

On a cool Thursday evening we were in the City of Ripon for dinner and took advantage of witnessing one of the oldest daily ceremonies in England—that of the “Setting of The Watch” in the Market square at precisely 9 p.m. We arrived just in time to see the current horn blower, a jovial gentleman by the name of George Pickle, approach one of the four corner of the obelisk in the center of the market square. Here he blew about a 10 second “call” on his animal horn with copper fittings—the fourth such horn to be used since the tradition started in 886. Yes, that’s not a misprint and I haven’t missed a digit; the nightly setting of the watch has been carried out for the past 1129 years—without interruption!

After the initial sounding, he walked clockwise to the next corner of the obelisk and sounded his horn once more. This was repeated at the other two corners. After the final blow, he turned smartly through about 45 degrees, bowed and tipped his three corner hat in the direction of a Tudor-style building at the southern end of the square. The ceremony was now complete—for another day.



There were few witnesses to this nightly event on a cold February night but Mr Pickle was happy to greet those who did turn out and, as he said, he is always happy to welcome visitors from the Colonies. He also presented us with a Lucky Wooden Penny which he has taken on as his own project to promote the event and which he assured us would bring us “wondrous opportunities in the days ahead”. I have no doubt that it will fulfil its promise.

I have taken the liberty of copying directly from Mr Pickles’ website the history of this ancient and important event in the life of the beautiful City of Ripon. I certainly could not do it the same justice in my own words. I have also included here a photograph of Mr Pickles, his Lucky Penny and his contact details. I feel sure that he would love to hear from anyone wherever they are in the world and I would encourage any traveler to make a point of visiting Ripon (its magnificent cathedral, fine buildings, racecourse and beautiful countryside) and, as its welcome notice suggests “Stay Awhile Amidst its Ancient Charms”.

Visit nearby Fountains Abbey and Studleigh Royal Estate, stroll its ancient streets and take in its 1300 year history. Perhaps even take the family to one of its more contemporary attractions, the Lightwater valley theme Park. You can even arrive by canal boat to the most northerly point of England’s connected canal system (although there may be some Lancashire towns that would lay a similar claim!

There’s always plenty to do in and around Ripon—but whatever brings you to town, make the nightly setting of the watch a “Must See” event.



George Pickle, Hornblower since 2004

The motto of Ripon on the Town Hall above is: 'Except the Lord keep the city, the wakeman waketh in vain'. This is taken directly from Psalm 127:1 which has 'watchman' instead of 'wakeman' because the Hebrew meaning is that of protecting and guarding. But that of course was the Ripon Wakeman's function, despite his unusual name.

**AS WE AND THOSE WE LOVE, TRAVEL ALONG THIS PATH OF LIFE,
SOMETIMES TROUBLES COME ALONG AND BRING US PAIN OR STRIFE.
WHEN THEY DO JUST TRUST IN GOD, HIS POWERS THEY ARE MANY,
AND GOOD TIMES WILL RETURN TO YOU THROUGH YOUR LUCKY WOODEN PENNY.**

NOW BE PREPARED FOR A WONDEROUS OPPORTUNITY IN THE DAYS AHEAD. - GEORGE PICKLES - HORNBLOWER SINCE 2004



THANKS FOR COMING TO SEE THE CEREMONY OF 'SETTING THE WATCH'. It was a pleasure to meet you. - I have been RIPON HORNBLOWER since 2004. My contact details are - George Pickles. 12 Ash Bank Road. RIPON, HG4 2EQ, or ripon.hornblower@hotmail.co.uk - website - <http://the-ripon-hornblower.webs.com>. If you have any comments regarding your visit to RIPON or the HORNBLOWER experience or good luck stories from your Lucky penny, we would welcome these to - The Editor Ripon Gazette - news@ripongazette.co.uk

The History of the Ripon Wakeman and the ancient ceremony of 'Setting the Watch'

by George Pickles, the Ripon City Hornblower since 2004.

My role as Ripon City Hornblower is to support the Mayor of the day in all his/her civic duties and above all else to safeguard the continuity of the ancient ceremony of 'Setting the Watch' which has been carried out every evening on the market square without a miss, not for one single day, for 1129 years. It is the longest ongoing unbroken daily ceremony in the world :

'Setting the Watch' dates back to the year 886 when Alfred the Great visited the City in those unsettled and troubled Viking times, and was so impressed by the place itself and the support he was given by the people against the intruders that he decided to grant the community a Royal Charter. As it was a spontaneous decision he did not have a parchment scroll or anything of that prepared. All he had to offer them as a symbol of the Charter was a horn. He told them that they should treasure the horn, refer to it henceforth as THE CHARTER HORN, and look after it for ever, and the people did. It is still in safe keeping in the City Town Hall today.

