

Quite a Day!

What is the connection between a lamb shank, a piece of bamboo and a cow's horn? (Clue: a serpent and a rumble pot.) Puzzled? -- read on:--

Six members from Bude were part of a gathering of over 140 at a very special North Devon Link U3A Study Day in October. The lecturer was Jonathan Weeks, a one-time farmer with a degree in Mediaeval Archaeology who has both a fascination for musical instruments of the period and a talent for playing them.

During an enthralling day he took his audience through the whole range of those used in Europe, explaining where they were found and how they were made. What made his presentation so special was that he not only illustrated his talks with slides of contemporary paintings and sculptures of every instrument he mentioned, but also showed his amazing collection of authentic replicas and demonstrated their range and limitations by playing a tune of the Middle Ages on each one.

It would take all the space available in the whole of this Newsletter to do justice to Jonathan's knowledge and expertise, so I can only give you a taste.

During the morning we were introduced to the reed family and then woodwind, whistles, flutes and organs. Man was making music as long ago as 3000 BC, and probably well before that, as the oldest reed pipe ever discovered (in a tomb in Ur) proves. In this Country the Saxons also played lyres, and the Romans brought us bone whistles, pan pipes and bagpipes. The original bagpipes were small and quietish in tone and were first used by shepherds to calm their sheep. Although their general use in most of Europe had died out by the 16th century, they are still found in Albania today. However, not everyone is happy with them; they are registered by the Geneva Convention as a weapon of psychological warfare! When the Crusaders travelled to the Middle East they encountered the shawm, a single note, very loud, reed instrument which was most effective for curfews and alarms. They adopted it and we know that it was used for hundreds of years as one (six feet long) was recovered from the wreck of the Mary Rose. Writing in the 1380's, Chaucer refers to the hornpipe, meaning a pipe where the reed is covered by horn to form the mouthpiece. The Hornpipe was a dance developed for sailors from below decks as a way of exercising their legs when they came up for their periods in the fresh air. Arms had to be kept folded so that no-one was knocked overboard. Compulsory dancing lasted until Nelson's time.

After an excellent lunch provided and served by a small army of helpers from the participating U3As we reassembled to the evocative sound of the conch shell. Its single note carries for miles, especially across open water, so it is an extremely effective transmitter of messages in morse code or other pre-set formats.

The afternoon session took us through trumpets, horns and sackbuts (which developed into trombones), and on to stringed instruments. The first of these was the lyre, as shown on ancient pottery, which evolved one way as the harp and the other, with a long finger board and a sound box, as the lute. The Middle Eastern zither, with strings of different lengths stretched across a sounding board, also developed in Europe in two ways. The psaltery, where strings were plucked, was the forerunner of the harpsicord, and the dulcimer, where strings were hammered, was the ancestor of the piano.

The bow was introduced to stringed instruments to give a more sustained sound. The smallest, the rebek, was about 15 inches long with only three strings -- the predecessor of the fiddle.

A long single string with a big back box was known as the string drum, or humdrum. This is bowed and emits a single note; it can be played with one hand while the other hand controls a flute. This combination is still heard in India today.

The final instrument we met on that memorable day was a small round pot with a skin stretched over it. A stick is moved up and down through a small hole in the centre of the skin and the vibration produces the sound; hence the rumble pot. So the answer to the puzzle at the beginning of this piece is that all three can easily be made into Mediaeval musical instruments.

A short question time brought the day to a close, and we all went home having experienced once again the truth of the principle behind U3A -- that learning IS fun!

