



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



Interviewee **Pat Clark**
Interviewer **Alistair Paterson**
Date of Interview **28th March 2012**

This interview is copyright of the National Piping Centre

Please refer to the Noting the Tradition Project Manager at the National Piping Centre, prior to any broadcast of or publication from this document.

Project Manager
Noting The Tradition
The National Piping Centre
30-34 McPhater Street
Glasgow
G4 0HW
jbeaton@thepipingcentre.co.uk

2012-03-28 Pat Clark

This is Alistair Paterson, I am here with Pat Clark on the 28th March in Carside Community Centre the home of Johnston Pipe Band. So firstly Pat I would like to thank you for being part of the Noting the Tradition Project...

Pleasure.

And for taking up your time to contribute to the project, as you know it's an oral history project about piping in the last half of the twentieth century and peoples own experience of piping during that time. So to start with if we take you right back to the start, if you can tell me a little background information about you where you grew up, how you started to play pipes..., where..., and any information about your background?

Yeah, I was born and brought up in Greenock and I had a cousin who was a drummer in what used to be the Renfrew and Bute Constabulary Pipe Band. But I had no pipers that I was aware of that was in the family, but I remember going to listen to the band one day and I quite liked it. And when I joined the Scouts and discovered that the local Scouts had a pipe band and I joined, and took up the pipes then. Probably about twelve years old, roundabout 1968.

Yeah..., and so who was teaching you at that point?

The old guy that taught us was a guy called Alec MacKay who had been a piper in the Argylls, and had studied under Willie Ross at Edinburgh Castle. He was Pipe Major of the Scout pipe band so it was him that taught me to begin with.

Yeah, and was this individually or as a group?

Both individually and as part of the band.

Yeah, and so..., sort of how would you describe the teaching is it mostly of music and...?

Yes we were taught using the old Logan's Tutor...

Oh right.

Which he managed to abridge, he used to refer to the seven phrases, the seven exercises. Which you were able to play and play in the band then you would go down to his house for extra lessons, extra tuition.

Yeah.

There is a guy who played in the band previously, a fellow called Tom Cuff. He was a brother of Tony Cuff you may have heard of who played with Ossian...

Yeah.

His brother was a piper in the local Scout band and then went on to play with Red Hackle, so he was playing at that time with Red Hackle which was one of the top bands in the late sixties. So those of us who were showing a bit of potential then got additional lessons from Tom.

Yeah, yeah. And so were you learning light music or piobaireachd or...?

I was learning light music then until I was about sixteen and went to the Pipe Band Headquarters in Washington Street for piobaireachd lessons from Donald MacLeod..., wee Donald so that is where I got my piobaireachd. Old McKay could have started us on the basics taught us crunluaths etc, but didn't want to teach too much. He would say look there is no point me teaching you piobaireachd if you are going to go to Donald MacLeod, and what I always remember about that was that wee Donald didn't charge on the basis that nobody had ever charged him a penny for lessons. And he told me at the time that we weren't charged but the Pipe Band Association wasn't charged either, and he said at the end of the first year he did this they bought him something for the house. And he told them if they ever do it again that is the end of the lessons.

So would you describe his teaching as very aimed towards competition and you were competitive, or was it mainly for a past time, you know sort of amateur lesson?

Wee Donald...?

No your first teacher?

I wouldn't have said it was geared towards competition at all no, when I joined the band at first it didn't compete. It was actually the boys in the band put pressure on him eventually to start competing, but I don't think he was particularly bothered whether we competed or not.

Do you think there is a difference in mentality between people or pipers who were learning to play for competing purposes, or people are just doing it as a sort of hobby?

I think so..., I think he was tasked really with the job of providing the local Scouts with a pipe band... For marching up and down the street in the Founder's Day Parade that sort of thing, but once as I say we got the additional tuition from Tom Cuff etc who was very much playing in a top competing band then that changed. His tuition

was geared very much towards perfection, and aiming to us to be able to play at a competitive standard.

Yeah..., but that wasn't apparent in the Scout pipe band?

No, no...

Not necessarily...?

No.

No..., so what about as a solo player were you ever involved in...?

I didn't compete solo..., no.

Not as a solo player?

