

Patrick Byrne (1794 - 1863) By Keith Sanger

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Patrick Byrne was one of four resident students of the second Harp School run by Edward Macbride (who was one of the original students of Arthur O'Neill). He commenced his tuition on the 20th February 1820 and in Macbride's report to the annual general meeting of the Irish Harp Society on the 20 August 1821, he is described as Patrick Byrne (blind), county Meath, aged 23 and as having learnt 60 Tunes. Both his age and county of origin are possibly in error, since he seems to have actually been born in 1794 and appears to have been a native of Kingscourt, which is just over the Meath border, in county Cavan and just ten miles south of his subsequent patrons, the Shirley family of Carrickmacross, county Monaghan.



Byrne had been discharged from the school after eighteen months tuition, and the society, as he 'had made considerable proficiency on the instrument, presented a harp to him as an acknowledgment of his diligence and good deportment as a scholar of the house'. It would appear that these harps were fitted with a brass plate inscribed with the name of the pupil and the Irish Harp Society. According to Byrne's will, he left his harp to Evelyn Philip Shirley Esq, with the request that it be preserved in the great hall at Lough Fea, as an heirloom in the family of Shirley.

Byrne travelled widely throughout the United Kingdom, playing for both private parties and in public concerts. In 1829 he was presented with a silver medal by the Shakespearian Club of Stratford on Avon. He also played before Queen Victoria and on the 6th January 1841 received a warrant as Irish Harper to his Royal Highness, Prince Albert. It was just two years after this that while in Edinburgh, he took part in a historical tableau, as an ancient celtic bard and became the subject of the Hill and Adamson portraits. He also sat for at least one other portrait much later in his life which was published by Francis Bigger in the Ulster Journal of Archaeology of 1911, and clearly shows a much older Byrne than the Edinburgh series. Bigger also relates that he only played old Irish airs, and when asked to play the new tunes he invariably replied 'I never learned them, my son'. This statement must however be set against a handbill advertising a concert he gave on the 9th of July 1849 in Dungannon where 'he intends to perform a number of Irish, Scotch and Welch Airs on the Irish Harp'.

According to his tombstone, Patrick Byrne died on the 8th April 1863 at Dundalk aged 69. He was buried in the cemetery at Tobergubboch, in the Townland of Cloughvalley Upper, near Carrickmacross. He was survived in Ireland by two married sisters and also had a brother who had emigrated to America.



Although there were a number of attestations to his ability, including several newspaper reviews, it is difficult at this distance in time to assess exactly how good a harper he was. It could be argued that as he was around 26 years old when he joined the harp school, his late age would impart some limitations. It is of course possible that he may have had some other musical experience before the harp. However, what can be confidently stated is that of all the students to emerge from the Irish Harp Society Schools, Patrick Byrne was the most successful performer of them all.

Keith Sanger 2002

Portrait Above: on or around 1st April 1845, this and other photographs were taken of Byrne by the pioneering photographers

Note on first picture:

Above: on or around 1st April 1845, this and other photographs were taken of Byrne by the pioneering photographers David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson. Byrne was appearing in one of the "tableaux vivants" at the Waverly Ball, Edinburgh, as "The last minstrel striking his harp to the last lay". Some survive in the [National Portrait Gallery](#), the [National Gallery of Scotland](#) and at [Glasgow University](#). Hill later wrote of the "costume, which, made of a blanket and plaid shows how simply one might get up pictures of the old world".