

Volunteer Bands and Local Identity in Caithness at the Time of the Second Reform Act

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Abstract

Caithness lay outside the national railway network in 1868, but as this article demonstrates, used the band music of its local volunteer military units, embedded within a wider contemporary British context of imperial music-making, as a means to express and shape local political identities. The second Reform Act of 1867, enacted in Scotland by the Representation of the People (Scotland) Act 1868, prompted wider reimagining of what it meant to be a citizen of Scotland and Britain. Regular references to civic bands in contemporary newspapers and carefully posed photographs in local archives provide evidence for the popularity of Silver and Brass bands connected with the Caithness Volunteer movement. As they marched around towns, villages and countryside, especially around the time of the national elections and local by-elections of 1868–9, their music created powerfully affective soundscapes that connected traditional local identities with the modern British fiscal-military state, helping people to imagine their place as British citizens in a period of widening political engagement. The county's band music provides a microhistory that allows exploration of contrasts between rural and civic patterns of political behaviour in this period.

Introduction: The British Volunteer Movement and Its Bands

Caithness in the mid-nineteenth century was a remote place. A daunting combination of bogs (the 'flow country') and coastal geography dominated by high cliffs and deep inlets prevented the railway from being extended to Thurso until 1874. The telegraph only reached Wick months before the election of 1868, just in time for reports to be lodged more quickly in newspapers to the south about the proceedings.¹ The fastest way to reach the rest of Scotland in this period was by steamer rather than land. A regular steamer service from Granton in Edinburgh connected with Thurso and Wick roughly three times each month, and another similarly connected the county with Aberdeen.² A daily boat connected Scrabster with Stromness in Orkney. News, as well as goods and livestock, accompanied people in these boats, but not with any great rapidity. How, then, did Caithness people feel themselves to be part of a larger political identity, alongside their traditional local affiliations?

The extent to which Caithness people imagined themselves to be part of a larger British identity in this mid-Victorian period was substantially assisted by the formation of the Volunteer rifle and artillery units after 1859, and, I will argue, the civic work done by the music associated with these amateur groups, heard live and celebrated in local newspapers. Trevor Herbert has written at length about the growth of British patriotism in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the role of music in making people beyond the metropolitan centres feel part of a larger patriotic moment.³ Drills and shooting practice helped to keep young men away from the temptations of drink, while musical bands,

¹ 'Extension of the Telegraph to Wick', *John O'Groat Journal*, 6 August 1868, 3, and 'Canvassing by Telegraph', *John O'Groat Journal*, 13 August 1868, 3.

² 'Sailings for October, 1868', *John O'Groat Journal*, 1 October 1868, 1.

³ Trevor Herbert, 'Public Military Music and the Promotion of Patriotism in the British Provinces, c.1780–c.1850', *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 17, (2020): 427–44. doi:10.1017/S1479409819000594

formed alongside the more military activities, benefited both the men and the wider community and, as we shall see, were to have a significant impact on civic involvement, especially during elections.⁴

Standing militias had not been popular in Britain – especially in Scotland after 1745 – as civilians rightly feared governments might turn a local defence body against local people. The ‘fencible’ regiments raised for home defence in the Napoleonic period were therefore quickly disbanded. However, anxious about the bellicosity of France in the post-Crimea period and recognising that full-time regiments were widely dispersed around the world protecting British imperial interests, the War Office in May 1859 approved the creation of a British Volunteer Force for home defense.⁵ Local Lord Lieutenants were to oversee the recruitment and training of volunteer rifle and artillery corps in counties throughout Britain.⁶ Volunteering for these local Volunteer units gave men exemption from the ballot for regular army service. Unless mobilized for war, members were initially required to provide their own arms and equipment, the acceptance of which in local training would be ‘subject to the approval of the Lord-Lieutenant’.⁷ In the 1860s, Volunteer regulations became more formal and the infrastructure deepened. The Volunteer Act of 1863 required an oath of allegiance, specified conditions for mobilization in the event of war, set pay for active service, defined standards for drill and readiness, and made provision for a small remuneration for training.

By 1866, there were nine volunteer corps in Caithness, including six volunteer artillery corps, located in the coastal settlements of Wick, Thurso, Lybster, Mey, Castletown and Thrumster, and three rifle corps, located in Thurso, Wick and Halkirk.⁸ These volunteer militias successfully aligned local area loyalties with the patriotic requirements of the British military state and, until they were reorganized by the Territorial and Reserve Forces Act of 1907 as the Special Reserve units of the regular army, were the ground out of which brass bands grew and flourished in Caithness.

While the core activities of local militias were drilling and shooting practice, many also found social music-making in concert an excellent way of generating an *esprit de corps*. In the far north, where brutal winter weather might have made outdoor drilling more challenging, this extension of volunteering found a particularly enthusiastic welcome. Amateur bands associated with the Volunteers in this context did not function as ‘instruments of command’, in which bugles and drums conveyed military instructions on the drill-ground or battlefield.⁹ Rather, these bands were an extension of the kind of gentlemen’s music clubs that had been fashionable amongst the gentry and upwardly mobile professional classes since the eighteenth century. On the field, they played for formal inspections to help volunteers march in step; off the field, they performed for local balls and public festivals, and in concert, to raise money for their own upkeep and that of the Volunteer units more generally. Music today is everywhere, personalised and instantly available. Music in the nineteenth century was live and social. In Herbert’s words, ‘through the impact of sight and sound, routine military drill could stimulate a benign view of the army and by implication the state’.¹⁰

The officers of the Volunteers were drawn from prominent men in local communities, particularly landowners in rural areas. Beckett suggests that in some areas the Volunteers looked remarkably similar to ‘bands of neo-feudal retainers’, and this is certainly true for Thurso, although

⁴ On the ritual, performative nature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century elections in England and their place in civic life, see Frank O’Gorman, ‘Campaign Rituals and Ceremonies: The Social Meaning of Elections in England 1780–1860’, *Past and Present*, 135 (1992): 79–115.

⁵ Ian W. Beckett, *Riflemen Form: A Study of the Rifle Volunteer Movement 1859–1908* (Barnley, S. Yorks: Pen & Sword, 2007), 19.

⁶ Trevor Herbert, *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 37.

⁷ Major General J. M. Grierson, *Records of the Scottish Volunteer Force* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1909), 6.

⁸ Grierson, *Records*, 152.

⁹ Herbert, ‘Public Military Music’, 435.

¹⁰ Herbert, ‘Public Military Music’, 444.

not so much for Wick.¹¹ The rank and file of the men who joined the Volunteers drew on the lower middle classes and skilled trades. In Caithness, they would have included fishermen. Ordinary ranks were often very young, in their late teens and early twenties, before marriage brought other responsibilities.¹² Recruitment patterns also suggest that these units were knitted into other professional and trade networks.¹³

Beckett suggests that by the mid-1860s, membership in Volunteer units was moving down through the social class structure, drawing in more working-class men, perhaps including some who might have hoped to gain the franchise. For citizens of twenty-first century democracies, it is worth remembering that the 1832 Reform Act in Britain only extended the vote in parliamentary elections to men in boroughs owning property worth at least £10 a year, thus excluding nearly all working-class males and all women. In 1860, 1865 and 1866 there had been some discussion of extending the vote to the Volunteers; but in 1867, when the second Reform Act was passed, this was not achieved.¹⁴ The 1867 Act extended the franchise to male householders and lodgers in urban areas paying £10 annually in rent, and it slightly lowered the threshold for rural voters, but the modern notion of universal adult franchise was still a long way off.

Research by Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow surveying the impact of military music on local identity around Britain included evidence from lowland and central Scotland, but not the far north.¹⁵ Ian Kelly has also written about music making in the context of a larger study of the Highland regiments; his comments, however, concentrate more on bagpipes.¹⁶ In her study of the vibrant brass band tradition of the Scottish Borders, Gill French suggests ‘there are no brass bands in a large part of the Highlands where pipe bands predominate.’¹⁷ This was by no means true. By the summer of 1860, Caithness had Volunteer Rifle units in Thurso and Wick; by 1861, the fishing village of Lybster had yielded another; and by the summer of 1867 Volunteer units had formed in Castletown, Mey and Thrumster. All of these units marched to the sound of brass band music: the British band movement had reached the far north.

Caithness Politics in 1859

In 1859, Caithness had a total population of around 40,000.¹⁸ The largest and most economically developed communities were coastal: the towns of Thurso and Wick, and the coastal villages of Castletown, Reay, Dunnet, Mey, Lybster, and Latheron. Inland villages include Halkirk, upstream along the river Thurso, and Watten, sitting beside the Wick River. Caithness was thus an obvious hub for both sea and freshwater fishing.

There were two parliamentary constituencies. The Royal Burgh of Wick was part of the ‘Northern Burghs’ constituency, a group of towns around the Moray Firth coast with shared interests in fishing, that together returned one member to parliament; member towns included Kirkwall, Wick, Tain, Dornoch, Cromarty and Dingwall. The rest of the county formed the ‘County’ seat of Caithness, dominated by the estates owned by a few notable landowners who acted as tenants in chief (i.e., who held land direct from the Crown) and who rented land to lesser tenants, and by commercial slate

¹¹ Beckett, *Riflemen Form*, 43.

¹² Beckett, *Riflemen Form*, 74.

¹³ Beckett, *Riflemen Form*, 60.

¹⁴ Beckett, *Riflemen Form*, 146.

¹⁵ Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow, *Music & the British Military in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Ian Stuart Kelly, *Echoes of Success: Identity and the Highland Regiments* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 164.

¹⁷ Gillian French, ‘Follow the Band: Community Brass Bands in the Scottish Borders’. (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 2014), 9. <http://hdl.handle.net/1842/9482>.

¹⁸ Ruth Nancy Hildebrandt, ‘Migration and Economic Change in the Northern Highlands during the Nineteenth Century, with particular reference to the period 1851–1891’. (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 1980), 15–16. <http://theses.gla.ac.uk/3555/1/1980HildebrandtPhD.pdf>. The 1861 census, the first census conducted after the 1855 act required civil registration, recorded a population of 41,111.

quarrying around Castletown organised by the Traill family. By far the most prominent of these landed notables were the extended Sinclair family, at least until the Portland family bought the Langwell estate from the Sinclairs in 1857 and gradually extended their influence further north. The most senior Sinclairs were the Earls of Caithness from the late fifteenth century, although a lesser branch, the Sinclairs of Ulbster, had their family seat on the east of the river Thurso mouth, and controlled Thurso as a Burgh of Barony.

