodation. The picture of itinerant beggars or mere buskers is far from the truth and their evident pride in their work gave them a status in their society which over-rode their disability. In a time of equal opportunity we may wonder whether or not these men were more equal because of disability than others who were merely poor.

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