I regret that now, I can remember going along to the piobaireachd lessons in Washington Street one night. And wee Donald saying where were you on Saturday? At the football probably, you should have been competing in the Uist and Barra, I would have given you a prize because I was judging the Class B..., well if you had told us that a few weeks ago I might have entered [laughter]. So he certainly seemed to think that I would have been capable of competing, certainly in piobaireachd... But it really wasn't something that..., you know I was more interested in playing with a band.

Yeah, yeah. If we just go back a minute you said your cousin was a drummer?

He was a drummer, and as I say it was the old Renfrew and Bute Constabulary Pipe Band..., you know police pipe band. I just happened to be out somewhere and the pipe band was playing, and I said that's my cousin there playing in the band. So because of that I think I stood and listened and quite enjoyed it, and then at the first opportunity when I..., because I hadn't a clue where you would go and learn right. But I joined the Scouts and discovered there was a pipe band locally and that was for me.

And was there any piping within your family or...?

Apparently and I only discovered this when my grandmother died, my father discovered when they were clearing things out an old medal from the First World War presented to a piper Kenneth Clark, who apparently was my father's uncle. So of course I asked what kind of piper was he, he said I don't remember him. But like a lot of pipers in the First World War he probably never survived.

Yeah unfortunately.

And I keep meaning to try and get my hands..., I am trying to track that medal down because presumably you know it will have his number taped round the side..., might be able to get some information about him.

Yeah.

But bizarrely enough I wasn't aware that apparently I had a piper who played during the First World War, an uncle.

You weren't aware...?

I wasn't aware of that.

At the time no..., so there wasn't the influence of piping in the family no..., it was all on your own impetus?

None at all.

Would you say when you grew up piping was quite popular, or there was a ...?

Certainly when I started I wouldn't have said it was particularly popular, but it was popular with all of my friends because most of my pals we had played football together, we were in the Scouts together were all in a pipe band mainly all drummers of course.

Yeah.

So among my immediate friends most of us were involved in a pipe band...

Yeah.

But wider than that, I mean in school it was kind of frowned upon. I would say one of the big things that happened was the Dragoon Guards and The Scots Greys released Amazing Grace and that must have been in the early seventies, which got to number one in the charts. And suddenly everybody wanted a piper to play Amazing Grace so to me it became more popular then, it became the bane of most pipers' lives of course having to play Amazing Grace. I think we can knock that, but I think it certainly added to the popularity of the pipes.

So it certainly wasn't..., sorry just a minute...

Amazing Grace I think.

Yeah piping..., so you wouldn't say piping was as popular maybe as it is now?

Oh certainly not.

Certainly not no...?

No absolutely not, I think you were looked upon as a bit of an eccentric really. And I don't think there was the same coverage of piping, it was very unusual for example... I mean nowadays nobody gets married without having a piper and that was really unusual as well in those days, unless it was somebody from a piping family. It certainly became much more popular over the years after that.

Yeah..., so when you were first learning the pipes... Where did you get your first set of pipes?

The band supplied them.

The band?

The Scout Pipe Band supplied them, started off I bought a practice chanter for fifteen shillings which I think is seventy-five pence new money. A cane practice chanter reed which had to be blown in, and my first Christmas after I joined the band I got my first blackwood chanter. I thought that was the greatest Christmas present I had ever had, four quid it cost my mother.

Yeah.

But the band supplied pipes at that time, so I just played a set of pipes belonging to the band.

Do you know what kind they were, or where they might have come from?

If memory serves me correctly I think they were Robertsons with Hardie Chanters, all very flat but there we go.

I suppose have you noticed a dramatic change in pitch?

Oh absolutely, absolutely. The pitch of the chanter now is so much higher than it was then, personally I think it is just getting to the upper edge of where it should be. If it goes up anymore it will be like flute bands rather than pipe bands, but the pitch has increased tremendously since then. I laugh at times now I have still got some old LP's of the bands which I thought were the bee's knees when they started, and you put them on and it's horrendously flat. I know that the recording facilities are much better now, but even at that everything is so tremendously flat.

Yeah, would you say that the changes also been solo playing and...?

Aye both.

Why do you think..., maybe the reason for...?

I think personally more thought went into getting a sound than perhaps had been the case previously, I think more people are concerned about technique. And certainly in the bands sphere which was the sphere that I inhabited, and I think one of the big differences..., one of the I think forces in improving sound was actually the introduction of the polypenci chanter, plastic chante*. I think it was Warnock's originally and then Warmack, now if you give somebody one of these chanters now you would think oh god that is dead flat.

