

## Archie Cuckoo, 'Fiddler of Fiddlers'.

by Maurice Powell

This article was prompted by the news that a violin, thought to have belonged to Archie Cuckoo, one of the most colourful street musicians in Douglas during the mid-nineteenth century, had returned to the Island to find a home in the Manx Museum.\*

\* The violin in question is in fact not old enough to be Archie Cuckoo's own instrument, but belonged to Richard Cain OBE MHK, the grandfather of the donor. Information from Katie King, Manx National Heritage.

Next to nothing is known about the life of Archie Cuckoo, real name Archibald Collins, the son of 'Collins the bruiser', except through brief references to him in the local newspapers and scant few official documents. These glimpses of his life tell us that he was a 'well-known character in the history of Douglas', and a street fiddler renowned for his 'magic touch on the violin (which) cheered the heart and exercised the legs of many a swain alike, in country hamlet and in town tavern in bygone days'. It was said that even Paganini could not have made the fiddle speak like Archie Cuckoo.

He was born in Ireland around 1817, and in February 1843 married Catherine McBray, also from Ireland. The 1851 Census reveals that Archie and Catherine and a daughter Mary Anne were living at number 5 Water Lane, Douglas, one of the 'slumming parts of Douglas . . . with their utter want of sanitary methods', according to J. A. Brown, and nearby 'Little Ireland' which was known locally as 'Little Hell'.\*

\* See *Douglas Nearly 100 Years Ago, Ellan Vannin* Vol 1, number 2, June 1924.

The 1861 Census reveals that he was living in James Street, near Lord Street, with his wife and daughter Mary Anne plus two further daughters and three sons, together with a Charles Collins (presumably a relative), described as an agricultural worker, his wife, son and three daughters.

A self-taught musician, 'not deeply skilled in the mysteries of music', he earned the nickname 'Cuckoo' because of the prowess he displayed in playing *The Cuckoo Galop*.\* When the young boys called out 'Cuckoo, Cuckoo!' 'Archie would pop his fiddle to his shoulder and give a scratch or two leading some to imagine he could even make his violin swear'.

\* Possibly *The Cuckoo* or *May Day Galop* by Josef Gung'l, the Austrian composer of waltzes and polkas. This piece was in the repertoire of the famous Distin Family of saxhornists who gave concerts in Douglas and Ramsey in August 1850.

Other well-known fiddlers in the town included Tommy Cringle, Neddy Bell, and 'Old Murphey' who was described as 'an apt reader of notes' whose 'violent physical contortions' contrasted wildly with 'the sweet sounds which he discoursed on the violin'.\*

\* *Mona's Herald*, 09.12.1863

### The Christmas Callers

There is one reference to Archie Cuckoo as a member of the Choral Society Band along with other fiddlers 'of great power' including (Old) Murphey and Tommy Cringle, known as Nichol

or and possibly Tommy the Wad, one of the 'old fiddlers at Christmas time', 'who perambulated the town after midnight' to announce the approach of the festive season with their traditional greeting:

*Good morning, Mr So-and so, good morning, Mrs So-and-so, and all the rest of your family, just gone half-past two o'clock on a fine, frosty morning'.*

in December 1898\* the *Ramsey Weekly News* recalled the Christmas 'Fiddlers' or 'Callers' in an article entitled 'A reminiscence of fifty years ago: a description of an old Manx custom'. According to the article groups of musicians would go 'night marauding' (collecting money or begging) in the streets from the end of November until Christmas Day, with a 'few twinges on the fiddle as proof of their bona-fides'.

\* *Ramsey Weekly News*, 31.12.1898

On one occasion the 'callers' rudely roused from his slumbers the 'Manx Burns', John Gell, who penned the following rebuke in verse:

*Cease, catgut scraper, cease your trade, my ears no longer tickle; for the Devil he once a fiddler made, and called him Tommy Nichol.\**

The musicians would congregate at the old quayside customs hut - near the present-day Swing Bridge – before setting out on their perambulations, and 'sample' the rum and whiskey being examined for alcoholic strength by the customs officers there.\*\*

\* See 'Old Douglas' in the *Mona's Herald*, 29.01.1930, and 'Christmas 70 years Ago: The Fiddlers' in the *Mona's Herald*, 24.12.1935.