Following the Reform Act of 1832, only 0.6 percent (a total of 219 voters) of the county population of the Caithness constituency could vote. In the election of 1868, this number rose to just under 1000 voters following the Representation of the People (Scotland) Act, as the Second Reform Act was known in Scotland.¹⁹ The electorate in Wick was rather larger. In 1868, the Northern Burghs together polled 1486 votes, a turnout of just under 89 percent.²⁰ Of these, 832 – by far the largest of any of the burghs and a majority of all the votes cast – came from Wick, in an election that came to have national notoriety for being ill-tempered and controversial.²¹



Fig. 1: Thurso Town Bandstand, early 20th century. With permission from The Johnston Collection, Wick Heritage Centre.

The Volunteer movement, and its music, arrived at a moment of important political change in the north. Band music in the streets of Thurso and Wick in the mid-nineteenth century reached not only the small proportion of the population who were actually enfranchised, but also the much larger general body of people who one day might be. The importance of regular band performance to local life by the end of the century can be inferred from the photograph of the Thurso bandstand, built over the winter of 1902–03, which sat in the central town square and gardens donated by the Sinclairs of Ulbster and commanded the view of the road leading east to the county town of Wick (*Fig. 1*).²²

¹⁹ Michael Dyer, “‘Mere Detail and Machinery’: The Great Reform Act and the Effects of Redistribution on Scottish Representation 1832–1868”, *The Scottish Historical Review* 62(173), Part 1 (1983): 25, 29.

²⁰ Based on Data from ‘UK House of Commons Election Results at Constituency Level’, *Harvard Dataverse V4*, (UMIT: Resul, 2022). <https://api.parliament.uk/uk-general-elections/elections/4009>.

²¹ ‘Northern Burghs – Election of Mr Loch’, *Inverness Courier*, 3 December 1868, 6.

²² Image from publicly searchable Johnston Collection at The Wick Heritage Centre, Index JN22163B018. <http://www.johnstoncollection.net/>.

Thurso in the 1860s

Thurso is an ancient Viking fishing settlement on the west side of the mouth of the river Thurso. The town entered the nineteenth century as a burgh of barony, with town officer appointments made by the Sinclairs of Ulbster according to powers personally granted to them in 1633 by Charles I. Relatively underdeveloped both in terms of its civic infrastructure and population, Thurso was slowly expanding as a planned town under the patronage of these local lairds.

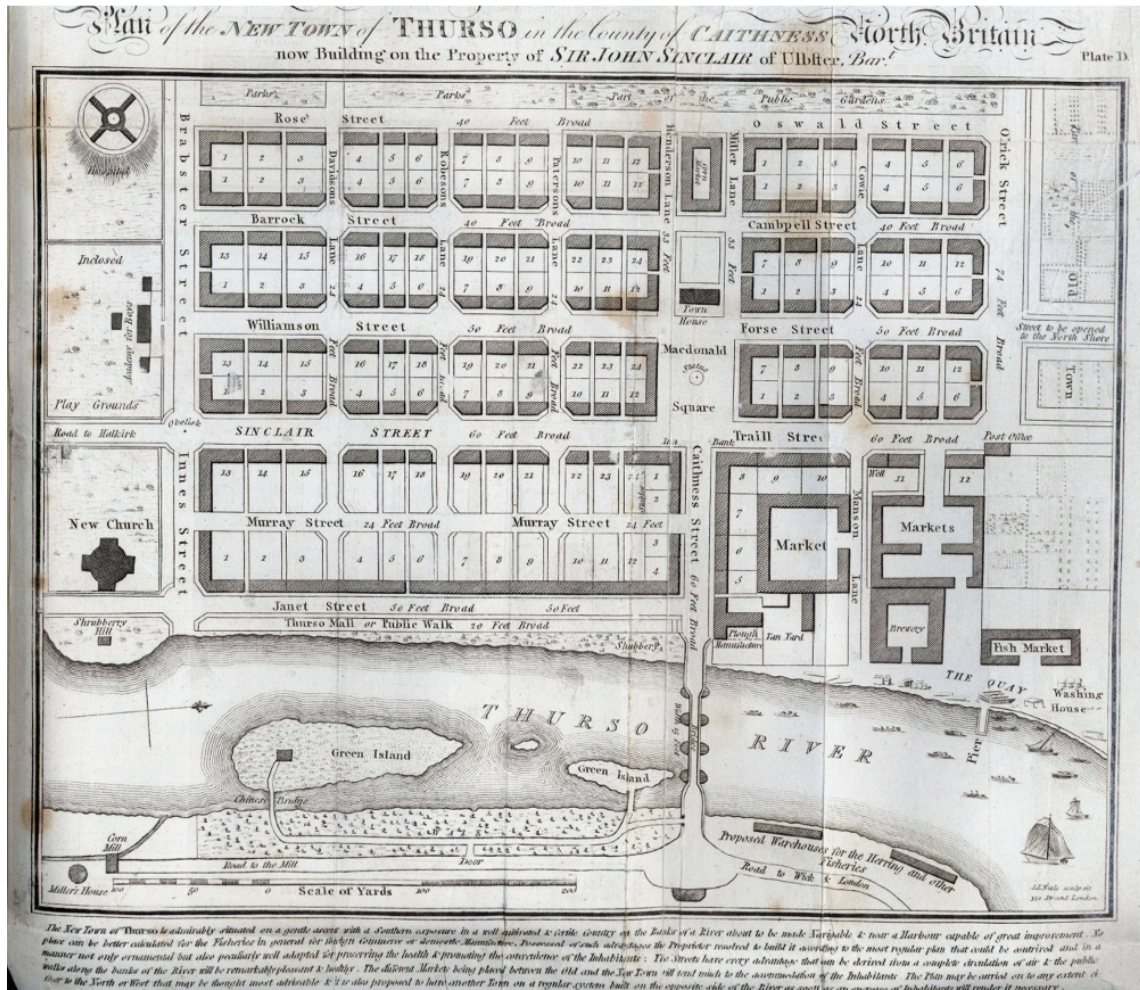


Fig. 2: Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster’s Map of Improvements for Thurso in A General view of the Agriculture of the County of Caithness, together with maps (London: Board of Agriculture, 1812). Image courtesy of www.ambaile.org.uk and Highland Libraries.

The Sinclairs’ ambitions for the town were laid out at the start of the nineteenth century in Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster’s projected grid plan, drawn up in emulation of Edinburgh’s Georgian new town (*Fig. 2*).²³ Partially realised in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the plan expressed the modernising aspirations of the nineteenth century town as it expanded beyond the old fishing settlement at the mouth of the Thurso River. In the period we are discussing, these broad streets made fine thoroughways for processions of local organisations led by their bands. Similar plans were drawn up for the Sinclairs’ tenants in the neighbouring inland village of Halkirk, along with what became highly controversial clearance schemes for the county that aimed to make rural tenants into cottage

²³ Am Baile: Highland History and Culture. <https://www.ambaile.org.uk/asset/38287/>. Image Reference QZP40_ULBSTER_036b_Illus.

industry employees in a range of projected new industries (most of which never materialised). The immediate consequence of these changes for the rural north was steady depopulation, as tenant crofters boarded boats and sailed to new homes overseas. Those who stayed, however, found themselves in a complicated relationship with the local gentry that required some complicated strategic forgetting of the past and careful renegotiation of local political power and representation.

Thurso's harbour, lying across the river mouth and potentially the most lucrative part of the town, was controlled by the Ulbster Sinclairs. This feudal arrangement, however, began to give way to a more modern civic politics in 1866, when J. G. Tollemache Sinclair, acting on behalf of his ailing father Sir George, began negotiations with the town to hand over the west harbour area and to draw up a new town charter to give the townspeople the right to free elections for baillies and counsellors. Thurso would thereby become, for the first time, an independent, self-governing town.

This 1866 initiative is symptomatic of changing times in national politics, as well as of the Sinclair family's broadly liberal political affiliations. As the national Reform Acts in 1832, 1867, and 1884 gradually extended the parliamentary franchise, so local civic structures came under some scrutiny. One of the first questions to be discussed for those planning Thurso's first free town council elections was the basis of the local franchise, and surprisingly, this seems to have been left to the town itself to decide. The first Minute Book of the provisional Thurso burgh council, convened pending formal elections, reveals that the question of local franchise dominated discussions in 1866.²⁴ The first entry, dated 18 January 1866, records local druggist Mr Bremner regretting the lack of a burgh magistrate able to give an independent steer to proceedings 'upon broad and liberal principles.' Ten months later, on 5 October 1866, it was agreed that the franchise for the town council be given to householders aged twenty-one and over who occupied property within the burgh of an annual rent of at least five pounds. Three days later, at a meeting of all duly qualified local voters, bookkeeper Alexander Mackay lodged a counter proposal calling for the vote to be given to *all* proprietors of properties within the burgh of this rental value, not just householders – a proposal that would have given local county gentry such as the Sinclairs, who lived outside the town boundary but who owned much of the land and tenements, a much more direct influence over the vote. To this, a radical counter proposal was minuted that the franchise should include not just householders but all local inhabitants. The 'bell man' was thereupon instructed to call everyone in the town to a further meeting in the courthouse.

On 13 October 1866, a meeting described as 'public' and 'of the inhabitants of Thurso' duly took place, listing the names of eighty-seven men deemed eligible to vote. Local magistrate and doctor James Mill proposed that 'in place of the electors consisting of Householders, the right should extend to Proprietors, Tenants and occupiers of premises of the annual rent to the value of five pounds and upwards above the age of 21 years residing within the extended limits of the Burgh', citing the Police and Improvement (Scotland) Act's provisions for funding local policing as a possible basis on which to constitute an electorate, a proposal seconded by draper Donald Shearer.²⁵ This was countered with a suggestion by joiner George Swanson that the five-pound qualification for magistrates and councilor candidacy should be reduced to 'either two pounds or all who pay police rates', a motion seconded

²⁴ *Thurso Burgh Minute Book* vol. 1, in Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archive, Wick: BT/1/1. The following discussion draws upon minutes for meetings of 18 January and 5–13 October 1866.