But they don't appreciate just what a difference that made to sound, and the other thing apart from the pitch being raised that bit they were also easier to set. So that now and I would defy anybody to say different, nowadays a good grade four band has got a much better sound than the top grade one bands had back in the sixties, I think there is no question of that. And if you go back and listen to old recordings I think that's proved, and that was a great leveller I think, it became easier for bands to set up. And of course that has developed since then, the Warmack chanter I think a lot of people would consider to be quite flat to what else is on the market, but I think that is a big step forward.

So the chanter is obviously..., the introduction of plastic chanters..., what about chanter reeds themselves. I mean do you notice just any sort of dramatic difference?

Well the introduction of the Warmack or the Warnock chanter..., the Warmack chanter also tends to be blown McAllister's reeds. And some of these reeds had more wood on them than the Braemar caber, it would take about three months to blow it in. Once they were in they were great reeds but really, really difficult to blow in because everybody was also looking for a big sound. But certainly there are more..., I think one of the other things you have to remember is that there are far more people these days making pipes, making reeds than there were then. So there is probably more competition among pipe makers or among reed makers, to perfect what they are doing.

I mean I can remember when I took over as Pipe Major of the Scout Pipe Band, we got drone reeds from a reed maker. A guy old MacKay had dealt with for years and years, and I remember ordering maybe a dozen sets or so of drone reeds and they were terrible you know. And I sent them back and then I got a letter back, I won't name the person right he will be dead now anyway. But I got a letter back saying what you should do is take a sharp knife and take some of the edges off the inside of the tongue, take the bridles off and retie them..., and instructions how to tie the bridles as if I didn't know that already [laughter]. And maybe cut a bit off the top, I said in other words make my own reeds that is what he is suggesting.

And I think in those days people just bought these things because there were very few of them, where now they just say we are going to stop using you there are plenty of people. And I think that probably improved it, quality control I think probably came into it. So everybody is competing, there is more people at the game, they are competing against one another to get some kind of business, so at the end of the day the product has to be improved so I think that was an improvement as well... But yes I remember actually being in the loft a wee while back and finding an old case with old bits and pieces, and in amongst these old bits and pieces were old reeds. There must have been reeds I had played in the late sixties, they must have been long, they were just horrendous, how well I got a sound out them I will never know.

So you think the reed making has become more refined maybe?

Absolutely.

Yeah, and maybe expectations for each player are much higher?

I would say so, I would say so. I mean the days when if you wanted four dozen reeds you would have to buy eight dozen because you assume that half of them are going to be useless.

Not going to be used.

I mean I don't know what it is now for a chanter reed, but if you are saying that a reed is five pounds a time..., imagine going into Woolworths or into a shop and you require twenty items at five pounds you are not going to buy forty. You are going to assume that these twenty items are going to work, so I think quality control is certainly improved the quality of these things. And I think the fact there are more people doing it, and you just move elsewhere.

Yeah, so what about drone reeds and have you seen the same sort of change?

Well of course one of the things about piping is it keeps changing and comes back to the start again...

It comes full circle.

I obviously grew up with the cane reeds, and then probably maybe about twenty years ago you began to get the first workable plastic reeds. I mean there were attempts before that but you began to get the first workable ones and of course everybody started playing them, and now there is a tendency back towards the cane again. But I think that's because there is more thought going in, people are thinking about what they are doing. People are not content any more, that is one of the reasons why bands

are staying at the top as long as they are because they are asking themselves questions how can we improve this sound.

So in terms of reeds we are seeing a move back in lots of cases towards cane drone reeds, we have seen a move back towards sheepskin bags. For a long time they were considered to be a thing of the past, and people are experimenting and going back and finding that in lots of ways the old methods are maybe the best. So there has been lots of changes but..., as I said none of these things stand still people will change and quite often will change back.

And what do you think say tonally synthetic, the sound of synthetic reeds compared to the cane reeds. Did that mark a difference when the popularity of those reeds grew?

