

From a deep well of music

TOM SPEIRS

For a small Ayrshire town Darvel has more than its fair share of claims to fame. As the birthplace of Sir Alexander Fleming, its remarkable contribution to the world of medicine is assured.

“But he’s only the second most famous guy to come out of Darvel,” chuckled Tom Speirs as he reminisced about his boyhood there.

Perhaps there is something in Speirs’s remark. After all, the scientist who discovered penicillin may have won the Nobel Prize but he never even came close to winning the Northern Meeting Gold Medal.

“Actually the most famous person to come from Darvel was Sammy Cox of Rangers,” Speirs added with the wit that is familiar to those who take lessons from one of the foremost authorities on our art.

Relaxing in his study where he lends a critical but encouraging ear to his pupils, Speirs recalled that it was in the family home in Darvel at the end of the Second World War that he played his first note on the practice chanter. He was only four-years-old.

It was the beginning of a lifetime’s study that would take him to the very top as a competitor and has latterly seen him move from the boards to the bench, where he is now in great demand as a judge.

The young Speirs made excellent progress on the chanter and within three years, he was on the pipes – playing in his first competition aged seven.

Perhaps his precocity was inevitable given his pedigree.

Supervising his musical education was his father, Pipe Major Jock Speirs, who had been demobbed in 1945 and had just come home after service in Italy.

Jock Speirs was a very well known piper and had been Pipe Major of the Third Battalion of the London Scottish during the war.

Not only was Jock Speirs a fine player, he was also a gifted tutor – something that Speirs only fully appreciated when he saw his father teach the next generation – his own sons Iain

and Gregor, who, of course, are both prize winning pipers.

“The thing that strikes me now, seeing my father’s involvement with my two sons Iain and Gregor, was that he was marvellous motivator,” Speirs said.

“He could make you enjoy practising. He made them enjoy learning and so it must have been the same with me. For instance, he would say ‘that was a good taorluath, can you play five of them in the one breath? Now see if you can do 10 of them without any mistakes’.”

‘They had a sound that was above and beyond everybody else’s sound. Nowadays that doesn’t happen, because everybody’s sound, pitch, balance, and steadiness is like-for-like.’

Although Speirs’s father’s own musical career was primarily based around pipe bands, he greatly enjoyed solo playing.

Indeed, Speirs Snr had a great love of piobaireachd – in particular that great tune, *Lament for Mary MacLeod*.

“Latterly, he used to say to me ‘away and play me a piobaireachd’ meaning ‘away and play me Mary MacLeod’,” Speirs said.

In those early post war days, the young Speirs joined the grade three Crosshouse Band, which was led by his father.

But it was through one of his father’s other bands that he was to meet another important early influence.

Under Pipe Major Speirs’s leadership, the Darvel Rovers pipe band used to go on tour in Norway and Denmark. In Scandinavia, the pipes and drums met up with the Maryhill Rovers band from Glasgow. The Pipe Major was Jim Jeffray, a piper who worked for the Peter Henderson pipe-making firm.

The two men became firm friends and when Jock Speirs was looking for someone to teach his promising son, it was to Jeffray that he turned.

Jeffray travelled down to Ayrshire from Glasgow almost every weekend to teach his protegee.

“Jim Jeffray was a gentleman,” Speirs said. “He was a very, gentle man in the true sense of the word. My father had started me on piobaireachd, but Jim Jeffray took over. Jim Jeffray took me when I was six and a half or seven.”

Under Jeffray’s guidance, the young piper began to make his mark in junior competitions.

In the 1950s there were three main junior competitions: two run by the Scottish Pipers’

Club in Glasgow plus the annual contest at Cowal.

There, Speirs faced some pretty formidable opposition including Iain MacFadyen, his sister Freena MacFadyen, John MacAskill and Kenny MacDonald. Up against those future champions, Speirs proved he had plenty of potential.

“In those days you got medals and I’ve still got a box full of them in the house,” he said.