²⁵ Victorian-era Scots law on policing and street lighting gave localities the optional power to administer policing and (also relevant to crime reduction) street lighting. The 1857 County and Burgh Police Scotland Act placed these local powers under some central scrutiny, by directing that local police committees be established under the local Lord Lieutenant and Sheriffs. Local politicians were not always expert in the range of potential power they could or could not wield through these instruments; Mill's proposal to define a local electorate using these laws is rather novel and may not be fully legally competent. The discussion reflects the way that local people were using Scots law to test civic remits and responsibilities. See David G Barrie, 'Anglicization and Autonomy: Scottish Policing, Governance and the State, 1833 to 1885', *Law and History Review* 30, no.2 (2012), 474.

by stationer William Allan. After some debate, the more radical proposal for the extension of the franchise was withdrawn; Swanson seconded the list of candidates proposed under the five-pound qualification. The final proposal of the meeting was that future meetings to elect town officials should be announced around the town not just by the bellman, but with additional drums ‘or other mode of intimations’, once a week for two weeks before the election meeting, and by newspaper advert ‘in any newspaper in the said burgh.’

These archives reveal a lively interest in the early days of Thurso Burgh Council, amongst newly minted town politicians, in determining who should have a say in shaping the town’s future fortunes and in mobilizing political engagement using aural tools: bells and drums as well as printed media (‘other modes’ probably included posted billboards, referred to in local press coverage of the County by-election of 1869). The requirement for town residence was an important one, qualifying the influence of the landed gentry somewhat: voting patterns in which tenants simply followed the lead of their feudal superior were slowly changing. Fairly late in the franchise discussions – two days before the first town elections were held on 13 October 1866 – Tollemache Sinclair threw in the suggestion that perhaps ‘he and his heirs should confirm such elections,’ a suggestion politely but firmly rejected by the town magistrates.²⁶ Otherwise, the early minutes of the Thurso Burgh council show local democracy moving tentatively forwards.

Although drums, bells, ‘intimations’ and newspaper adverts only managed to turn out thirteen town electors for the annual electoral meeting of 21 October 1870, several significant civic projects did move ahead in this first decade of civic independence. A new non-denominational secondary school, the Miller Institute, had already opened in 1862 in an attractive neoclassical building, founded by a local man whose uncle had made his fortunes in colonial trade. A new town hall, providing a band practice room, a large assembly hall and meeting rooms, was completed in 1872, thanks to a bequest from a local banker topped up by local subscriptions. Similarly, a hospital was projected, to be built following a bequest first noted to the Thurso town council on 27 October 1868 from the trustees of Alexander Dunbar, a local JP and deputy Lord Lieutenant. Voluntary civic activism was undoubtedly more effective in 1860s Thurso than formal political processes, but overall, town civic works were emphatically given a new injection of confidence by the new charter of 1866.

It is worth looking at the ritual surrounding the laying of the foundation stone for the new town hall, because music provided by the Volunteer band was important to the solemnity of that occasion. This event was reported at some length in the *John O’Groat Journal* of Thursday 15 October 1868, one of two county newspapers in existence at the time, and one that usually reflected the interests of the Sinclair family and liberal politics more generally. A procession formed in front of the Miller Institute at the west end of the new town, and participating musicians included both those of the Volunteers and the band of the regular militia. Leading the way were the ‘Thurso Rifles Volunteer band in their picturesque uniform of Sinclair tartan.’ Next came the fishermen, for whom the band played the lively Scottish tune ‘Weel may the boatie row.’ The Magistrates, Commissioners of Police, and various unnamed but leading citizens and clergy followed; then came the trades: the Freemasons with their banner, the bakers carrying loaves of bread on poles, fishermen carrying their banner. Next were ‘3 pipers and a drummer boy, whose ear-piercing notes resounded over the whole length of the line behind them and made up for the want of the music of the bands now so far in front.’ In the middle of the procession were the pavement workers, joiners, masons, merchants and shopkeepers; local school children from the Parish Church and the Free Church elementary schools and the Miller Institute brought up the rear.

Once the procession had arrived at the site of the future town hall, Reverend Taylor of St Peters Church of Scotland church urged everyone to sing Psalm 95 (‘O come, let us sing to the Lord’ from the 1650 metrical psalter), led by the precentor, Mr Goodlad. Lengthy speeches followed, acknowledging the legacy, listing the local subscriptions – including those from the Sinclair family

²⁶ *Thurso Burgh Minute Book*, in Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archive: BT/1/1, 11 October 1866.

and the local county MP, Mr Traill – and calling for more to finish the project. The band played again while a bottle with copies of local and Scottish national newspapers was placed, and the foundation stone laid over it. Corn, wine and oil having been poured on the stone by the masons, ‘the band then played the Mason’s anthem.’ The only discordant note recorded by the newspaper on this occasion was a placard on one corner of the street that read, ‘Down with the Irish Church and Ben. Diz’ (i.e., Benjamin Disraeli) – typical liberal sentiments of the time.²⁷

The reported ‘soundscape’, involving unaccompanied collective psalm singing, bagpipes and drums, and not one, but two, military-style bands, clearly contributed to the day’s success. The report is vague about the relationship between the bands – vagueness being a common trait in Caithness newspapers of the 1860s. But the fact that the bands turned out, with instruments and uniforms, rehearsed and ready to play, speaks to careful and regular preparation, and it is to this process of formation that we now turn.

Music Club or Volunteer Band?

Prior to the formation of the militia volunteers, Thurso had a musical band that formed part of the activities of the Thurso Musical Club. This club, formed around 1857, was an informal association of young men in the town who met after work to sing glees and play instruments, entertaining each other and occasionally others with amateur concerts. Essentially a continuation of the eighteenth-century pattern of male socializing in Britain, it was rather old-fashioned in national terms. It had taken Thurso some time to develop enough middle-class youth to make this kind of socializing viable. Club members were local tradesmen and young professionals: bank clerks, watchmakers, stationers and junior skilled trades, with reasonable levels of education and middle-class cultural aspirations. These were the sort of men who, when they were not at the Musical Club, might have been found in the local ‘St Peters’ Freemasons Lodge. They played a variety of instruments initially in a non-standardized ensemble.

In January 1859, the Thurso Musical Club participated in the town’s Robert Burns Centenary celebration. Thurso is always windy, and this was the depths of winter. The masonic banners were torn ragged by the wind and the (predictably) driving rain. The *John O’Groat Journal* reported: ‘The [Musical] Club wore Balmoral bonnets, adorned with harps, while their flag also represented the same on a larger scale, along with other instruments peculiar to them.’ The trades’ procession for this event included, alongside the ‘peculiar’ band of the Musical Club, some bagpipers and a ‘flute band’ (probably military-style fifes) also associated with the Thurso Musical Club, all blowing away and blown away by the winter gale.²⁸

Almost two years later, the *John O’Groat Journal* of 8 November 1860 reported that the Musical Club band had marched out in association with the town Volunteers, to celebrate the arrival in town of a new lifeboat. A standard military bugle call summoned all to order. The procession was again led by the Musical Club band playing some ‘fine airs and marches’, followed by the Artillery volunteers, then the lifeboat with the crew on board, flanked on each side by three Artillerymen with fixed bayonets; the Rifle Volunteers brought up the rear. Some members of the band seem to have joined the boat’s crew as it was launched, and what followed evokes a dramatically-conceived performance, almost an ancient Viking ship ceremony. As music from the boat reached the ears of those on land, ‘the sound of the oars combined with the notes of the clarion and the cornopian, grew fainter and fainter, and in a short time the boat was lost to our view.’²⁹ At this point, there still seems to be a degree of formal separation between the Musical Club and the Rifle Volunteers, although the club is acting *de facto* alongside the Volunteers as their marching band.

²⁷ ‘Laying the Foundation Stone of the New Town Hall, Thurso’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 15 October 1868, 3.

²⁸ ‘The Burns Centenary (Festivities at Thurso)’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 3 February 1859, 3.

²⁹ ‘Thurso (Life-Boat)’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 8 November 1860, 2.

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A couple of weeks later, the *Groat* editor added a few more general remarks about the Musical Club in a paragraph where the alternative title ‘Trades’ Band’ is also used for the same group of musicians, now providing a list of instruments:

We may also notice that the Thurso Musical Club is at present in a very flourishing condition. This Club consists of twelve military fifes, two kettle drums, a tenor and bass, one clarion, two cornopians, tenor saxhorn and bass trombone, eight vocalists, six violins and one violincello. We expect that a concert will be given by the above Club in about a fortnight or so.³⁰

This concert took place on 7 February 1861, in the nearby village of Castletown. The *Groat* reported that on this occasion the Musical Club fielded both their ensembles – a brass band and a fife band – and generated controversy that suggested a little bit of military discipline might be timely. The concert itself was decorous, ending with everyone singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’. But while some of the Club retired to Mrs Miller’s Coffee Rooms for refreshments, others went elsewhere to enjoy stronger beverages.³¹ Letters in the newspaper throughout the rest of March alternatively blamed and defended the band for their behaviour on this occasion. What the Thurso band required was some military discipline buoyed by patriotic idealism. Over the next couple of years, the Musical Club band’s activities are increasingly mentioned in connection with those of the Caithness Rifle Volunteers (Thurso) unit.

On 17 October 1861, the *Groat* reported a ‘Grand Review of the Thurso Volunteers on Monday last by the Lord Lieutenant, the Right Hon Earl of Caithness, accompanied by Countess of Caithness, Sir John Sinclair Baronet Barrock, John Henderson of the Commercial Bank, and the Misses Henderson.’ The volunteers were led by Captain Smith of Pennyland House, on the north edge of Thurso. Headed by the brass band of the Thurso Musical Club, they marched to a field at Smith’s farm, where they played the national anthem.³² This performance must have been witnessed by Captain Smith’s son William (1854–1914), the future founder of the Boys Brigade movement, a movement dedicated to the moral formation of youth through the conjunction of para-militarism and Presbyterianism. It is interesting to think that the young William might have been inspired by the efforts of the Thurso Volunteers in providing young men with morally improving leisure alternatives to drinking and worse.

By the middle of the decade, the personnel of the Thurso Musical Club and the town’s Volunteer Rifle band, playing now with some considerable overlap of personnel, got some recognition in more distant news reports. On 14 January 1864, the *Dundee Advertiser*, in a digest of news from around Scotland, reported that New Year’s Day entertainments in Thurso went off without undue drunkenness despite an outbreak of diphtheria. The article highlighted two events in particular: the Christian Association celebrations in the Benevolent Institution, and a ‘festival in the Mason Hall.’ The former involved ‘an extemporised choir’ singing ‘sacred and sentimental music.’ The latter started with a speech by local merchant Mr Keith on the subject of ‘innocent amusements,’ following which ‘the Thurso Musical Club and Volunteer Brass Band catered most successfully in the musical departments’: local ladies sang, and then there was dancing.³³ The syntax here, and singular ‘Band’, makes it very unclear where the Musical Club stopped, and the Volunteer Band began – or indeed if they were the same or different groups.