I think at first it did, because the introduction..., I am talking here about band playing. The introduction of the synthetic reeds occurred at the same time as the use of the tuning meters, and I remember I was playing with Glasgow Skye it was cane reeds. But the first time we used one of these tuning meters the Pipe Major went round and tuned what everybody was playing, and folk stopped... And I remember Willie Morrison for example, you know Willie starts his pipes up..., he said oh you are out of tune and retuned them. No don't do that they are fine, so the idea you get an overall drone sound. But that improved the drone sound as well, certainly in the past everybody's pipes were tuned by ear.

The Pipe Major would go around and tune by ear, and they would all sound absolutely perfect. But when folk blew up you wouldn't get the same sound. So I think that synthetic reeds were assisted, the introduction of the meter at the time. And maybe for long enough the idea was that the synthetic reed is a better reed than the cane one because you got a better sound. But in actual fact it's the use of the meter that is getting the better sound.

Yeah, so you mentioned you played with Glasgow Skye. If we can maybe just talk briefly about your career in pipe bands and which bands you have played with and...?

Well I joined Glasgow Skye probably when I was eighteen, so that would be 1974. It would have been, because the World Championship in 1975 was in Corby and that was the first time I was at the band, and that was a big step up you know because I went from a band which was a Novice Juvenile straight into Grade One, a big, big step. And at that time the Pipe Major was Donald MacLeod he had just taken over from his father Jimmy, Jimmy had just retired a couple of years prior to that. So Donald was the Pipe Major, and I played there up to about 1990 about fifteen years or so. And played under Donald for most of that time and then his brother Kenny took

over, and Kenny was in the band right..., Kenny joined the band more or less the same time. He was more or less a bit younger than me, but he joined about the same time as me and in later years he took over as Pipe Major. That was a great band to be in, socially as much as anything else.

Absolutely, and what sort of level was the band competing at?

When I joined the band at first we were in Grade One, they had only been promoted I think a couple of years prior to that having won the Worlds in Grade Two. And I think we were on Grade One up until about 1981 or so..., and quite frankly weren't good enough at the end because like now it was so hard, there was a hardcore of bands that you had to beat, you had to break into the Shotts and Dykehead, Strathclyde Police and so on. So we were downgraded to Grade Two, and maybe spent about four or five years there because the year I got married 1985 we won the Champion of Champions and got promoted back up into Grade One again and that made a big difference, because during the period we were in Grade Two you were going out on a Saturday expecting to win so everybody was putting a lot more work into it.

Yeah.

Whereas I think the last few years in Grade One you were going out to make up the numbers, but the idea that we are good enough to win was carried on into Grade One. So although we still never set the heather on fire in terms of winning majors, we certainly equipped ourselves reasonably well at a few of the minors. I remember I think it was the last year I played in the band about 1989, 1990 we won the first Grade competition at Gourock out of I think ten..., Grade One bands including Shotts and Dykehead, Strathclyde Police and so on. So on our day we could play.

So is the Strathclyde Police and Shotts were the big players at that time?

They were the big players Edinburgh Police, Lothian Borders, Dysart..., maybe the late 70s, 77, 78 they were winning the Worlds then as well. They were the sort of new kids on the block, they were the do it yourself band. These other bands like the police and so on they were being able to recruit all the best players they want going in, whereas Bob Shepherd decided that the only way he is going to get a band is to teach his own and rear his own which is what he did with the Ballingry School Pipe Band. So at one time they had the Novice Band in the school, and the Juvenile Band, and the Dysart Band all winning the Worlds.

People were critical of him in a lot of ways, I mean folk used to say they miss out on a lot of working, and they could only play two drones and all this sort of thing. But the reality is that they could play, I mean I remember hearing them..., they did one of the first concerts at Ballymena which was a big thing for a while before the Glasgow Skye

concert took off over here. And they played an entire piobaireachd including the a-mach the whole band played it, and this was Bob saying we can put the working in when we are required to or when we want to you know. So these are the kind of bands then I suppose to beat at that time.

Yeah, and what about then the repertoire or the style of pipe band playing?

I was laughing about this when I was thinking about coming up here, and I was thinking back to the first time I played in Grade One with the Glasgow Skye. It started with something like..., I think the opener was Dumbarton's Drums or something, and it was very much kind of strathspeys Campbeltown Kiltie Ball, and Mrs MacLeod of Raasay and stuff like that. And I remember hornpipes in one selection were The Jolly Beggarman, two parts of the Jolly Beggarman, and the Lord of the Dance believe it or not. And finishing with a 3/4 march do you believe that?

