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# The Borders



When Tom Hughes was born in 1908, the family were on the farm of Butchercoat (1) where his father and grandfather were both fee'd as ploughmen. The family moved from farm to farm around Jedburgh, first to nearby Smailholm (2) then Nisbetmill (3) near Crailing and then to Mervinslaw (4) near Jedburgh. After his grandfather died in 1920 the family moved to The Orchard (5) near Hawick and Tom started playing fiddle for dances with his father. In 1925 they moved to Netherlaw near Lilliesleaf (6) and in 1927 to Whitton (7) on the Kale Water.

In 1931 Tom married and moved with his wife further into the hills up the Kale Water taking a job as a horseman at Beirhope near Hownam (8) and after a couple of years to nearby Chatto (9) where he stayed for fourteen years setting up his own band the Kalewater Band playing for dances up and down the valleys of the Cheviot foothills. After the war Tom and his family moved to Ruletownhead (10) where he joined the Rulewater Band. When Tom's son took over the farm at Ruletownhead in 1951 Tom retired from farm work and moved into Jedburgh.

# Tom Hughes

## Fiddle player of Jedburgh

(1908–1986)

**T**OM HUGHES – or Tam as he was often known – was born into a farmworking family near St. Boswells in the Scottish Borders in 1908. The family were all talented musicians – his grandfather Henry Hughes, father Thomas Hughes and two uncles Henry jnr. and Bob played together in a family band – two or three fiddles, melodeon and tambourine – and his father also played pipes and tin whistle. Henry Hughes was a talented craftsman and, after he retired from his life as a ploughman, he spent his hours making wheelbarrows, walking sticks, fiddles in three sizes and goat skin tambourines.

As was the custom in those days, farm workers were fee'd to a farm for six months or a year at a time and in the spring usually went to the local hiring fair in search of a farmer who would offer better wages and conditions. Tom's family were no exception and they followed this insecure lifestyle, regularly moving from farm to farm. Tom was seven years old when he was presented with his first (half size) fiddle made by his grandfather<sup>1</sup> and he quickly taught himself the rudiments. By the time Tom left school in 1921, the family were at The Orchard near Hawick and Tom was playing fiddle with his father, travelling by bicycle to play at all the important rural events in the area, at harvest kirns<sup>2</sup>, village hall dances, hiring fair dances and country weddings firstly around Hawick and later around Jedburgh, Morebattle and Kelso. After moving to Nether Raw near Lilliesleaf (1925) they played in Adam Irvine's Band, and later at Whitton near Morebattle (1927) they joined Jim Kerse, the farm steward, who also played fiddle.

Tom, like his father and grandfather before him, spent his working life as a ploughman on farms in the Border countryside around Jedburgh. After he married, Tom formed a band of his own – the Kalewater Band when he was ploughman at Chatto near Hownham from 1933, later joining the Rulewater Band when he was farm steward at Ruletownhead near Bonchester Bridge after the war. The traditional music revival of the 1970s gave Tom's playing a new lease of life. In 1970 Tom met fiddler Wattie Robson of Denholm and they were soon playing in their distinctive style at festivals, clubs and competitions throughout Scotland and south of the Border – at Gretna, Alnwick, Rothbury, Newcastleton, Kinross and Keith.

Like many traditional musicians in days gone by, Tom learned his music by ear within the family circle and Tom's style and many of his tunes were learnt from family tradition. He not only played fiddle but also melodeon, accordion, pipes, tin whistle and tambourine. Tom also had a pair of ivory bones<sup>3</sup> and if anyone in the company had an Irish bodhran<sup>4</sup> he could (in the 1970s) show his rhythmic prowess playing the instrument with his thumb or silver topped pipe as if he had been playing the instrument for years. Although Tom's fiddle style includes many characteristic Scottish elements, it is quite different from any mainstream fiddle style such as that of Scotland's North East or that of the West Highlands. Through Tom's playing we are able to gain an insight into an old, traditional, fiddle style that stretches back through his family well into the 1800s and that may well have evolved from or retain much older elements.

PETER SHEPHEARD, Balmalcolm, Fife December 2014

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1. Making fiddles was clearly a family tradition, as Tom's grandfather had also made a small fiddle for Tom's father back in the late 1800s when Tom's father Thomas was not yet in school. See the letter from Tom's cousin Thomas Hughes of Newbiggin-By-Sea, Northumberland (page 91).

2. Kirn – the term used in the Scottish Borders for a Harvest Home gathering.

Go to the Scots Language Dictionary link for other words used in the text: <http://www.dsl.ac.uk>

3. See Wikipedia article: *The Bones*: <http://goo.gl/I8SveH>

4. See Wikipedia article: *The Bodhran*: <http://goo.gl/w36IBq>