

2.02 A Timothy Kenna set of c.1825 pitched about modern C.

Ken McLeod, with drawings by Wilbert Garvin.



This set turned up in Bray, co Wicklow in the ownership of a Mr Patrick 'Peino' O'Donnell. They came into his family through his father John who is shown here playing them sometime in the 1960s. He purchased the set from a pawnshop in Church Street, Dublin, in 1922 for five pounds. William Rowsome taught Mr O'Donnell to play, insisting that he learn to read music first. Patrick told me that his father was a good friend of the Dorans and during the 1930s both Johnny and Felix often visited the O'Donnell family home on their travels down to Wexford "and God knows where else." They enjoyed playing this set and sometimes borrowed it, leaving one of their own behind in its place. About three months later they would come back and swap the pipes again.

Mr O'Donnell was an uncle to the late pipe-maker Johnny Burke who had them in his possession for some years. After Johnny passed away they were returned to the owner.

At first glance the set appeared to be in a poor state. It is made of a fruitwood, possibly pear, with ivory, horn and brass fittings. The brass had been gilded a long time ago, perhaps by Kenna himself but only a few specks remain. Just a few parts could be said to be perfect but most are original. The main-stock is original and this is unusual enough for a set of this age.

As I said, not much had been left untouched, but little permanent damage had occurred. The chanter had the bottom hand tone holes scalloped and the keys were all missing. It had been broken in two when a concrete block fell on it at one stage when they were stored in a garage, but thankfully the repair was well carried out – possibly by Johnny Burke. The repair is barely visible inside or out and it plays superbly well. The tenor drone tuning-piece was a poor replacement and a superior piece has been added since. The bass drone had been cut near the end and a bend fitted to turn it up – shown at right. The end of the baritone regulator had been badly mutilated and the mount stuck together with 'Araldite.' In fact Araldite seems to have been the preferred adhesive used by a very recent 'restorer' of the set. This person shall remain nameless – I know who it was, and in case of any misunderstanding, I state here categorically that it was after Johnny



Burke's time. A plastic bag was also fitted after Johnny's time and the main-stock cup – a beautiful piece of turned horn (below), typical of Timothy Kenna, was connected to the bag with Araldite alone i.e. not tied in at all.



The regulator keys are the work of at least two makers, Kenna (above) and another, though not modern. Only about half of the keys are original, and these are easily identified. Timothy used the same method of manufacture as James his father seems to have used – the pins are fitted through folded down flanges exquisitely made.

The ebony bass regulator was a replacement early in the last century, possibly by William Rowsome. It is in good order and works perfectly well. Nevertheless it does not belong and so has joined the collection of bass regulators which I keep on a wall (along with some other antique weapons). It is a pity that the original bass is missing because as far as I am aware there are no earlier bass regulators extant than those made by Timothy Kenna.

The most awful modern addition was the bellows which were so badly made that they held no air and needed enormous pressure to push them closed. They joined the sacrificial pyre last mid-summer.

One of the nicest things about the appearance of the set is that every original stick is clearly stamped 'Kenna Dublin' with the shamrock motif over the name.¹ I say circa 1825 because Timothy Kenna moved his business from Mullingar to Dublin in 1812² and remained there until c1837. So they were made between 1812 and 1837. They appear to be very like the pipes depicted in the painting 'The Limerick Piper' by Haverty – allowing a little for the artist's ignorance of the instrument and my personal fancy.

I think it is worth mentioning here the similarity between Timothy Kenna's work and that of the Northumbrian maker Robert Reid (1784-1837). Both carried out extremely fine work, their designs are very similar in many ways, and they were contemporary. A relationship is without doubt in my mind, but there is no proof that they ever met. If that

¹ *The Seán Reid Society Journal*. 01. Vol.1. 1999.

² Seán Donnelly in 'A century of pipe-making, 1770 – 1870: New Light on the Kennas and Coynes.'

is the case certainly one of them was highly influenced by, and familiar with, the other's work.