It was at that time he told the people of Ripon that they should be vigilant as the Vikings were still a threat and other unruly elements in the land could descend upon them and they risked losing all they held dear. He suggested that they appoint a 'Wakeman'. The 'Wakeman' would be a man who stayed awake and patrolled the area all through the hours of darkness keeping a watchful eye while others sleep safely in their beds. So they appointed a 'Wakeman', and they further decided that he could put the Horn to good use. He would sound the Horn at the four corners of the market cross at 9pm each evening to let the people know that the 'Watch' was 'Set' and they could retreat to their homes knowing full well that it was safe for sleeping, and that he was out there keeping a watchful eye all night. It has not been missed, not even for one single night since then.



The ritual continued almost unchanged throughout the centuries to the year 1604 when a second Charter was granted to the City by James 1st, (James 1st of England, James 6th of Scotland and the first king to rule over a united Britain). This time it was a written Charter. It was decided at that time that things should become more democratic in Ripon because the Wakeman of the day had become all too powerful. He was elected by and from a group of about 15 of the most powerful men in the City; no one else had a say in the matter, and once elected to the office of Wakeman for a one year term of office, he simply appointed the others as his constables. Between them they ruled the City with a rod of iron, made up laws to suit themselves, and meted out justice as they saw fit including lashings on the square where the ancient ceremony now takes place. However at the granting of the second Charter, the office of Wakeman was discontinued, and he was replaced by the first Mayor to be elected by vote by all the people, and the Mayor appointed a Hornblower to carry on the ceremony of 'Setting the Watch' on his behalf.

The first Mayor of Ripon was a man called Hugh Ripley and the house he lived in still stands at the South West corner of the square and is known as 'The Wakeman House', and is now used as a cafe. However Mr. Ripley did not trust his Hornblower and put a rule in place so that he could keep his eye on him and to make sure he had done his duty each evening. That rule requires that, when the Hornblower has 'Set the Watch' at the market cross at 9pm, he must find the Mayor of the day, wherever he is in the City and report to him that he has done his duty by standing in front of him and after sounding the Horn three times, he must bow his head, raise his hat and shout the words "Mr. Mayor, the Watch is Set". That is still done today, and must be done wherev-

er the Mayor is, whether it be at home, at a function, or in the Town Hall. If the Mayor was outside the City or away on holiday it had to be done on the Town Hall steps as if he was in residence.

It is said that if the Horn is not sounded to his satisfaction, the ghostly face of Hugh Ripley will appear in the attic window of the Wakemans House and a pestilence and other great tragedies will descend upon the City

The nightly Ceremony attract visitors from all over the world as well as from every part of the U.K. At the height of summer there could be up to a hundred people there each evening, and in the depth of winter there are always some people looking on.

The city has four Ceremonial Horns. The original Charter Horn given by Alfred the Great in 886 does still exist. It is not blown any more and is in safe keeping in the Town Hall. It is now covered in black velvet and capped with solid silver and hangs on a wide leather Baldric which bears the badges and crests of previous Mayors and Wakemen.

The Charter Horn was replaced by the 1690 horn which is the only Horn the city ever paid for. They were charged six shillings and eight pence at the time, which is equal to a mere thirty four pence (about 20 US cents) in todays money. It is recorded that it was considered a princely sum, and those who charged that price were referred to as no less than thieves, rogues and vagabonds by the Council members of the day. That Horn can still be used today by me to 'Set The Watch' if I choose to bring it out for special occasions, and is a wonderful specimen of craftsmanship from that era.

The next Horn to be introduced was a very large African Ox Horn given in 1886 to celebrate 1000 years of granting of the first Charter. This is always in the possession of the first Deputy Hornblower who has to be fully equipped and prepared at all times to stand in at short notice should the Hornblower of the day himself be unable to carry out the duty of 'Setting the Watch'.

Horn number four, is the one used by George Pickles, the present Hornblower. This was given to the City in 1986 to celebrate 1100 years of granting of the first Charter. It is a large Ox type animal Horn with copper fittings and was created by a local craftsman and financed and donated to the City by a local company called Sigma Antiques. This is considered by most as the most beautiful of all the Horns.

There is a fifth Horn in the City but it has never been blown. It stands 93 feet (30Mtrs) up on top of the Obelisk as a symbol of the City. It is a weather vane and also a sealed time capsule. It was sealed the time before last in 1889 for one hundred years, and it was always said it contained 7 gold sovereigns. It was taken down in 1986, three years before the hundred years was up because urgent repair work was needed to the upper part of the Obelisk. When it was opened up the sovereigns were gone and there was just the bill for the last time repairs were carried out. This, to put it mildly, did cause some disappointment !!. It was re-sealed in 1986 for a further 100 years and this time there is money inside the sealed Horn. Maundy money given to the City by the Queen is now in the Horn together with a bill for the repairs this time. The bill for repairs in 1889 was 42 pounds and the bill for almost identical repairs in 1986 was 13 thousand pounds. That gives some indication how things have changed over the years.

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