As a teenager, Speirs was also lucky to listen to some of the great names of the day. On occasional visits to the Scottish Pipers’ Club in Glasgow, Speirs heard Seamus McNeill, John MacFadyen, Willie Connell and Donald MacLeod.

He also heard the playing of the pre-war master Robert Reid. By then, Reid had retired from competition, but he used to have the odd tune at the Scottish Pipers’ Club.

“As a youngster, you sat back in awe,” Speirs remembered. “They all had great ability. I think Reid and Donald MacLeod are the two that stand out in my mind.”

In those days, there was not the same consistency of tone that comes from today’s bagpipes



Photo: John Stevin @ designfolk.com

with their plastic drone reeds and sophisticated moisture control systems.

But as a young man, Speirs was impressed by the beautiful harmonics produced by the sheepskin and cane instruments set up by John MacLellan, Donald MacPherson and Hector MacFadyen of Pennyghael.

“They stood out to me. They had a sound that was above and beyond everybody else’s sound. Nowadays that doesn’t happen, because everybody’s sound, pitch, balance, and steadiness is like-for-like.”

In the years to come, Speirs would be lucky enough to receive tuition from some of those pipers who stirred his youthful admiration.

But after leaving the junior ranks, Speirs’s piping career stalled as his professional one flourished. In 1958, he joined the Royal Bank of Scotland and the demands of his job meant that he was unable to devote much time to piping.

There were banking exams to sit and, as his career progressed, he became an inspector for the bank, a job involving much travel and which made practice difficult.

In fact, it was his job as an inspector that put paid to his lessons with a one of the great figures in piping. In 1965, he moved to Edinburgh and with some trepidation he got in touch with Captain John MacLellan.

“It was like phoning up God,” Speirs recalled as he relived the moment he sought tuition from the soldier, who succeeded the legendary Willie Ross as the head of the Army School of Piping.

MacLellan agreed to take him on and for some time, Speirs went up to MacLellan’s beautiful house in Ramsay Gardens at the foot of Edinburgh Castle Esplanade

“It just didn’t work out, because I couldn’t guarantee that I could attend every week for a lesson,” Speirs admitted.

“Eventually, John MacLellan said ‘look, it is not working. Let’s not waste each other’s time’. I realised that if you are away working on an inspection you don’t have time to sit and practice. I would be turning up unpractised and it just didn’t work out.”

Eventually, however, his career with the bank settled down and at the age of around 30 he started going round the Highland Games.

Speirs may have parted amicably from MacLellan, but there was another master piper waiting to take over.

Donald MacPherson had recently moved back to Scotland after his job as an engineer had taken him to south of the border.

Speirs travelled to Glasgow for weekly lessons with a man who is regarded as the greatest competitive piper of the 20th century. It is a bond with the Speirs family that survives to this day. MacPherson, who won a record number of Inverness Clasps and Senior Piobaireachd prizes at Oban, has helped Speirs's son Iain to two Gold Medals and numerous other victories.

It proved to be fruitful relationship and, before too long, Speirs made an impact on the competitive scene.

But his early days on the boards were not without their tribulations. When he judges today, Speirs can empathise with pipers who are struggling to make it on to the prize list. His own breakthrough happened in Speyside, but at the time he didn't realise it.

Speirs travelled up to play at the Nethy Bridge Games, where Bob Nicol of Balmoral was judging.

"I played in the piobaireachd and hadn't played very well. I played in the march and played Abercairney Highlanders and played in the Strathspey and Reel and broke down and thought to hell with it I'm off."

He was so disillusioned that he left early not bothering to show up for the Jig competition.

The following week he went to the Crieff Games and bumped into a friend Eddie Clark, a piper in the Atholl Highlanders.

Clark asked: "What happened to you last week?"

"Och...I'm chucking it. I didn't enjoy it," was Speirs's reply.

"That's unfortunate, because you won the March," Clark told him.

The big breakthrough had been achieved and more prizes were to come his way that day at Crieff.

"That was it," Speirs said. "I was proving then that I could do it rather than proving I couldn't do it."