Although the Thurso band does not seem to have travelled south much, if at all, it was prepared to undertake the short but choppy sea voyage across the Pentland Firth to Orkney, reciprocating a previous visit south by the Orcadians. On 3 May 1864, the *Orkney Herald and Weekly Advertiser and*

³⁰ ‘Thurso (Thursday last)’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 29 November 1860, 2.

³¹ ‘Thurso (Concert)’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 7 February 1861, 2.

³² ‘Grand Review of the Thurso Volunteers’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 17 October 1861, 2.

³³ ‘Thurso (News Notes)’, *The Dundee Advertiser*, 14 January 1864, 4.

Gazette for the Orkney and Zetland Islands reviewed a concert by the Thurso Musical Club ‘or’ [sic] Band of Thurso Artillery Volunteers in the Stromness Town hall, in which members sang songs, glees and catches: ‘the [Town] Hall was tastefully decorated by the band of the 4th O.A.V. who did their utmost to show their appreciation of the kindness they had experienced whilst across in Thurso.’³⁴

As it transformed from a ‘club’ to performing in association with the Volunteers, the Thurso stock of instruments seems to have been built up in association with both civilian and military identities. In the early 1860s, there was not an obvious Thurso newsheet in which local accounts might have been published, nor the same tradition of public fiscal accountability as existed in Wick at the same time. The *Caithness Courier* – a new, Thurso-focussed newspaper serving the west of the County – started to roll its presses in 1866, another initiative undertaken in the year of the new town charter. The lack of earlier local reporting on band finances may also reflect the fact that the financial subscriptions that supported the band were drawn from a narrower section of society than the broad-based civic subscriptions that set up and supported the Wick Volunteer band (see discussion below). In particular, the personal support of the Sinclair family was not publicly advertised unless – as happened with Sir George Sinclair’s donation of six pounds to purchase silver shooting prize medals in June 1864 – the gift was designed to encourage more competitive participation in the resultant shooting competitions. The *Courier* described the shooting medals as ‘another proof among many of the warm and lively interest the worthy and esteemed Baronet has taken in this patriotic movement ever since its organisation.’³⁵



Fig. 3: Thurso Musical Club 1868. Photograph by A. M. Allen.
Source: Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archive, Wick P543/3.

³⁴ ‘Stromness (Concert by the Thurso Band)’, *The Orkney Herald and Weekly Advertiser and Gazette for the Orkney and Zetland Islands*, 3 May 1864, 2.

³⁵ ‘Thurso (Sir George Sinclair)’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 30 June 1864, 2.

The Sinclairs contributed a particularly significant piece of patronage branding to the Thurso Musical Club band in the middle of the decade. In 1866, the band acquired not only new instruments, made to the latest standard army specifications ensuring common tuning, but also a spanking new uniform, using the Sinclair tartan. As many entries in the new Burgh's minute book make it clear that there was no spare money in the community purse at this period, it is reasonable to infer that any investment in local bands would have needed to come from private patronage, or from the pockets of the members themselves.³⁶ Although proof in the form of either a newspaper report or a letter in the Sinclair family archives has not been found, the Sinclair influence is clearly at work in the particular design for the new Thurso 'Musical Club' Band uniform of 1866, as photographed in 1868 by local shopkeeper Mr A. M. Allen, and presented to their founding members, the men of the Thurso Musical Club.

The uniforms shown (*Fig. 3*) are not standard national uniforms. In the first years of the local Volunteer movements, Lord Lieutenants were given freedom to determine how to dress their men. In the 1860s, the Lord Lieutenant would have been the 14th Earl of Caithness, James Sinclair, whose seat was the Castle of Mey. A report of the Thurso Rifle Volunteer Band in 1865 suggests it initially wore a green uniform with white banding, which is certainly not the dress here.³⁷ The 'Musical Club' band in 1868 wore tartan trousers, plaids, and fitted jackets that are more usually associated with twentieth-century Highland pipe bands than with the nineteenth-century British Volunteer companies. By the 1870s, after the Caldwell army reforms had introduced greater standardization, Volunteer bands in the Highlands were to be kitted out in plain blue serge with, at most, a modest red trim.³⁸ The use of tartan in the first decade of the Volunteer movement in the Highlands speaks to the way in which the personal affiliations of traditional Highland feudal bands were co-opted by the British state with, in this case, the transition being managed through traditional local Sinclair patronage.

The status of tartan had risen alongside the reputation of the Highlanders in the Napoleonic age and its British imperial aftermath.³⁹ Tollemache Sinclair's grandfather, Sir John Sinclair, author of the *Old Statistical Account of Scotland* (1791–99), had been an early promoter of tartan through his involvement in the Highland Society of London, in particular advocating the trews (as in *Fig. 3*) rather than the kilt (or *philibeg*) as fit and manly traditional garb.⁴⁰ In his 1813 *History of the Highland Society of London*, Sir John's description of idealised Highland dress amounts to a design brief for the Thurso uniforms of 1868:

The Natives of the Highlands have always been distinguished for the attachment to their ancient Garb, which they look upon as a National Dress, peculiarly calculated for mountainous districts and well fitted for the purposes of war.⁴¹

By 1866, tartan was again the height of British military fashion, promoted by a series of nationally circulated postcard images called 'Crimean Heroes', studio portraits taken in 1856 by Robert Howlett

³⁶ For instance, a minute of a meeting held in February 1868 discusses the challenge of repairing a storm-damaged breakwater, which the council funds totalling £10 would be stretched to cover. *Thurso Burgh Minute Book*, 10 February 1868.

³⁷ 'Review of the Caithness Battalion of Rifle Volunteers at Thurso', *The John O'Groat Journal*, 15 June 1865, 3.

³⁸ Major General J. M. Grierson, *Records of the Scottish Volunteer Force 1859–1908* (Edinburgh, 1909), colour plate VI.

³⁹ Allan Carswell, 'Scottish Military Dress' in Edward M. Spiers, Jeremy A. Crang and Matthew J Strickland (eds.), *A Military History of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 635–6.

⁴⁰ Sir John Sinclair, *An Account of the Highland Society of London, from its Establishment in May 1778, to the Commencement of the Year 1813* (London: Macmillan, 1813), chapter 1, 'Restoration of the Highland Dress.'

⁴¹ Sinclair, *An Account of the Highland Society of London*, 7–8.

and Joseph Cundall in London, as the regular Highland Regiments returned from service.⁴² This elaborate, be-tartaned ‘Highland’ uniform was not so much based on contemporary rural dress, but was rather part of an imagined heroic, warrior tradition, giving an ‘ancient’ glamour to the evolving traditions of the modern British army.

Even for a regular army soldier serving in the professional army, the full tartan uniform of an officer involved some considerable personal expense.⁴³ Soldiers of the line had the cost of the ‘necessary’ trimmings of their uniforms taken out of their wages (i.e., their basic kit was supplied, customised for the regiment). However, for the Volunteers, and certainly for loosely associated town bands, uniform expenses would be covered locally, often by the band members themselves. Volunteers relied on local subscriptions and their own fundraising. The Thurso band, whose members were shopkeepers, tradesmen and several very young boys, would have relied on generous local patronage to achieve the finery of the 1868 photograph. Peter Macdonald of the Scottish Tartans Authority, to whom this photograph was shown, was able to compare the tartan shown with those in the STA archives. His opinion was that the 1868 tartan did look to be identical in weave and colour block distribution to a sample of ‘Ancient Sinclair’ tartan dated c.1820 that was designed and woven by Messrs Wm. Wilson & Son, Bannockburn, official supplier of tartan to regular army regiments.⁴⁴ The pattern is of contrasting rich, earthy reds with bands of hunting green and thin but striking contrasting lines of white, pale blue and black.

This example is not the only instance of local Highland aristocracy supporting a musical band: Lance Whitehead has described the Marquises of Breadalbane employing musicians taken from their estates in the 1840s.⁴⁵ However, where the musicians at Breadalbane were primarily established to provide entertainment at Taymouth Castle, the Caithness musicians played not for private entertainment but rather public utility. The Thurso town band may look like a feudal band, but it is playing in a local, civic, and national, militaristic, context. This is a pattern that reaches beyond the traditional role of clan musicians into a new civic age.

Local newspaper reports in 1866 also celebrated the news that the Thurso Volunteer band had acquired a new set of musical instruments. The *Caithness Courier*, the new Thurso-based newspaper launched in the spring of that year, described some recent and planned improvements to the Volunteer band: ‘we believe that...brass instruments and two drums, on the improved principle, for the new band of this corps, has reached here.’⁴⁶ Two months later, the same newspaper reported on the annual inspection of the Thurso Volunteer Corps, which started with a muster outside the Masons’ Hall in Traill Street, crowds cheering the Volunteers in their ‘handsome uniforms.’ To the band’s music (unfortunately not detailed), the volunteers marched to the artillery battery on the headland, where firing commenced. The *Courier* correspondent noted that this was the first public appearance of the Volunteer band with their new instruments, and there was much anxiety about how good they would be: ‘the instruments are all first class, supplied by Mr Lyons, Woolwich’ (the headquarters of the Royal Artillery) but ‘the band has only been in practice a little over two months under the instruction of Mr John Stewart and the leadership of Sergeant David Manson’.⁴⁷

⁴² Joseph Cundall, ‘Crimean Heroes’ (1856). National Gallery of Scotland, <https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/34487/crimean-heroes>.

⁴³ Carswell, ‘Scottish Military Dress’, 638–9.

⁴⁴ Peter Macdonald, Head of Research & Collections, Scottish Tartans Authority, private communication by email, 27 June 2017.

⁴⁵ Lance Whitehead, ‘The House Bands of the Marquises of Breadalbane c. 1804–60’, *The Galpin Society Journal* 70 (March 2017), 179–197.

⁴⁶ ‘Artillery Volunteers’, *The Caithness Courier* 12 May 1866, 2.

⁴⁷ ‘Inspection of the Thurso Volunteer Artillery Corps’, *The Caithness Courier* 21 July 1866, 3.

VOLUNTEER BANDS & LOCAL IDENTITY IN CAITHNESS

Instruments and personnel for the ‘Volunteer’ band, as reported by the <i>Caithness Courier</i> on 21 st July 1866		Instruments in the 1868 ‘Music Club’ photograph.
1 st coronet [<i>sic</i>]	Sergeant David Manson	Cornet (or flugelhorn)
coronet [<i>sic</i>]	Robert McAdie	Cornet (or flugelhorn)
Alt Horns [<i>sic</i>]	John Dunbar and John Bruce	Alt Horns
B flat tenor horns	John Waters and Donald Bain	Baritone or Euphonium
1 st Bass [<i>sic</i>]	Henry Hope and Matthew Waters	Bombardon
Solo Bass	John Stewart (instructor)	Euphonium?
Trumpet	Donald McKenzie	
Side Drum	Alex M Allen	Side Drum
Bass Drum	D McKay	Bass Drum
		Cymbals

Table 1: Instruments of the Thurso Band in 1866-8.
(With thanks to Professor Arnold Myers, RCS.)