Yeah.

And of course at that wasn't uncommon, and I think at the time nobody really gave a great deal of thought to how to put selections together.

Yeah.

As long as tunes seemed to kind of flow from one to another that was fine, and then probably..., probably due in no small measure to Dysart who started putting bridges between tunes.

Yeah.

It got to the stage every break with every band had some sort of bridge built into it you know which also became sort of monotonous, but when you hear what bands are doing now it's laughable when you think back to what you were playing. And I told some of the kids in this band I think it was Armistice Day we heard somebody playing Lord of the Dance..., a brass band or a flute band or something. They were kind of laughing and I said I played that as part of a selection in a Grade One competition, you're joking... And I actually brought the thing up and said there it's there [laughter], laughable.

Yeah..., so obviously that's medley sort of playing, what about MSR playing?

MSR playing was just the same as it is just now.

It's remained quite standard?

Absolutely, absolutely. And funnily enough most bands I have been in have tended to be better MSR performers than medley. I don't know why that should be but..., no that's not really changed at all.

No, it's just I have asked that question. Okay so recently we have seen Grade One bands with almost thirty pipers in some cases and drum corps getting increasingly bigger. How would you say this compares with size trends in general?

Well in my day you would you were looking at maybe a good Grade One band maybe playing with twelve pipers six sides, a bass, and maybe no more than two tenors. Nowadays bands have got six or seven tenors that would have been the normal size, whether that was to do with cost or not I don't know because we tended to wear Number One kit then. And to kit thirty pipers out with Number One kit would probably be prohibitive these days.

But I like the bigger band, but I think when you start getting to thirty or so it's getting ridiculous it's like a mass band. But up to about twenty I think is a good number, and it allows more things being done in the band as well in terms of harmonies. You know we would at one time somebody would just play seconds with two or three guys out and that would be it, whereas now you are getting you know a bit of chording, some counterpointing and stuff like that which is more difficult to do if you have only got twelve players.

And do you think like you are talking about electronic tuners, and improvements in reed making has allowed bands to have a more refined sound with a greater number of players?

Oh aye absolutely, absolutely. And sometimes you think that more players you have got, the more you can disguise a bit of unsteady blowing here and there. Like if I am slightly flat you are going to hear that with twelve pipers, and it is going to affect the rest of the band. But with twenty..., I mean I am not talking about being horrendously flat or anything. But if you are just slightly out you might get away with it, and I think there is an element of that built in as well, it's almost like an insurance policy.

And again the drone tuners help as well, because if you are the Pipe Major and you are required to go and tune thirty sets of pipes it would be a nightmare. Although granted grade one bands most of the guys can tune their own drones reasonably well, but most Pipe Majors still prefer they are responsible at the end of the day. But aye I think when it gets to thirty it comes ridiculous quite frankly.

Okay so..., well you have mentioned then Donald MacLeod, wee Donald who was your teacher...?

Just for piobaireachd aye.

For piobaireachd yeah..., can you describe maybe his approach to teaching or his sort of methods or...?

Yeah it was very laid back, I mean it was great. Only maybe half a dozen folk would go, it used to be a Tuesday night just after teatime on a Tuesday night up Washington Street. Folk at various..., there were guys there who were competing at piobaireachd, and folk who were learning from scratch. But he had time for everybody and was an absolute gentleman, a fantastic teacher, never once heard him raising his voice to anybody. And he would take you individually, and again he would sing the bar over just counting..., you know I am just trying to think is it Glengarry's Lament for example... One, two, three, and..., and he would play along and you would learn the thing. And he would start you off singing that, counting the beats and so on.

And then if you were doing well his eyes would shut and he would lapse into canntaireachd, and his [laughter]... I'm small but he was wee-er than me, his wee feet didn't actually reach the floor, and he would sit there almost in a daze, he would be singing along as you were playing in. And then you would be almost at the end of the tune, one gracenote out of place, it would be as if he had just woken up out a dream, you just missed a gracenote there. And he would also give you tapes away, and one of these things I loaned some of these tapes out years ago and never got them back. But he would talk you through the thing, marvellous..., absolute marvellous teacher.

These tapes then the same as the published collection,...?