As his reputation grew the tune that gave him his first success at Nethy Bridge was to become his signature March.

One particular year, there was hardly a games went by when the judges didn't choose it from his list. Towards the end of the season he was about to go on in the March competition when he overheard a voice from the crowd say: "Oh Goad, here comes Abercairney Tom."



Tom's father Jock Speirs in the mid-80s



Tom as a young piper with the Crosshouse pipe band in 1948



Tom with his trophy haul from 1976 which included the strathspey and reel at Oban, and the overall winner at the Braemar Gathering

The name stuck and "Abercairney Tom" has since also become the title of an attractive jig by R.S. MacDonald.

But it was winning the big piobaireachd prizes – in particular the Gold Medals at either Inverness or Oban – that were his ultimate ambition. The pursuit of those prizes took him on a sometimes frustrating yet ultimately rewarding piping odyssey.

Base camp for his assault on the highest honours in piping was a caravan that he bought and put on a site in Birnam, Perthshire.

"We used to drive up there on a Friday night and get away to the games on the Saturday – wife and kids and a car-load of nappies and goodness knows all what.

"Off to the games and back to the caravan on Saturday night and if there was games on the Sunday, off to them, then back on a Sunday night," he said.

Practising was done outside, of course. But was family life inside the caravan as harmonious as Speirs's well-tuned MacDougall drones and Sinclair chanter?

"That's not for me to say," laughed Speirs.

"They still remember it though. When you came back home you realised you had been eating, sleeping and everything else in half the space of your living room. It was quite astonishing."

In 1972, he played MacIntosh's Lament to come second at the Uist and Barra competition. It was his first major piobaireachd prize and it gave him great encouragement. Andrew Wright may have beat him playing the Desperate Battle, but the result helped Speirs realise that he could overcome his nerves.

"Competing was always nerve-wracking," he said. "I found that if I wasn't nervous I didn't play well. I think most pipers get pretty tense. Really the secret is to try and channel it into something positive rather than let it affect you negatively."

That sort of positive attitude was behind the win that propelled him into piping's elite.

After several years of near misses, Speirs finally struck Gold at the Northern Meeting in 1980.

The year before he had played Corrienessan's Salute to take the "worst prize in the world" – second place in the Inverness Medal.

In 1977, he was second to Ian Clowe in the Gold Medal at Oban, playing Lament for Donald of Lagan. At Inverness, there had also been two fourths, another second and two thirds – not to mention a couple of thirds at Oban.

He could have been forgiven for thinking that the Gold Medal would elude him yet again when he was asked to play The Battle of Bealach nam Brog.

'God, we are going back 25 years now. This is a bloody confession you're getting from me!'

The tune was a great favourite of his, but he had heard that one of the judges did not like it.

"I was of the view that whoever got that tune was a goal down and only playing for a draw. So instead of going on to the platform all nervous and tense, I went on with a view – you don't like the tune – this is it – listen to it. And it was really quite a different mental approach."

That feeling of defiance gave him confidence as he sailed into the tune and helped him bring out the full beauty of the music. But nerves almost broke the spell.

"Strangely enough, I became very tense," he remembered. "I became very tense in the taorluath doubling and really lost my way. I didn't know if I was in the second or third line."

One option would have been to panic. But instead, Speirs recalled: "I cut my head out and let my hands take over." The music was indelibly imprinted in his subconscious and he was able to finish the tune without missing a note.

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Relieved that he hadn't broken down, Speirs headed upstairs to the restaurant in the Eden Court Theatre, desperate for a calming coffee.

He couldn't catch the eye of a waitress and sat down next to "two old dears" who were obviously not piping aficionados. "They were in Inverness for the shopping," Speirs said.

After his ordeal on the boards, the last thing he wanted to do was chat. But he was bombarded with an avalanche of questions.

"What tartan's your kilt, son?" they said.

"That's a funny sporran you've got," was another helpful comment.

"Who knits your stockings?" the interrogation continued.

"I could have been extremely rude," remarked Speirs, who displayed admirable patience in the most trying circumstances.