The list of instruments and personnel given in Table 1, which Arnold Myers has helpfully helped me to crossmatch against the 1868 photograph (*Fig. 3*), suggests that the instruments shown in the 1868 ‘Musical Club’ photograph are, substantially, the same as those bought for the ‘Volunteer’ band in 1866. There is little overlap between this new instrument list and the list given for the earlier band in the *John O’Groat Journal* article of November 1860. This new batch of instruments, bought in consultation with the Royal Artillery Regiment’s national headquarters at Woolwich in London, would have met the requirement for a standard B-flat pitch laid down by the British army in 1862–3, allowing the band to play in concert with other standard military bands. New instruments, and new uniforms in ‘traditional’ Sinclair tartan, aligned local feudal affiliations with national British military identity. Alex. M. Allen, the photographer in 1868, was a side drum player in the ‘Volunteer’ band in 1866.

The program of music played by the band on the occasion of the 1866 summer inspection of local Volunteer units reflected the merging of its civilian and military identities. As the *Caithness Courier*’s writer described it, the Volunteer band on that occasion played a combination of arrangements of popular contemporary Music Hall songs and military march music. Unusually, the report included a full list of items played, including ‘Slap Bang’ (probably ‘Slap Bang Here We Are Again, or The School of Jolly Dogs,’ composed by Harry Copeland in 1865)⁴⁸; ‘Will ye come to the Bower’ (not to be confused with an Irish Fenian song of the same name, this was a popular broadside ballad with lyrics by the Irish entertainer Thomas Moore, also author of ‘The Last Rose of Summer,’ and normally sung to a Morris dance tune called the ‘Vandals of Hammerwich’),⁴⁹ ‘Oh Isn’t That a Pull Back’ and ‘The Lass that Sits on the Outside of the Door’ (exact identification of these not found, although the latter’s trope of a pregnant girl driven outside the walls of her in-laws’ castle is found in several Scottish traditional ballads); ‘Garryowen’ (a popular military march, originally Irish, but also popular in the American Civil War where it was also known as the 7th Cavalry March); a medley from Verdi’s operas; and finally something the correspondent hasn’t managed to record, although he knows the tune came from *The Musical Times*. This is standard, fashionable British band repertoire: it is neither specifically local or Highland, or even particularly military, but rather connects Thurso with a national, British, musical culture of brass band playing.

⁴⁸ Harry Copeland, ‘Jolly Dogs, or, Slap Bang, Here We Are Again,’ Lester S. Levy Sheet Music Collection, John Hopkins Sheridan Library, <https://jscholarship.library.jhu.edu/handle/1774.2/26779>; Kirsten Anderson, ‘“I Like to be a Swell”: Paupers at the Pantomime’, in *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, 44(2), (2017): 133–153, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748372717752313>.

⁴⁹ Thomas Moore, ‘Will you come to the bower I have shaded for you?’ (Roud 16910). *Broadside Ballads Online*, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, <http://ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/search/roud/16910>.

The tartan uniform followed apace on the Thurso band's instrumental refurbishment. In mid-August, the *Caithness Courier* – after a panic piece discussing ‘rumours of a Fenian invasion of the Faroe Islands’ – reported that ‘the Rifle band is, we understand, to receive new uniform. The trousers are to be of Sinclair tartan, with a Highland doublet and (smart) plaid. The contract, however, has not yet been settled.’⁵⁰ This is the uniform shown in the 1868 photograph. A week later, the new band uniforms have been ordered from Messrs J. & W. Keith of Thurso, to be delivered by steamer in time for the autumn September review.⁵¹

The autumn review of the combined County companies took place on 20 September 1866. The *John O’Groat Journal* reported that the Thurso Volunteers marched across the county to the designated venue in Wick. Mail carts conveyed spectators from Thurso; some also came by the coastal steamer. For those who took the land route, ‘the stirring strains of the fine brass band of the Thurso Rifles were heard on the Thurso Road’ while ‘the Artillery, with their band, came via Castletown.’ The march across the County allowed both the new instruments and the new Sinclair-tartan uniforms to be prominently displayed. The reporter remarked on the combination of ‘ancient’ and modern:

The band of the Thurso Rifles attracted general attention, both from the excellence of their music and of a doublet of dark green, and trousers and plaid of Sinclair tartan. It has a look of ‘other days’ about it and is certainly a dress that will attract attention anywhere. The other bands, though not so conspicuous from anything unique in their uniforms, are very tastefully dressed and play very well.⁵²

Despite ostensibly giving away power in the form of the Thurso charter, the Sinclairs were clearly using alternative means to make their place and position in county society secure. These efforts, which continued in less flamboyant ways throughout the 1860s, included benefit entertainments attended by local gentry.⁵³

Women and the Thurso Volunteer Movement

The naming of female patrons specifically in connection with support for music rather than shooting medals or military equipment may have been considered an appropriate outlet for the ladies of the county. The inscription on a rather beautiful silver bugle currently in the collection of the Caithness Horizons Museum in Thurso (*Fig. 4*) describes its having been presented from the proceeds of a fundraising bazaar in spring 1861 that was held to raise money to equip the recently established 1st Caithness (Thurso) Rifle volunteers. This week-long celebration, hosted by the town’s ‘Benevolent Institution’, was described at length in the *John O’Groat Journal* of 11 April. It clearly involved most of the ladies of the area, who donated baking and donations of art and bric-a-brac, and even items brought in by the Friday mail steamer. In the evening after the bazaar finally closed, a ‘soiree’ was held in the old Court house. The weather outside was not particularly clement, but inside the ladies had been at work, decorating the ceiling rafters with rope nets laced through with greenery. White linen covered long tables, and home-made candelabras supplied the lighting, suggesting ‘the idea of an entertainment *al fresco* or a *dejeuner a la* Friar Tuck and his merry men all under the greenwood tree’ – the allusion to Robin Hood suggesting local Scottish identities reimagined through British folk myth. The guns of the local Volunteers (carbines of the Artillery and Enfields of the Rifles) hung from the joists; bayonet scabbards were arranged ‘in a variety of tasteful devices’ as in a Highland baronial hall. Before a lengthy vote of thanks was offered up to the ladies by Captain Henderson (commander of the Rifles), ‘a band of violins whiled away the time till the assemblage was completed.’ Other speeches that evening remarked on how the local ladies had shown themselves to

⁵⁰ ‘Artillery Volunteers’, *The Caithness Courier*, 11 August 1866, 2.

⁵¹ ‘Artillery Volunteers’, *The Caithness Courier*, 18 August 1866, 2.

⁵² ‘Review of the Caithness Volunteers’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 27 September 1866, 3.

⁵³ ‘Letters (A Volunteer)’, *The Caithness Courier*, 27 June 1868, 3.

be well worth defending from ‘the grasping policy of Napoleon III.’⁵⁴ In June, the *Inverness Courier* briefly reported on the same event: that two silver bugles had been presented by Miss Henderson of Stemster and Miss Sinclair of Forss ‘in the name of the ladies of Thurso’ to the 1st Caithness Volunteer Rifles and the 2nd Caithness Volunteer Artillery, and that the money otherwise raised by the bazaar had covered both existing debts and a surplus of 20 guineas to purchase music and instruments.⁵⁵

Such female patronage continued throughout the decade. In 1867, a trio of local ladies from Olig House in Castletown (a village dominated by the slate quarrying operations of the Traill family) organised a local day *en fête* at which they presented a set of two silver bugles to the newly formed village artillery corps.⁵⁶ In 1869, the *John O’Groat Journal* printed an acknowledgement of receipt from the Thurso bandmaster of £1 from Lady Sinclair of Ulbster ‘for the purchase of music for the use of the various volunteer bands under his instruction.’⁵⁷

Musical gestures like these gave the more prominent women of the community an opportunity to contribute to the expression of local civic identity. Andrew Mackillop has observed that throughout this period ‘in the north of Scotland a successful and mutually beneficial form of symbiosis emerged as local power, in the form of landlords and gentry, colonized the state and became its agents and its employees.’⁵⁸ In the Caithness County context, these feminine gifts cloaked some rivalry between the Sinclairs of Ulbster and other local families. In the 1869 county by-election, for example, Tollemache Sinclair emerged late as an independent Liberal candidate against the party nominee, Mr Traill, and in his election speeches aimed some particularly strong invective against the Sinclairs of Forss.

Banding Together: County Soundscapes

The regular presence of fit young men parading in smart new uniforms aroused pride in local onlookers. Combining sound and spectacle, Volunteer units marched along roads that joined local communities into wider area geographies. The *John O’Groat Journal* on 11 August 1864 reported the first appearance in Thurso of the Rifle Corps in new uniforms similar to those of other rifle volunteer units in the Highlands:

The rifle corps turned out last night for the first time in their scarlet tunics and blue trousers. The new uniforms are of superior quality and well fitted, and reflect the highest



Fig. 4: Silver Bugle presented to 1st (Thurso) Rifle Volunteers in 1861. (Photo Credit and permission: Alan McIvor, Thurso Heritage Society.)

⁵⁴ ‘Ladies Bazaar in aid of the Thurso Volunteer Corps’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 11 April 1861, 2–3.

⁵⁵ ‘Caithness & Orkney, &c. (Presentation of Bugles to the Thurso Volunteers)’, *The Inverness Courier* 42(2276), 27 June 1861, 6.

⁵⁶ ‘Presentation of Bugles to the Castletown Volunteer Corps.’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 25 July 1867, 3.

⁵⁷ ‘Mr Smith acknowledges’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 14 October 1869, 2 (col. 4, miscellaneous items). The following column (‘Concert’) reports a concert of vocal and instrumental music given by the 1st Caithness Artillery Volunteers in the Temperance Hall, which showcased Mr Smith’s musicians.