Well they would be done for you, whatever tunes you were learning. And he would be speaking to you as if there was maybe something that you were having difficulty with then he would point that out. So they were geared towards you and anybody could use them really at the end of the day.

And so you were taught piobaireachd with the use of music as well...?

Kilberry book, oh aye it was the Kilberry book.

But a lot of for singing through the tunes?

Yeah I mean he would sing everything, and as you played he would sing along. But as I say in a world of his own he would close his eyes and sing, rather than follow you..., you were really following him and listening to him. And I say he would come out that as soon as you went wrong.

And Donald was also a very prolific composer as well?

He was indeed aye.

And did he ever teach you any of his compositions...?

No.

Or made aware otherwise?

It was strictly piobaireachd it was...

Strictly piobaireachd...?

It was a class organised by the Pipe Band Association to teach piobaireachd and that was all you were there for. And later on it used to be a Tuesday night and that was a band practice at Skye so I would go to band practice, but I know some of the younger ones hung on and if they were playing on a Saturday he would take them through their light music as well sort of thing.

Okay, talk about Donald MacLeod's light music?

Yes some of the younger kids who were there would stay on and if they were playing on a Saturday he would take them through their light music, but I just went had my lesson and left again.

Do you think he had his own particular style of composition or in...?

In terms of light music?

Yeah.

Oh aye, uh-huh

Distinctive to himself or...?

I think so, I think so.

Yeah, so after you left Glasgow Skye Pipe Band did you go straight to another band or was there a break?

No, I had a break for about eighteen months which is the worst thing I think I have ever done because when you are not playing..., it would be somebody would phone up play at a wedding, a Burns Supper or whatever go and season the bag and go and play and that is the worst thing I have ever done. And I have always cautioned people against it don't be going and taking a sabbatical, or if you are you need to make sure you keep practicing, I don't think my fingers have really recovered from that. For the while I was playing with Glasgow Skye I mean I told you I started off in the Scouts, I was also Pipe Major at the Scout Pipe Band. And although I didn't compete solo I encouraged all the kids I was teaching to compete solo.

And this is another big difference that I have noticed because I remember going through to juvenile solo competitions in the seventies, and there was an awful lot of

dross, real rubbish. Kids that should never have been put on the platform, and some of these competitions were huge. I remember going to one I think it was in Castlemilk, and the poor judge had to sit and listen to sixty performances. Maybe ten of which could pass muster, the rest were awful. And then when that band folded up that was me until a number of years later when my two sons were playing so I would take them to the competition and the difference, you don't hear that rubbish anymore.

Virtually..., you get the odd one...., but virtually everybody can play reasonably well, maybe not to prize winning standard right. But everyone can blow their pipes up, get a reasonable sound. Play their tune, get to the end and finish. So there obviously has been a sea change in the way piping has been taught that's for sure, that's one big difference I have noticed. And it's probably another reason why piping's so much better now than it was back then, because everybody seems to have been taught reasonably well compared... As I say that was maybe twenty years or so between my experiences of going to these juvenile solo competitions.., and that was the thing that you know..., because when I was taking my own kids I was thinking oh God I have got to sit and listen to an awful lot of rubbish again. But what a surprise that is no longer the case.

Do you think things have changed as well compared to encouragement to compete solo either or play with a band?

I think so..., I think there are also more teachers now..., obviously teaching in schools etc. The establishment of the Piping Centre, and the colleges all around... But there are more I think anyway..., piping is broadcast much wider now people can hear it. When I was teaching kids I used to have to say to them now we practice every Wednesday in the Scouts, and the piping programme which is now Pipeline used to be Chanter and that was on at quarter past six on a Wednesday night so you listen to that before you come. And you couldn't just record things or whatever right, and that was the only opportunity they were going to get to listen to what pipes should be like, so I was saying you have to listen to the top players playing on the radio to get an idea what you are aiming for.

But it's much easier now, people can just download things all over the place. So I think kids themselves know what they are aiming for, they can hear it, and obviously teaching through schools etc I think has improved it as well. But as I say there has just been that marked difference, the one difference I have noticed in piping..., if you were saying what is the main difference you would say about piping now as opposed to back then? Is the fact that everybody I reckon now presents themselves to play in a solo competition is capable of going up and playing a tune, where as in the past as I say that memorable day in Castlemilk* out of sixty kids only ten of them could play.