\*\* *Mona's Herald*, 29.07.1896.

The *Manx Sun* of December 1845 contains a report of the event known as the 'Liberation of the would-be Martyr' from the 'dismal dungeons of Castle Rushen', and the Grand National March which followed. Archie Cuckoo joined the 'Tag-rag' crowds after they departed the George Hotel and passed a field at Ballaughton where they disturbed some quietly grazing 'porkers'.\*

\* A lengthy description of this strange old custom – the 'Martyr's Liberation Farce' - may be found in the *Manx Sun*, 20.12.1845.

Archie Cuckoo, 'the widely-celebrated, exquisite and graceful fiddler', died in 1863 in conditions amounting to squalor – 'with neither fire, nor candle, nor bread, nor food of any description' – possibly in Old Post Office Lane or James Street; he may even have been living to an extent 'off the grid', and it is likely that drink had much to do with his death. His wife died the following year, virtually destitute and in wretched circumstances, after a long period of ill-health in which excessive drinking played a part.\*

\* *Mona's Herald*, 09.12.1863; *Mona's Herald*, 23.11.1864.

## Epilogue

Archie Cuckoo was remembered affectionately long after his death, because he was often represented as a stock character in local entertainments. 'Oul' Archie Cuckoo was recalled in

August 1897 when 'Old Tommy Kinrade' representing 'the Castletown Fiddler', led a bridal procession 'down to the tumultuous and happy *mob beg*' at a Ramsey Cricket Club concert,\* and again in September 1898 in a report of a concert given by the parishioners of St. Paul's Church, Ramsey, in the Ramsey Pavilion, when Kinrade once again assumed the role of 'the indispensable fiddler' Archie Cuckoo, and led 'a score of young damsels', in a jolly country dance.

\* *Ramsey Weekly News*, 28.08.1897 and 03.09.1898.

A letter in Anglo-Manx dialect to the editor of the *Examiner* in January 1898, being a review of the Manx concert in Douglas, was signed 'ARCHIE CUCKOO', and was possibly from the Manx National Poet by T. E. Brown.\*

\* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 08.01.1898; see also *A rale Manx concert*, Maurice Powell, manxmusic.com.

At the Juvenile Fete of the Church Band of Hope in Kirk Michael in February 1903, one master J. Halsall portrayed him in a performance of an 'original operetta' based on *The Manx Wedding* from *Manx National Songs*\* arranged by Mr Ambrose Kelly of Peel, and at the Carnival, Gymkhana and Sale of Work in the grounds of Whitehouse in the same village in August 1905, when the same entertainment was performed and Mr Ambrose Kelly himself took the role of 'the Castletown Fiddler'. In August 1907, a Mr R. Miller played 'a merry air' as 'oul' Archie Cuckoo' at a Manx Concert in Ramsey, and the following year, a dance named after him was performed at the end of season Mhelliagh at the Derby Castle.

\* A line in *The Manx Wedding* goes: 'Karran the Cornet just come from Malew and the Castletown Fiddler old Archie Cuckoo'. 'Karran the Cornet' was a retired military bandsman from Castletown who trained the Ballabeg Band.

In November 1911\* Archie Cuckoo was named as one of the 'guests' at an evocation of a Manx wedding of from a hundred years earlier along with 'Karran the Cornet', 'Phillie the Desert', 'Tommy the Mate' and 'Mrs Cregeen', which was by all accounts 'excruciatingly funny'.

\* *Isle of Man Examiner*, 18.11.1911

Archie Cuckoo was last mentioned in the local newspapers in the *Ramsey Courier* in June 1936 when a Mr J. Fick portrayed him at a 'Rale Manx Tae Party' given by the Liverpool Manx Society which concluded with *The Manx Wedding*.

**Ramsey, May 2022.**