Robert Barnes, the well-known piper from Fife who was to come second in the competition, joined him and the two ladies eventually gathered their shopping and left.

"I hope you're lucky son, we'll keep our eyes

on the paper," was their parting shot.

Speirs was duly announced as Gold Medal winner and the encounter was temporarily forgotten in the elation and relief of victory.

His picture was taken and Speirs's name and address were recorded in the Inverness Courier.

"By the time I got back down to Edinburgh from Inverness, there was a card from the two ladies in the Caledonian tea room. I don't know who they were or where they came from. But I've still got the card."

That triumph allowed him to compete against other Gold Medallists at the Senior Piobaireachd at Oban and the Clasp at Inverness. Unlike his son Iain, he never quite won the Gold Medal at Oban.

But in 1983 he took first place in the Clasp at Inverness – an achievement that crowned a wonderful competitive career. He was on last having just played in the Strathspey and Reel. But that failed to distract him from his winning tune, which was Tulloch Ard, the version in the Piobaireachd Society book 12.

That performance earned him an invitation to Blair Castle for the Grants Championship – the precursor of today's Glenfiddich competition. His pipe let him down on that occasion, but by that stage his days on the boards were coming to an end.

He had always told himself that he would stop competing when practising became a chore.

"That's exactly what happened, I stopped enjoying practising," he said. "But I used to play every night. In fact the kids can still recall going to sleep with me playing the pipes. So can my wife!"

Another factor was an unfortunate accident that resulted in a condition that has sadly restricted his pipe playing in recent times.

"I fell in 1979 carrying my pipe box and I slipped on a top step and clattered down the stairs trying to keep my pipes off the ground and damaged not only my elbow, but also my neck and damaged discs in my neck and it left me with spondylosis and I've got great difficulty keeping the bag up in my left arm."

When he was at his competitive peak, practising had been great fun. Three of his closest friends in piping used to come round to his house for regular sessions. They were Derek Fraser, a Silver Medallist, Jim Hood, a well known figure round the Games, and Iain T Cameron, a distinguished obstetrician who is now head of the medical school at Southampton University.

"All three of us would judge the other guy's playing. And, the worst player got to make the coffee. You've no idea the fights that we used to have to try and not have to make the coffee. But it meant they were learning to instruct and learning to judge."

Such was Professor Cameron's devotion to piping that he had chosen to study at Edinburgh rather than Oxbridge.

"He's a clever guy," said Speirs with some understatement as he recalled his tremendous facility for remembering heavy tunes.

Speirs once played him Battle of the Pass of Crieff. Cameron then played the tune straight back to him on the pipes after a single listen.

Fun was also on offer at the Eagle Pipers – a much-lamented Edinburgh piping institution.

"Will you tak' some snuff, laddie?" was the unconventional greeting he received from Gordon Asher, the famous bearded piper of El Alamein who ran the West End Hotel where meetings were held.

The society took its name from the Eagle Tavern at the top of the Royal Mile, where it met before moving to Asher's hotel.

Soldiers on the Pipe Major's course at the Army School of Piping at Edinburgh Castle were the stalwarts in the beginning.

During its heyday, members included Pipe Major George Stoddart, the father of Gavin who was always known as 'Uncle George', Iain MacLeod, the Pipe Major of the world championship winning Edinburgh Police Band, and other great characters like Hugh MacCallum and John MacLellan.

‘I had to declare – not that he was pupil of mine – but that I was a pupil of his. It was just magic. It was premeditated. It was precise. It was well tempered. It was well built. It was well fingered on a wonderful bagpipe.’

Those Wednesday nights in the West End Hotel are still remembered fondly by veterans of the Edinburgh piping scene. Indeed, nostalgic contributions to piping internet forums remember one “glorious summer” when Speirs rehearsed his Gold Medal tunes to an appreciative audience.

The Eagle Pipers was where Speirs witnessed one of the best piobaireachds that he ever heard.