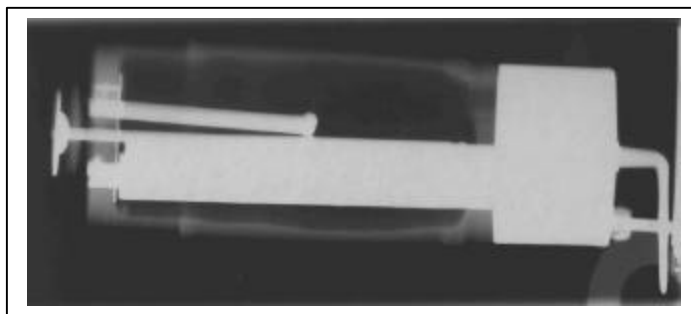
Initial body restoration began with the removal of the 'Araldite' adhesive from the fabulous horn stock cup. This took a week of spare time carefully picking at it. A new bag was fitted, and the tone hole chimneys filled and re-tuned. (See below).

Unfortunately some of these tone holes were also enlarged in an obvious attempt to re-tune it after the chimneys were reduced. We will therefore never know what the maker's dimensions were – however we can assume they were somewhat similar to the upper tone holes. The D# had been re-drilled farther up the bore than the original position. Restoring the chimneys moved the D# back to its original position. Surprise, surprise!



The first job of real concern was of course to measure the chanter bore, half in fear that some re-tuning had occurred by some incompetent reed-maker unable to fit it correctly. Fears were thankfully unjustified. The throat diameter is 3.8mm and a nicely tuned bore plot was produced showing final tuning in a number of places. Trying reeds showed me quickly that it was not far away, but some of the lower tone holes were still oversize. After filling these and re-drilling, voicing the chanter has come close to perfect tuning. Not only that, but superb harmonic variations and the cross fingering movements only found on the best chanters were easily playable. Ignore the keys in the pictures – they are of my own manufacture. When I finally got the drones working I was surprised at the perfection of tone and the resonance of the hollow main-stock, which adds greatly to the overall sound. The 'buzz' in the sound is dampened greatly by placing a hand around the stock. This was the point at which I definitely decided that the bass regulator was not going back. A third reason for this decision was mechanical. The stock is about 175 years old, the walls of the hollow part are down to 3.2mm thick, and it has not been treated with the respect it deserves.

I suggest that the thinness of the walls was to maximise the resonance from the drone reeds working together inside. At least some believe, myself included, that this aids to force the drone reeds to work together and therefore keep the tuning more stable.

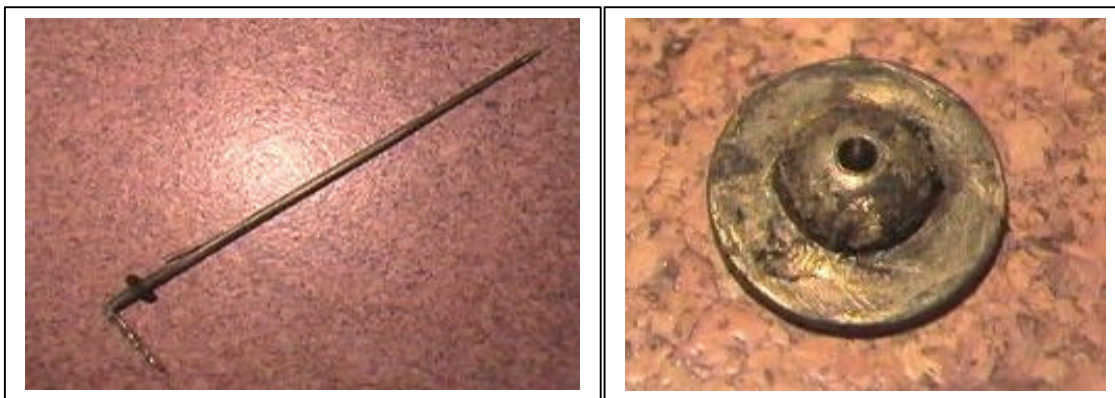


X-ray of hollow main-stock.