⁵⁸ Andrew Mackillop, ‘The Political Culture of the Scottish Highlands from Culloden to Waterloo,’ *The Historical Journal*, 46(3), (2003), 531.

credit on the contractors, Messrs Fraser and Sons, Inverness. Under the command of Captain Tait, the corps marched to Janet Street, and after being drilled there for an hour or so, they paraded the town led by the band, the bright colour of the tunics attracting great crowds, so much so that some of the corners the streets were almost impassable.⁵⁹

Standardised uniforms for the non-musical volunteers connected these local units to wider regional identities. These collective identities were most visible when all the units in a particular area gathered at local county level for their annual reviews by the Lord Lieutenant. Annual inspections presented Volunteer units from different communities around the county for comparative evaluation in the eyes, and ears, of all onlookers, civilian and military.

In Caithness, in the 1860s, travel beyond the county for joint inspection with units from Ross-shire and Inverness-shire was impossible: there was no train service to the far north, and the steamer services were not sufficiently frequent or capacious to transport Volunteer units to a common mustering point.⁶⁰ A report in the *Inverness Courier* of 1861, for example, mentions units from Inverness, Nairn, Forres, Elgin, and Ross-shire convening by the Inverness railway station before travelling out to Fort George, but no mention is made of either Caithness or Orkney. In 1860, at the first great review of the Volunteer units of Scotland in Edinburgh, only a subset of the Wick Artillery Volunteers managed the nine-day excursion by steamer to Granton, and they do not seem to have brought any band members with them.⁶¹ These were working men, many of them fishermen, at the height of the summer fishing season. Apart from the Wick unit, the other Caithness units seem not to have had much interest in the national Volunteer movement outside of their own county. The national *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch* newsletter repeatedly lists the Thurso units amongst those not subscribing to their publication.⁶² After mentioning Thurso once in the 1860s (in connection with the 1860 county inspection at Pennyland), the *VSG&MD* thereafter concentrates on the Wick unit, who bother to subscribe to their reporting of the national movement and to come (once) to Edinburgh. However, from the start, all the Caithness units, and their music bands, were able to take one day off for their annual local inspection, and local reporting shows that these events had a significant impact across the county on those who saw the men making their way to the designated inspection field.

Getting British military bands at any level to play together harmoniously was not always easy. In 1854, a parade to celebrate Queen Victoria's birthday in front of the General Staff of the Crimean allies at Scutari had been reduced to a day of national shame, as the various regimental bands had played the National Anthem in different keys and in different tunings and in a different arrangements. It can therefore be imagined that massing the local Volunteer bands might cause some nervousness.⁶³ However, by the early 1860s there were national standard specifications for the production of military instruments, so technically at least, they could play in tune together, providing units owned military standard instruments, as was now the case in Caithness. It was also helpful that in 1862, new army regulations for standard military pitch set a standard B flat.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ 'Thurso', *The John O'Groat Journal*, 11 August 1864, 3, 1.

⁶⁰ 'Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Wick, Thurso, Orkney and Shetland', *The Inverness Courier* 42(2279), 18 July 1861, 8. Column 6 shows the timetable for once-weekly steamers over the summer. The *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch* reports shooting competitions featuring members of the Artillery volunteers from around the Highlands, but not from Caithness in the far north; see 'Highland Rifle Association', *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 7 October 1865, 5–6.

⁶¹ 'The Caithness Artillery', *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 15 August 1860, 14.

⁶² 'The following list of corps not taking etc', *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 31 December 1864, 9, col. 5; see also 'Notice', *VSG&MD*, 2 December 1865, 8, col. 2. Of actual subscribers, the paper mentioned only units from Wick; see 'Notice', *VSG&MD* 13 November 1869, 5, col. 2.

⁶³ Herbert, *The British Brass Band*, 31.

⁶⁴ Herbert, *The British Brass Band*, 65.

The *John O’Groat Journal* of 15 June 1865 described the first combined review of all the constituent companies of the Caithness Battalion of Rifle Volunteers at Thurso East, home of Sir George Sinclair and his son and heir, J. G. Tollemache Sinclair: ‘The band played at intervals, and the morning being so fine the journey was as pleasant as it could possibly have been.’ The Wick corps arrived first, then the Halkirk corps arrived: ‘brawny, broad-shouldered, rosy-cheeked fellows, big-boned, and with more beef and muscle on them than is characteristic of either of the town companies. And in marching, what strides they take!’ These country lads did not have the sophisticated brass band resources of their town brothers, but were instead headed up by their two bagpipers: Sergeant Mackay, late of the 79th Highlanders, and Alex Murray: ‘They came down the hill literally devouring the road ... in active service they would certainly be the sappers and miners of the battalion, and for forced marches, as a flying column, they would considerably astonish the enemy.’⁶⁵ The stereotyping of the rural ‘teuchter’ by the urban sophisticate from Wick (in this instance) reproduces the re-purposing of an imagined Highland warrior culture for British military endeavour that haunts post-1745 British imperial writing.

The *Groat* reporter noted on this occasion that the ‘Thurso Band’ was a composite band with eight players drawn from the 1st Caithness (Thurso) Rifle Company volunteer band, and another six players from the 2nd Caithness (Thurso) Artillery, with one James Mackenzie acting as the ‘trumpet major’. The Wick company – 2nd Caithness Rifles – had a twelve-strong musical band, two fewer than the combined Thurso forces. In this report we also learn that in 1865 the Thurso band had ‘a distinct uniform from that of either of the Corps’, although not yet the glorious tartanry that would be purchased in 1866:

It is dark green with white facings, and has a very fine appearance, contrasting well with the scarlet and blue of the Rifles and Artillery. Their bandmaster, Sergeant David Manson, acted as field bugler to the commanding officer during the skirmishing. They are unquestionably a first-rate band and play with great taste and sweetness, but notwithstanding their larger number, owing to their instruments being finer in tone than those of the Wick band, the latter is the better for marching music as the power of their instruments makes them distinctly heard over almost any length of column. During the review, after playing for a time alternately, the bands were massed and played together, and the effect was peculiarly fine.⁶⁶

At the end of the formal inspection, the Thurso and Wick bands’ joint performance of the national anthem provoked no adverse comment. Afterwards, the amity continued:

The battalion marched into the town and through the principal streets to the music of the united bands, bringing all the inhabitants who had been left in Thurso to the windows, and having half the country-side at their heels ... the Thurso Band played the Wickers out of town with ‘Auld Lang Syne.’ ... The band played at intervals along the road – wherever there were houses, and the rest of the road they sang, while those behind cheered everything and everybody until they got to Wick where they arrived all safe and happy a little before eleven o’ clock.⁶⁷

Music from these two Volunteer bands demonstrated their towns’ pride in distinctive local civic identities, with local competition contained within a wider patriotism. For those units travelling to the inspection, their various bands’ music helped to create a regional county identity, filling the countryside with appreciative applause from onlookers. In 1860s Thurso, the local town band fulfilled both civilian and military functions, although increasingly taking to the uniforms that badged it as a

⁶⁵ ‘Review of the Caithness Battalion of Rifle Volunteers at Thurso’, *The John O’Groat Journal*, 15 June 1865, 3.

⁶⁶ ‘Review of the Caithness Battalion’, 3.

⁶⁷ ‘Review of the Caithness Battalion’, 3.

military rather than a purely civilian body of amateur friends. In Wick, the Volunteer band seems to have been from its inception more firmly associated with the military function.

The Wick Volunteer Band

Wick was a bustling fishing centre in the 1860s, and had been a royal burgh since 1589. Unlike Thurso, therefore, it was long used to managing its affairs through a freely elected town council. Wick burgh meeting books show the town council to have been energetic in steering infrastructure projects such as breakwater maintenance, lobbying MPs for national support via the Treasury and the Board of Trade, building a new bridge across Wick river, and establishing a new volunteer fire brigade.⁶⁸ Wick's status as a royal burgh also meant that it had well-developed traditions of street-level engagement in general elections, as can be seen in newspaper reports of the entertainments that accompanied the general election of 1868, discussed in this section.

The Wick militia band formed in the 1860s, in association with the town's Rifle Volunteer Company. As in Thurso, records of the unit as a whole show them to have attracted a great deal of local patronage, but in contrast with Thurso, this included more middle-class names alongside those of landowners. By 1866, *The Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, presumably using a locally supplied report, lists a truly astonishing list of prizes given by local donors for the annual shooting competitions; these ranged from carriage clocks and silver watches to leather bags, a barometer (useful, considering the fishermen in this group), and a prize concertina.⁶⁹ The large number of prizes and donors suggests some degree of civic competition between local businesses and trades.

On 9 January 1862, the *John O'Groat Journal* reported that the Wick Rifle Corps now possessed 'a full brass band of 14 instruments; and have engaged an instructor, a Mr Meerfeldt, who has arrived fresh from training bands in the south'.⁷⁰ Meerfeldt – a German – reflected the British army's practice of relying on overseas bandmasters from Germany, France and Italy, until the foundation in 1857 of the institution later called the Royal Military School of Music (initially, the Military Music Class) in Twickenham gradually replaced them with British home-trained musicians.

The expense of setting up the Wick unit seems to have been borne by the townspeople collectively through local subscriptions, donations in kind, and public fundraising events such as bazaars and concerts. Public accountability for the income and expenditure of the Wick Volunteer band was therefore important. On its front page of 24 April 1862, the *Groat* published a summary of the company accounts, along with some general standing orders signed off by Major James Horne, Captain in Command. Order number three specified that 'the Band will, until further orders, parade with the Company on Monday and Thursday evenings only, and on Friday evenings will attend private practise'.⁷¹ The income summary, which covered the period from the unit's being first raised to that date, revealed that the corps had received subscriptions from 'Gentlemen and the town' as well as from corps members themselves; had raised a further £275 from a successful fund-raising bazaar; and received a little bank interest. Out of unit expenditure totalling £438 5s 2d, shows that £38 16s 7d was spent on instruments for the music band.

Fundraising continued, with the band's efforts generating additional funds from public appreciation of their music. On 18 December 1862, the *Groat* reviewed a concert by the Rifle Volunteer band in the Wick Temperance Hall that had raised £7 10s: 'This band has cost the corps a considerable sum of money from first to last, and we are glad to say that they have been worth the outlay'.⁷² In the 1860s, there was no national grant even for regimental bands, let alone local

⁶⁸ *Wick Burgh Minute Book 1794-1939*, Nucleus Archive, BW/1/4: entries for 21 February 1861, 28 March 1868 and 27 June 1868.

⁶⁹ '2nd Caithness (Wick) Rifles', *The Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 1 December 1866, 10.

⁷⁰ 'Rifle Corps', *The John O'Groat Journal*, 9 January 1862, 2.

⁷¹ 'Second Caithness Rifle Volunteers Company Orders', *The John O'Groat Journal*, 24 April 1862, 1, col. 1.