It was the first time that he had heard Beloved Scotland and it was played by Ian C Cameron, a veteran piper from Islay. Cameron started playing in 1919, had heard G.S McLennan play and was taught by Willie Ross and Roddy Campbell.

Cameron had spent many years away from Scotland, which limited his competing opportunities. But on one of his few outings in the 1960s he narrowly missed a Gold Medal with All the Men Played Rent but Rory.

In a competitive sense, the most memorable tune that Speirs ever heard was played by his tutor Donald MacPherson when he won his last of 15 senior piobaireachd competitions at Oban in 1990.

It is a tribute to MacPherson’s longevity that Speirs was actually judging his old teacher when he gave his peerless rendition of Lady MacDonald’s Lament.

“I had to declare – not that he was pupil of mine – but that I was a pupil of his,” Speirs said.

“It was just magic. It was premeditated. It was precise. It was well tempered. It was well built. It was well fingered on a wonderful bagpipe.”



Tom with his son Iain Speirs and the Silver Chanter trophy, which Iain won three years in a row from 2003-5.

Nowadays, much of Speirs’s energy is taken up by passing on his knowledge to his pupils, who include some of our most talented professional pipers as well as enthusiastic amateurs.

Those lucky enough to receive tuition from Speirs ought to be aware that they are being passed knowledge that comes from the purest piping lines.

For those interested in piping lineage, it could be said that Speirs has inherited much from the Cameron school of piobaireachd. After all, his early mentor Jim Jeffray worked in the Henderson factory with Pipe Major John MacDougall Gillies, the main exponent of the Cameron style of the early 20th century. The piping taught to Donald MacPherson by his father Iain also came from MacDougall Gillies, whose knowledge can be traced to the great 19th century piper Donald Cameron.

But Speirs also received a lot from those schooled in the so-called MacPherson tradition – a style that some suggest calls for a more clipped presentation of piobaireachd than the rounder Cameron approach.

A major influence was Jimmy McIntosh, who was taught by Bob Brown of Balmoral. Brown was one of the main pupils of John MacDonald of Inverness, who, in turn, received much of his knowledge from Calum Piobaire MacPherson.

“A very soft, subtle piper was Jimmy,” Speirs said. “I don’t know if these are the best words,

but that’s how I would describe his playing – subtle – shades of all sorts of colours in his playing, and a very enthusiastic teacher.”

Interestingly, Speirs did not detect fundamental differences in style between MacPherson and McIntosh.

“It was not something that I was particularly aware of. At the time I was sufficiently inexperienced not to do my own thing. I just did what I was told. And I think that’s what tuition is all about.

“Eventually you are going to be experienced enough to make your own decisions as to what you like and what you don’t like. But certainly at that stage, I was in a position where Donald MacPherson said ‘play it this way’ I played it that way. If Jimmy McIntosh said ‘play it this way’ you did exactly that. I don’t see any great clash in terms of style.”

Speirs also had the odd lesson from John MacFadyen, Roddy MacDonald of South Uist and the piper who was arguably John MacDonald’s most celebrated pupil – “wee” Donald MacLeod.

The lessons with the master piper and composer were part of a prize for winning the B Grade piobaireachd in the Scottish Pipers’ competition.

MacLeod was working at the Grainger and Campbell pipemaking factory at the time.

“He was a wonderful man – wonderful,” Speirs said. “I used to go through there on a Saturday morning and Donald would be working on his bench and I would go and play the tunes then we would sit and have a cigarette and talk them through.”

In the past, some pipers were reputed to be reluctant to pass on the full extent of their knowledge in case their pupils began to match their expertise.

That is not something that Speirs ever experienced when he sat at the feet of the “who’s who” of piping who contributed to his learning.

“You hear about tuition where you feel you are only getting 50 per cent of what the person knows,” he said. “I’ve been very fortunate that everybody who’s taught me has always given me about 120 per cent of what they knew. They’ve always been very good instructors, very good teachers, very sympathetic and motivated and held nothing back.”

Speirs has a similarly generous approach to his own teaching and his pupils are indeed fortunate to be benefiting from such a deep well of musical knowledge. ●