

The Rothesay 'Megaphone'

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The collections of Bute Museum contain several items from the old cotton mills including what seems to be a voice amplifier, a megaphone (Plate 15). Many of the early acquisitions to the collection have very sketchy details of their origin and so is the case with this item. It is described simply as "a horn used for calling factory workers at the time of the cotton mills", giving no indication of its precise history, when it came into the museum collection or who the donor was. However, in a lecture was given to the B.N.H.S. in December 1908, ex-Provost Sharp described how: "a man with a horn went through the town in the morning to waken the workers up." As Provost Sharp had at one time owned the Broad Croft spinning and weaving mill, it is seems probable that the horn mentioned in his lecture was this megaphone and that he may have donated it to the museum.

The megaphone is 55 cm long. Its diameter at the bell end is 18 cm. Ten stitch holes in the edge of the mouthpiece indicate that there was originally some kind of padding to protect the user's lips when pressed against its otherwise sharp metal edge. As well as its outdoor function described by Sharp, it may have been used within the mills themselves to make announcements or call out the time. Cotton mills were exceptionally noisy places and some form of amplification would have been required to make a person clearly heard.

When I (JWM) first saw it, it came to my mind that this was a small version of the 19th century vamp or vamping horns, which were once used in church. The vamp horn was a powerful vocal amplifier, used where no instruments were available. The most reliable bass singer would clap the eggcup-like mouthpiece over his mouth and sing his part loudly. Perhaps he did not bother fully to enunciate the words, for it was pitch and rhythm that he needed to convey to the other singers of the choir as well as the congregation, assuming that the minister permitted the latter to sing. The vamp horn was not a musical instrument itself. Neither is the Rothesay exhibit, and anyone who tries to get notes out of it using a brass instrument embouchure - even a skilled didgeridoo player - is likely to produce no more than a disappointing raspberry.

There are several vamp horns still in existence, notably the one at East Leake, Notts. (for a long time misnamed "The Bass Shawm", which was in reality a rare double reed instrument that became extinct in the mid 1600s). There are also two vamp horns hanging from the ceiling of the church on the cliff top in Whitby, N. Yorkshire, (where some consider that the vile Count Dracula drained innocent young Meena's neck in the graveyard). Vamp horns are usually two metres or more in length, but there is an instrument of intermediate dimensions in the bell tower (*Belfort*) in the centre of Bruges in Belgium. It was used in former times to convey proclamations to the populace from one of the balconies on the front of the tower which dominates the city's main square. Another, shorter still, may be seen in the Castle Museum, York. This polished brass megaphone, which is displayed in the pawnbroker's shop window in the reconstructed Victorian street, Kirkgate, may once have been used for communicating with oarsmen on the river. Thus, both were used to amplify the spoken voice and, as with the Rothesay megaphone, there is no reason to think that either was ever used in church. They are portable voice amplifiers, probably for speech, and analogous to the conical megaphone which gained a handle in the 20th century and, later, battery power.