⁷² 'Concert', *The John O'Groat Journal*, 18 December 1862, 2.

Volunteer bands, and the army expressed concerns about the high cost of instruments as well as the ‘fast dealings’ of Mr Boosey, who offered bandmasters incentives to buy his instruments.⁷³ The growth of bands in the mid-nineteenth century was assisted by manufacturers making instruments available on a hire-purchase basis, often underwritten by local wealthy backers. Henry Distin’s 1857 catalogue lists new B flat cornets as retailing at over £8, alto flugelhorn at almost £11, and even cymbals coming in at around £6. Five pounds sterling would be worth just over £200 today, and shipping to the far north by steamer would raise the cost further. Although there would have probably been a discount for any bulk order, and possibly options to pay by instalments, the sums in the Wick accounts cannot have bought new instruments for every bandsman.⁷⁴ Some volunteer bands controversially diverted some of their capitation grants into a band fund, but most were mainly funded by some kind of subscription involving officers and the local community, assisted by the band’s own contributions to local musical social life.⁷⁵ The newspaper reports do not show who guaranteed repayments on the Wick and Thurso band instruments, but likely candidates probably included local landowning gentry – officers such as Major Horne of Stirkoke and, in Thurso, the Sinclairs of Ulbster, their rivals the Sinclairs of Forss and, more locally, the Smiths of Pennyland.

Wick Bands and the 1868 Election

In addition to its activities on the drill ground, the Wick band played for regular annual balls, serving up reels, polkas and other fashionable dances.⁷⁶ A further area of band activity that speaks to Wick’s pride in its independent civic identity, but which must have been controversial at the time, was the appearance of band members in the context of the general election of 1868. Strictly, this was not legal: a War Office letter of 11 September 1868, widely copied in local British newspapers (although possibly not in the far north), reminded Lord Lieutenants that ‘Volunteers in uniform should take part in no political demonstration or party meeting’, that ‘they are not to assemble their corps for drill or any other purpose between the issue of the writ and the termination of the election in any county or burgh’, and that they should remind all officers of all corps of this directive.⁷⁷ By September, however, Wick bandsmen had already marched out to accompany candidate canvassing on at least one occasion.

In the national election of 1868, the sitting Liberal candidate for the Northern Burghs, Samuel Laing, hoped to be returned. From a Kirkwall family, Laing was a national authority on railways, a hot topic locally, and he had also played a leading role in national and colonial British government, being appointed as financial secretary to the Treasury in 1859. He had won the Northern Burghs constituency in 1852, defeating the sitting MP James Loch, who was seen at that point as the apologist for the Strathnaver sheep clearance evictions and whose seat in the Commons had extended the Duke of Sutherland’s influence into Caithness burgh politics. Laing’s success in 1852 had rested on his being ‘above’ local politics: not in the pocket of noble landowners, nor sullied with the Clearances connection. By 1868, however, the franchise had been extended, and the result depended on the candidate being seen as well-briefed and committed to local issues.⁷⁸ Laing, whose activity in parliament had been in national and colonial affairs, was less secure.

Moreover, Liberalism was not a united movement in 1868. The national debates around the Second Reform Act had split the Liberals into two wings, one of which was more radical in its politics

⁷³ Lt. Col. P. L. Binns, *A Hundred Years of Military Music: Being the Story of the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall* (Gillingham: The Blackmore Press, 1959), 59.

⁷⁴ Binns, *A Hundred Years of Military Music*, 307–8.

⁷⁵ Herbert, *The British Brass Band*, 39.

⁷⁶ ‘2nd Caithness Rifles’, *Volunteer Service Gazette and Military Dispatch*, 21 November 1868, 3.

⁷⁷ ‘Volunteers at Elections’, *Naval & Military Gazette and Weekly Chronicle of the United Service*, 19 September 1868, 14.

⁷⁸ Annie Tindley, *The Sutherland Estate 1850–1920: Aristocratic Decline, Estate Management and Land Reform* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 12, 14.

and often critical of government foreign policy, and the other much more doubtful about the latest franchise innovations. Positions also varied on whether education should be more secular (current arrangements excluded Free Church children from burgh schools run by the Church of Scotland) and on Irish and foreign policy. Laing was on the conservative wing of the Liberals, and was opposed by a rival Liberal, George Loch (son of the infamous James), who was backed by the more forward reformers in the Liberals. George Loch promoted himself as a ‘local’, reforming, and entrepreneurial candidate, and characterised Laing as overly cautious and aging. Both men were briefly but controversially opposed by a radical independent candidate, Edinburgh man-of-means Edmund Lockyer.

Both Laing’s and Loch’s campaigns were enlivened by open air band performances and ritual processions through the streets of Wick. The *John O’Groat Journal* openly supported Loch, while the rival newspaper, the *Northern Ensign*, was partisan for Laing. In its editorial of 13 August 1868, four months before polling day, the *Groat* reported on Laing’s arrival in Wick to deliver his keynote campaign speech. The candidate had processed through the town accompanied vigorously by the Wick Volunteers’ brass band, augmented by fifes and a couple of bagpipers:

The band played him in to the appropriate tune of “Paddle your own canoe” At every corner where a crowd was collected an unsuccessful attempt was made by the fuglemen to get up a hearty and general cheer, but the whole affair was a most miserable failure.

The procession wound through the town, led by Mr Ross on the bagpipes and assisted by ‘spangled youths in skin-tights and mounted on seven-league stilts, and followed by all the boys and idlers of the town.’ At the New Hotel, there were desultory cheers ‘mingled with a good deal of hissing.’ The candidate attempted to speak from the hotel window, thanking Wick for its welcome and announcing that he was going to meet the electors in the Old Free Church, and expressing his ‘belief that [this gathering] would be a prediction of their success (cheers and hisses).’ In the Free Church, however, the *Groat* editor reported that Laing’s speech was punctuated with further parenthetical hisses, and finally brought to an end when bags of flour were thrown, to the distress of the candidate’s wife and daughters.⁷⁹

The Wick town band that accompanied Laing through the town was named in the *Groat* report as the band associated with the 2nd Caithness (Wick) Rifle Volunteers. It is possible that the bagpiper Mr Ross was also in this company, as the Lieutenant of the 2nd Wick Rifles in the mid-1860s was one Lieutenant Roderick Ross.⁸⁰ The band’s appearance must have been authorised by a more senior officer, who presumably was happy to have his troops put to political use. While the Lord Lieutenant of the County – the 14th Earl of Caithness, James Sinclair – was the commanding officer of all the militia volunteers in the area, the operational commander of the Wick units – the acting Brigadier – was one Major Horne of Stirkoke, a large landowner just outside of Wick, who emerged as a late and ultimately unsuccessful independent, Conservative-leaning, candidate in the Caithness County constituency in October 1868.⁸¹ If Horne authorised the Wick band’s deployment in support of Laing, did Horne think that Laing’s cautious stand on some of the issues raised by the Second Reform Act was worth endorsing?

Laing was not the only candidate to co-opt support from the local Volunteer militia. To balance local politics, a couple of months later, and after the War Office circular of 11 September had been widely disseminated, we find bagpiper Ross and the brass band of the 2nd Wick Rifles appearing *en fête* for the other Liberal candidate, George Loch. On 29 October 1868, the *John O’Groat Journal* reported a day of ‘Grand Demonstration’ on the occasion of Mr Loch’s visit to Wick, describing it as

⁷⁹ ‘Mr Laing, M.P., At Wick’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 13 August 1868, 3.

⁸⁰ ‘Review of the Caithness Battalion of Rifle Volunteers at Thurso’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 15 June 1865, 3 (col. 2, list for Second Caithness (Wick) Rifle Company Officers).

⁸¹ ‘To the Electors of the County of Caithness’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 15 October 1868, 1.

‘one of the grandest demonstrations ever seen in this quarter, rivalling alike in its magnitude, in the heartiness with which it was supported by all classes of the community, and in the imposing magnificence of the display, the long talked of demonstration of 1832’. Comparing it to the visit of Loch’s rival in August, the *Groat’s* correspondent crowed that ‘the demonstration of Thursday as far exceeded it as the mountain exceeds the molehill’.⁸²

The procession that accompanied Loch from the countryside south of Wick into the centre of town was heralded by ‘the occasional sounds of music marching through the streets.’ The trades associated with the town’s fishing industry each fielded a body of men: mounted carters, coopers, fishermen, boat carpenters, harbour workmen, masons, and the General Committee of Mr Loch’s supporters. Mr Roderick Ross, the bagpiper previously mentioned as having marched in the Laing procession in August, acted once again as marshal of the procession, which was doubtless necessary as ‘each trade had its own flag and a band of music.’ The town’s militia band was not the only band to turn out; Helmsdale and Lybster, both fishing settlements with volunteer militias, also sent their bands up the coast, although this time, the *Groat* reported that the Volunteer band that met Loch off the boat at Lybster was ‘not in uniform’ – perhaps, then, obeying the letter of the War Office letter if not exactly the spirit in which it was issued. The *Groat* went on to describe the Wick, Lybster and Helmsdale bands, mostly probably comprised of fisherman, as they marched with Loch along the coast road to Wick:

The fine brass bands which accompanied the procession were three in number. The Wick band marched out with the coopers, and came in with the masons, and in front of Mr Loch’s carriage, playing ‘Charlie ye are welcome’ and ‘See the conquering hero comes’ alternately. The Lybster band accompanied the fishermen. The Helmsdale band went out with the carpenters and came in with the coopers. The harbour workmen were preceded by three pipers.⁸³

This was a carefully curated programme of music, with the Jacobite song (casting Loch as a romantic Young Pretender) alternating with Handel’s Hanoverian anthem (associated with British Whig politics). By yoking together two once-antagonistic political traditions, the music projected Loch as the candidate most able not only to reconcile local political differences, but also to bridge local and national political histories.

At one o’clock the word was given to march, and the procession is archly described in mock-epic style:

The carters’ steeds are prancing and enjoying the novelty, and away they go ... as the first crash of music breaks out, and the first movement begins; [*a horse bolts*] as if possessed by seven demons, making the crowd fly right and left, knocking over a couple of lamp-posts, and finally coming to grief with his nose on the ground in Brown Place, happily without hurting anybody. The man in charge held nobly on for a while to the maddened animal, and only let go when he was in danger of being thrown down and run over.⁸⁴

There was a bit of difficulty getting the trades’ flags past the newly installed low-lying telegraph wires (a modernising initiative backed by Samuel Laing during his time as local MP), and a brief pause to gather up the candidate and carriages containing the candidates and local and national party worthies: ‘Mr Loch was in an open waggonette, accompanied by Messrs Crawford and Bruce, Vice-Chairmen of his committee, and Mr Macdonald of London.’ The crowd greeted Loch with ‘cheer on cheer’ as he passed the line of trades, ‘standing with head uncovered.’ Some young men unyoked the horses of his wagon and demanded to pull the wagon through the street as ‘an honour to Mr Loch’:

⁸² ‘Mr Loch’s Visit to Wick’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 29 October 1868, 3.