Yeah, do you think also the accessibility to instruments and there is a greater accessibility or...?

There are more instruments around..., but I didn't have a problem because as I said in my day most of the juvenile bands..., I mean mine was the only one that was a Scout Pipe Band. But a lot of the Boys Brigade companies had pipe bands and that sort of thing and they tended to have pipes, so if you were learning through a band then the band would supply pipes. But obviously as you progress and decide I can do this then you would buy your own, but I don't recall not having pipes being a particular impediment to anybody learning.

No, then perhaps using the greater exposure of piping now...?

Well absolutely, absolutely. If you are interested in piping then you can download it, you can get it from anywhere. If you think about it I grew up in Greenock no pipers in the family, but apart from listening to Chanter on a Wednesday night on the radio, no real exposure to piping at all apart from with the other kids in the band. So what is it supposed to sound like? Whereas now there is no excuse for that, you know anybody who is interested in piping..., wall to wall piping. I mean my kids would be walking down the street with their headphones in and it would be pipes that they would be listening to.

So how..., what about your experience as a teacher yourself...? Have you had a lot of experience in teaching pipers?

When I was Pipe Major in the Scout Pipe Band that would have been a ten year period I taught quite a few kids, I mean one time in Glasgow Skye I think six of the pipers I had taught. But you know like anything it was me on my own and it was difficult..., because particularly a band because to get six pipers you need about eighteen to begin with because there are going to be folk that aren't going to make it. And I tended to be left on my own, folk would come down and help for a while and then they would disappear again sort of thing. But certainly I went along and did a few courses up at Washington Street, I don't know what they are called now..., but a few like extra-curricular courses.

I did a conductors course at one time, a pipe major's course..., and on the pipe majors course you are sitting there with Bob Martin who was pipe major of Boghall, Davie Clark from Ayr, Iain Matheson who was his Pipe Sergeant, Donald MacLeod my own pipe major. People like Wilson Young who was leading drummer with Red Hackle they were all part of the class, so you were learning with these guys all the time. And that is always useful how other folk do things... I basically taught the same way as I was taught myself and it seemed to work, so if it's not broken don't fix it. But I mean after the Scouts I didn't teach much at all, and then there was a young boy locally who

had just started and his teacher had taken ill so his dad asked if I would take him on. So he ended up in Glasgow City, he is now with in Lomond and Clyde, Alistair McNeil*. I said to the Pipe Major down there, I taught all your pipers [laughter], but I never..., I mean after the band I didn't do it as a kind of you know as a side line or anything. If somebody asked me then I would teach them.

So you wouldn't say you had a particular approach to teaching in besides how you were taught, some people might focus on techniques and some other on style?

No I think when I said that probably taught the same way as I was taught that wouldn't be strictly true, because you have all this other experience you have learned over the years and that comes into it. And I think the same basic approach folk want to be playing tunes, so..., but the other thing was I always believed in teaching maintenance, tuning the instrument etc. And it fascinated me, I remember one occasion with Skye we had been into Barrhead, it was the branch championship and it was a scorching day, and at the Tuesday night practice everybody's stocks were turning. So we had two people in the band that could tie stocks, one was me and one was the Pipe Sergeant, nobody else had a clue. These were Grade One players.

You know I just found that incredible because I had been taught as a kid not just to tie a stock but to tie a new bag from scratch that sort of stuff, and then when I taught things that's just as important as being able to play, as to be able to look after the instrument. And it fascinated me how many folk were unable to do that, and also teaching kids to tune their pipes as well. One of the problems with kids who are learning bands for example the Pipe Major would go and tune their drones, and say what do you do at home, what do you do if you are asked to go and play at a wedding you have to be able to tune them. So I certainly I mean as well as teaching kids to play always make sure you are teaching them how to look after the instrument as well.

Yeah..., and you were talking about tying in the stocks there, in the same way you are probably with reeds. We have seen a move back towards sheepskin...?

Aye.

Do you see a benefit or different..., did you notice any difference in how this affects the instrument as a whole the bag?

