

## 2.05 A Hugh Robertson Pastoral set c.1775.

Ken McLeod, with drawings by Wilbert Garvin

This set is one of a pair, which I purchased at a Sotheby's 'Early Musical Instrument' auction in October 1998. Both sets are almost identical – one however was stamped 'Robertson' while the other was completely unmarked. There were slight differences in lengths and finger hole placing. They were together in one ancient dove-tailed pine box full of wood-worm holes which might lead one to believe that the pair had always been together – they certainly had been together for a very considerable time. There are too many similarities to consider that different makers could have made them. However Hugh Robertson had a daughter who apparently carried on the pipe-making business into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1775 Hugh Robertson appears in an Edinburgh street directory with an address at Castle Hill. He was born in 1725 and died in 1802. The sets were most possibly made in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but I believe they could be earlier and that the regulators were added later. Both have a four-key regulator and two drones – an A and a D. The material is brass, ivory and ebony. The original, and now shrivelled, basil bags were on both the sets and each set was complete with their little bellows, the outlet of which is horn. The set described here is the one which was stamped, and in my possession – the other belongs to John Hughes, the Belfast piper and flute player. It will be interesting to hear what John has to say about his set after his close examination and restoration.

The bore of the chanter is generally parabolic and rings are apparent on close examination. The regulator bore shows very distinct steps. Initially the appearance of the bores would lead one to assume that if the set is after 1780 then they are decidedly crude in comparison to the Irish instrument of the time.<sup>1</sup> However the Pastoral pipe would seem to be, beyond doubt, the forerunner of the Irish pipes. Another reason I propose an earlier date is that the stock plug does not appear to be original - it is of a different wood, probably mahogany, but exquisitely made.

The Geoghegan tutor drawing of a piper<sup>2</sup> shows two long drones, as this set has, and that tutor dates to before 1750. In 1750 Hugh Robertson was 25 years of age. If one had such a set around 1775/80 when the regulator was coming into vogue, one might take the set back to Mr Robertson and have him add one. In order to do this all he would need to do was make a new stock plug. In the earliest days of regulators it may not have been considered wrong to put the double-reeded regulator alongside the single-reeded drones within the same cavity. We know today that this arrangement causes tuning problems and notes on drones and regulators. But then again, the Hotteteres and others in France 100 years before, made their *Musette de Cour* with double reeds in all of the drones so they most likely knew not to mix single and double reeds.

The chanter note holes are straight and without fraising. The regulators however have some notes fraised in reverse that is, tapered outwards to the surface rather than *vice*

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<sup>1</sup> See SRS Journal Vol. 1, Item 1.01.

<sup>2</sup> See SRS Journal Vol. 1, Item 1.06.

*versa* – the norm. See the drawings for mechanical details. This is very peculiar and we must look out for such adjustment in early sets of pipes. Quite honestly, I do not understand it. All of the regulator note holes are elongated, where the chanter note holes are almost round. I think this makes these pipes a little ‘crude.’

The keys I do not believe are original. They are very simple and left a little on the ‘rough’ side in my opinion, when I consider the Jamie Allen ‘Robertson’ set at Morpeth and the general outside appearance of this set in general which is very fine indeed.

The Jamie Allen set<sup>3</sup> is shown in the picture collection for comparison. They are at least very similar if not the same make.

The reed I found to work is very similar to a UP reed – approximately 75mm long and 11mm across the tip of the blades. The regulator reed is about 70mm with a similar head.

The drones I found impossible to fit with cane but easily fitted with elder. Cane would of course be even louder and I would not recommend it in any case.

The set is overall quite loud and has a sound, which seems quite alien because of the low A drone. It quite easily plays the second octave, but I cannot manage much above the A. The main argument I would lay down about these pipes, from my little experience, is that I do not believe that it was ever possible to play a note in the second octave without ‘running’ up to it. It is difficult to get used to the fingering because of course the back D is not your expected middle D. Middle D is most easily achieved (at least to me) by over-blowing with all the fingers on the chanter except for the low C.

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<sup>3</sup> ©Morpeth Bagpipe Museum. Thanks to Anne Moore, curator.