⁸³ ‘Mr Loch’s Visit’, col. 2.

⁸⁴ ‘Mr Loch’s Visit’, col. 1.

‘clustering round the carriage like a swarm of bees, it seemed to move without effort on their part.’⁸⁵ The choice of metaphor references classical literature, particularly Virgil’s *Georgics*, giving this local triumph a Roman civic glamour that was part-ironic, and part-patriotic.

After Loch went into Nicol’s Hotel to speak to his supporters, those of the opposition attempted to create a disturbance by baa-ing like sheep (a reference to Loch’s father’s involvement in the Clearances):

But their united efforts were all in vain as cheer after cheer rang out from each of the bodies in the procession as they marched past, and all the baa-ing and screaming, and frantic caterwauling of the opposition was rendered inaudible, unless to themselves.⁸⁶

Loch’s speech having been delivered without the flour-decorated heckling that had marred Laing’s performance, the day ended with orderly votes of thanks and calm dispersal.

The third candidate in the constituency, Edmund Lockyer, withdrew from the race on the polling day. Lockyer had always been very much a maverick outsider. The previous year, at the start of his candidacy for the Northern Burghs, Lockyer’s grandstanding support for two elderly blind men who had been thrown out of the Edinburgh Asylum for the Blind had landed him in the Edinburgh papers as a Don Quixote-like figure, a saviour of the weak and dispossessed. That affair had, however, fizzled out without achieving much other than embarrassing all parties concerned. Lockyer had also failed to get himself elected to the board of the North British railway company, an embarrassment widely reported in both national and provincial papers.⁸⁷ The *Groat* reported in October 1868 that Lockyer had been arrested and released on £100 bail for bribing a Wick postman to show him a letter passed between Loch and some local supporters which he thought contained details of illegal election practices.⁸⁸ By the nomination day (in advance of the official poll) on Tuesday 24 November, Lockyer had circulated libellous notices, pasted to town walls in Wick, complaining about local corrupt electioneering.

Newspapers outside of Caithness were starting to notice that the election in Wick was unusually ill-tempered. On 26 November the *Inverness Courier* noted that ‘in all the Northern Burghs great excitement has been caused by the present contest, but in none has feeling run so high as in Wick’. As the three candidates appeared at the final hustings, the unruly crowd numbered as many as 4000, far exceeding the numbers of those actually enfranchised to vote. Speeches were barely audible, although Loch’s voice seems to have carried further due to his personal robustness and the crowd momentarily quietening slightly. Lockyer was still under investigation for somehow intercepting and opening letters, and the crowd waved ‘letters’ above their heads and shouted out oblique references to ‘Miss Sinclair, deerskin and letters’. Lockyer, rendered inaudible, pulled open his shirt and beat his chest to indicate his sincerity. The show of hands at the end of the hustings (not the official vote, but an nevertheless important barometer of local intentions) was not private: hands were held up and counted, in full view of all present. Lockyer accepted his cause was lost and withdrew that day in favour of Laing.⁸⁹

After the poll, which returned a decisive majority for Loch, the winning candidate was pulled through the streets in a boat atop a carriage, headed by bagpipes and a flag proclaiming ‘our

⁸⁵ The entrance of the candidate, met by crowds outside the town boundaries and conveyed by a carriage pulled by townspeople, is common among ‘ritual’ election practices found throughout the British Isles in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. See O’Gorman, ‘Campaign Rituals’, 83.

⁸⁶ ‘Mr Loch’s Visit’, col. 2.

⁸⁷ ‘Lockyer Latest!’, *The North Briton (Scotsman)*, 14 August 1867, 2, and 20 August 1867; see also ‘From Our Edinburgh Correspondent’, *Inverness Advertiser and Ross-Shire Chronicle*, 16 August 1867, 2, and ‘Notes on Edinburgh’, *Brechin Advertiser*, 20 August 1867, 2–3.

⁸⁸ ‘The Case of Mr Lockyer’, *John O’Groat Journal*, 8 October 1868, 2.

⁸⁹ ‘Nomination for the Northern Burghs’, *Inverness Courier*, 26 November 1868, 5.

independence and freedom'. However, by the end of December, Lockyer lodged a formal petition against Loch and for Laing, claiming that:

“the election of the said George Loch was effected and accomplished through bribery by himself, by his agents, friends and supporters; and by undue influence, violence, threats of violence, and intimidation by his committee and the members thereof, and supporters, agents, and others, and hired mobs; and by treating, and through a very large gratuitous distribution of whisky; and Mr Loch’s success was the result of extensive corruption and of proceedings wholly, or at least in large part, contrary to law.”⁹⁰

Laing himself was embarrassed by the petition and never backed it, and by the end of February, Lockyer was obliged to withdraw it and bear its expenses.⁹¹

The entanglements of Volunteer bands with local politics were less explicit in west Caithness. Unlike in Wick, Thurso musicians were not reported as having marched for political rallies before the County constituency poll in 1868, nor did they come out in advance of the rather scrappy County by-election of 1869 between two rival liberal candidates, one of whom was Sir Tollemache Sinclair, but they did celebrate their patron winning with a musical entry procession to the Town. Sir Tollemache’s 1869 campaign was otherwise populist: his election speeches referred in general terms to the many ways in which his family, and he himself, had promoted Thurso’s emerging civic regeneration. James Traill, the rival liberal candidate, had strong local family connections with the slate-quarrying Traills of Castletown, but was represented to voters as a ‘London man’ put up by a government-controlled clique. After a campaign marred by intemperate language and a public threat to punch his rival’s agent in the face, Sir Tollemache was declared the victor, and was accompanied into his home town of Thurso by ‘several bands of music’.⁹² The involvement of local bands in these various election processions suggests that public displays to the wider population, not just those qualified to vote, were part of a recurrent pattern of public festivity – including entry to the town, and general street celebration aiming to demonstrate civic assent from the wider town population, men of all classes, women, and youth under twenty-one (spangled or otherwise).

Conclusion

For some decades after 1859, as the far north of Scotland remained beyond the reach of daily railway services, brass bands played an important role in national politics, particularly at the time of the second Reform Act. While those formally enfranchised were encouraged to become involved in elections, the enthusiasm for the bands among the wider population contributed to the energy of civic life. Tradespeople, fisher folk, women, and members of both middle and lower classes raised money for music, instruments and even the costs of band masters to train the musicians and outfit their ensembles, demonstrating that the bands had become a much-treasured part of life in Wick, Thurso and other Caithness communities.

In the later decades of the nineteenth century, the opportunity for local gentry to dress bands associated with the local Volunteer units in the equivalent of their own family livery gradually receded. Military reforms put a stop to idiosyncratic local uniforms; the absorption of the Highland militias by the Seaforth Highlanders in the Childers Reforms of 1881 also saw their amateur counterparts, the Volunteers and their bands, reverting to more standard blue uniforms with silver buttons (*Fig. 5*).

⁹⁰ ‘Petition Against the Return of Mr Loch for the Northern Burghs’, *Inverness Courier*, 24 December 1868, 6.

⁹¹ ‘Withdrawal of the Wick Election Petition’, *Saturday Inverness Advertiser*, 13 February 1869, 2.

⁹² ‘Caithness Election’, *Inverness Courier*, 2 September 1869, 6.



Fig. 5: Thurso Town Band c.1900
Reproduced courtesy of Caithness Horizons Museum and Art Gallery, Thurso.

With the demise of Thurso's Volunteer 'Town' band in 1907, the rise of the Salvation Army temperance movement, which welcomed women as well as men to their bands, provided an alternative outlet for morally improving musical activity (*Fig. 6*).



Fig. 6: Thurso Salvation Army Band c.1920-29.
Courtesy of the Johnston Photographic Collection, Wick Heritage Society.

VOLUNTEER BANDS & LOCAL IDENTITY IN CAITHNESS

In 1913, on the eve of World War 1, Thurso and District Pipe Band was formed, a Highland expression of musical community identity more familiar to conventional histories.⁹³ In Wick, however, civilian brass bands continued to feature strongly in civic life, with photographs in the Wick Heritage Centre's Johnston photographic archive showing them turning out for gala days and for the proclamations of royal deaths and coronations in the years between 1900 and 1937.

Thurso 1911 Census (all males)	2179
Wick 1911 Census (all males)	5546
All-Caithness recorded as lost in First World War	1123 (c. 14.5% of total male population in 1911)

Table 2: WW1 casualties compared with male populations of Thurso and Wick, as recorded in 1911 Census.

Looking at the young men pictured in Figure 5, it is hard not to be moved by the thought that they, their peers, and in some cases their sons would go on to fight and possibly lose their lives in the Great War, in many ways the culmination of the militarised civic culture of the nineteenth century. The death toll of army personnel involved in that conflict in Caithness was significant (*Table 2*).⁹⁴



Fig. 7: Wick War Memorial, 1955.

James Valentine Photographic Collection, item ref. JV-D-956.
Courtesy of University of St Andrews Library.

By way of some slight compensation, by 1918, men who survived had been granted the vote; women joined them in 1928. The war memorials raised throughout Scotland remind everyone today of the cost paid for the pride and care these men had for their local and national communities: in both Thurso and Wick, memorials to the dead (*Fig. 7*) stare blankly down the same streets through which

⁹³ The Thurso and District Pipe band have just celebrated their 110th anniversary; see their Facebook group: https://www.facebook.com/tdpb1913/?locale=en_GB; also an account of their founding years by Bandsman David Manson: <http://www.caithness.org/entertainment/music/pipebands/thursopipebandhistory.htm>.

⁹⁴ Census returns for 1911: *Scotland's People Census Returns*, www.scotlandsppeople.gov.uk/, searching using the towns of Wick and Thurso and 'male'. The total casualty figures were kindly provided by Valerie Amin, Archive Assistant at the Nucleus Archive in Wick, who manually checked their *List of Caithness Service Personnel Killed in World War One and Two* GB1741/P949 (collated c2019) for the total Caithness army and navy personnel lost in the First World War.

peacetime military bands, in civic procession, helped to forge the link between local civic pride and national patriotism, thereby fueling enthusiasm for the First ‘Great’ War.

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