Well I am a great believe if we were supposed to play synthetic bags, God would have made synthetic sheep, I don't think first..., well two things. First of all I don't think... if you have got a well seasoned sheepskin bag it's as tight as a drum, I have played a variety of synthetic bags over the years. I have never found any of them to this day that's as airtight as a well seasoned sheepskin bag, and I think the sound quality is better as well. I once tried that taking your pipes apart and put them into another set

which has got a synthetic bag, it's got the same reeds... I defy anybody to say that you don't get a better sound from a sheepskin bag, don't ask me the science behind that...

No [laughter].

But it's a fact..., try it and you will find that's the case.

Yeah, when would you say pipe bands or a lot of solo players as well started..., we saw this popularity in synthetic bags approaching?

When..., synthetic...?

The onset...?

Of the synthetic bags?

Uh huh.

Well again probably about twenty years ago with the introduction of the Gore-Tex* bag. And I always remember the first time I tried one it was like blowing into a crisp bag because there was no weight under the arm, and nobody could stop them either once they were up you couldn't stop them. But I never liked them to be honest, and I played the ones with cat litter, and ones with the wee bottles and all the rest. I never ever liked these bags, I'm quite happy going back to sheepskin.

Why do you think they became so popular?

Why did they become so popular?

Uh huh.

Laziness.

Laziness [laughter].

Aye it's quite obvious you could go from one Burns Supper to the next and pick your pipes up, the bag hopefully still going to be airtight. Whereas with a sheepskin bag if you are not going to be playing it then they are going to dry out.

Yeah.

I think they are good for people who don't play regularly, you know folk who just play at the odd Burns Supper and that's fine. But if you are playing regularly I really wouldn't entertain them, I don't like them at all. A wee anecdote here..., a Donald MacLeod apparently in days gone by somebody had invented some kind of an artificial bag, some kind of synthetic bag. And Donald was saying he was at the Castle and had to go and play at a gig in Fife that night, and he hadn't been playing his pipes.

Oh he said there is a set down there with this synthetic bag, I will just grab them and take some reeds with me. The thing had been ..., the bag had been folded over. It was in the case when he got there he couldn't open it out [laughter]...

No...

It was stuck solid, but obviously the modern ones are not like that. So somebody who doesn't play in the band, who doesn't compete, who simply like to give the pipes a blow now and again then they are great. But if you are playing on a regular basis and you want to compete, then I wouldn't entertain them.

No, so the general move back to sheepskin is probably a better choice in your opinion?

Absolutely, absolutely. And you look at who has done it in the band sphere, the top bands are doing it and getting the sound. Then the proof of the pudding is in the eating isn't it.

Yeah, absolutely. Well I will just come to the end of the interview, and if we could just maybe talk about the state of the piping you see in the modern day, and maybe...

I think...

Maybe how you think it has changed?

I think it has never been better you know, the solo scene is still there, still very lively. People are playing as well as ever before, the bands, I can remember the World Pipe Band Championship you would have eighty bands, now it's two hundred and eighty. That's speaks really for itself, but there are so many other outlets for people now that people had never thought about before, I mean folk groups have all got pipers, you have also got the piper boy bands nowadays these days... You know the Chilli Pipers and all that kind of thing, whatever floats your boat. I don't particularly..., I mean I like pipes in Folk groups etc, I believe some of it is beyond the pale as far as I'm concerned. But if people like it then fine.

But what it also means is for the kids learning there are so many options available for them, I don't want to play in a pipe band, or I don't want to compete. A lot of people don't like the whole idea of competition, so there are a whole number of ways in which you can play the pipes now. Which would never have occurred to me certainly back in the sixties, for example two or three pipers and a guitarist or whatever would be filling the concert hall it would just be a pipe dream if you like, whereas now these things are available to kids now as well. But I think that it is wrong to see these things as being mutually exclusive, because most of the guys who are doing that crossover quite easily.

I mean a lot of these guys play in pipe bands and they can compete, you know I have heard people criticising Fred Morrison look at the way he plays. Yes but he has also won a gold medal you know, and tells me from time to time he will get the Highland pipes out and practice his piobaireachd etc. But that he says doesn't pay the rent, it's the other stuff that pays the rent. But I think it's a mistake to say these are just kitchen pipers whatever, because most of these folk can have a go at all these different kind of types of piping and I think that's good for kids as well because it gives them all sorts of options.

Yeah, well thanks very much Pat...

Pleasure.

For your contribution and for agreeing to be part of this project, Noting the Tradition Project and for your input. So thank you very much.