As I have already mentioned, an earlier bass regulator had been an original part of the set, apparent from filled screw and wind-outlet-holes in positions, which did not fit the current bass. Also, whoever had fitted the current bass ignored the little brass rolled tube, which supplied the air from the bag end of the main-stock, through the hollow chamber and directly to the flush of the bass regulator, but rather made a crude hole directly into the main cavity so that the air was fed from the drone reed chamber directly.

In the drawings we have ignored this and show the bass feed pipe as it was originally. There had been four drones and I would propose that the fourth, long gone, played a fifth in keeping with the earlier sets by both Timothy, his father James, Robert Reid and others of the period c1770 to c1820.

The drone switch is a very interesting design, much more complex than those not only in



common use today, but more complex than the work of all the other master makers. It is a round bar tapered over its entire length culminating in a fine double screw thread on to which is fitted a 'top-hat' design for the leather valve support. Undoubtedly a nut, now missing, was fitted to the final narrower screw thread for added security.

The hole to take the switch through the outer solid part of the stock is also tapered so that when the key is pushed in it fills the taper and when pulled out the hole is sealed by virtue of the valve at the bag end. To help stop the key moving when open, a spring is fitted near the lower end as can be seen in the picture above left. The spring fits the key bar almost precisely when closed.

The bass drone has been restored and is straight as intended by the maker, even though some of the material had been removed when it was modified – I estimate just about 44mm, using the baritone to give the correct ratio. It works extremely well as it is and so I do not intend to add material to put it back to its original dimensions. The drawings show the bass-tuning piece, as I believe the original dimensions were. A most interesting discovery was made regarding the decoration on the tuning-piece of the baritone drone, and can easily be assumed also on the tenor and bass. The fact that this decoration was not central on the wood always intrigued me. The piece certainly looks right and well balanced. A moment of inspiration one evening made me measure the distance from the

centre of this decoration to each end of the piece. The measurements were five inches and eight inches approximately. The ‘golden’ ratio of Fibonacci is 1 to 1.618 and this is not far away from that. Here we have something a little over 1:1.6. These old master makers never fail to impress me – almost every time I study them I discover something new. I do not believe for an instant that this is coincidence.

For the sake of completeness we have included the dimensions of the tenor drone tuning-piece, which, as previously mentioned, is a replacement. These dimensions are almost certainly the same as the original because of the discovery that Kenna used the ‘magic’ ratio.

There is no G# key on the chanter, nor any sign that there ever had been one. Egan omitted the G# key also at times. It does have the D# key however and it is roughly half-way between the D# and E tone holes. The D# tone hole on any *Uilleann* chanter is approximately an equal temperament D# which does not work with the drones at all. It is vital that the D# tone hole is there or we could not get a good E, as anyone who ever made a chanter will know. Played together with the key however, the D# key helps accent the second harmonic – a fifth (G), which of course balances perfectly well with the drones. One must remember that the early pipes were designed to play a broad repertoire of music and a D# that balanced with the drones would have been seen as a necessity. Near enough was not good enough in the classic period, although it certainly seems to be good enough these days.

The regulator bores are tuned as the chanter, though a little more crudely, and the bore plots given in the following pages clearly show this. The tenor is in better condition than the baritone, but both work very satisfactorily.

Only the most important and relevant dimensions are given in the following drawings. Great attention is paid to the main-stock, as it rightly deserves. The bore details should be quite good – they are the results of three complete measuring marathons and any small discrepancies were consolidated. Precisely how the maker left them is however open to conjecture. I can say that it plays extremely well and although the set has been through the wars, it has one of the finest tones I have heard. The chanter does everything a good chanter should, easily, and the tone of the drones is utterly superb. Pat Mitchell classifies this set as one of the finest he has ever played.

The sound sample is of the three tonic drones only without the replacement ‘A’ or 5th which I have added recently. Makers can have any further information they might require by contacting me directly.

Notes.

- 1 The bore plots are subject to slight inaccuracy both as the bore may be slightly oval in parts and also because of my measuring.
- 2 You may note that the chanter keys are different in various pictures. They are my own make and are now brass – as they should be. The originals were all missing.
- 3 Some pictures are in high resolution and others much lower.