

Youngstars

The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland
Newsletter No.18

Exciting times ahead

by Paul Warren, DIRECTOR
THE NATIONAL YOUTH PIPE BAND OF SCOTLAND



WE are booked for a return visit to the William Kennedy Piping Festival in Armagh in November, for the Piping Live! Glasgow International Piping Festival in August — and we are performing an outreach concert in Forfar on 3 June: three different venues, three different audiences, three distinct challenges.

Each is exciting. And each will be demanding

It is a delight and a big honour to be invited back to the William Kennedy Festival — one of the world's premier piping festivals — in the very strong piping region that Northern Ireland has become. Piping standards in that part of the world are high and we can count on a knowledgeable and critical audience.

We had a marvellous time there two years ago, and shared the stage with the Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band: an enormous thrill.

We went then as an unknown quantity and won them over: the reception we got could hardly have been more enthusiastic.

This time, it will be a little different: we will be better known, we have a reputation to live up to and expectations are likely to be high. It is going to be a big challenge, but one we should all look forward to.

I don't know yet who we will be performing with this time but it's worth noting that a youth pipe band has been established in Northern Ireland. It would be great to meet up with some of these people and compare notes.

Piping Live! will see us back on the big stage at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall on Tuesday 8 August. This is a brilliant festival that sees amazing numbers of pipers and drummers and piping enthusiasts in the city.

We should be expecting to start rehearsals on Sunday, 6th August, for a show that we'll be playing to an audience of friends and international visitors, including many very good and knowledgeable players. And their expectations are likely to be running high as well.

The stage is great and the facility is excellent so we will have everything going for us. And we'll have to ensure that we're up for a performance that raises the NYPBoS a few more notches in public estimation here in the capital of piping. As in Armagh, we will be able to take nothing for granted: everyone in that audience will be there to see us at our best.

When we go to Forfar, we can expect a warm welcome.

The concert is being organised for us by Kenny Ross, Glenn's dad, and he has been telling people how

brilliant the NYPBoS is. Fourteen year-old NYPBoS member Glenn Ross seems to be well-known in Angus: in February he was a guest soloist with the Tayside Symphony Orchestra and he will be out this season with Robert Wiseman Vale of Atholl Pipe Band.

So we'll be getting a bit of a build-up there.

This is our first "outreach" concert in Scotland and sets the scene for the sort of engagement we should expect to do more of.

It is important for us to take our shows beyond the central belt, and I am delighted that Kenny Ross has volunteered his time and efforts to open this door for us by picking up the local organisation and promotion, and I am very, very grateful.

If people in other centres are prepared to take on that work on the ground to get us there, I'd be more than happy to talk with them. Having someone working well for you locally makes life so much simpler for us. It leaves us to concentrate on ensuring we deliver a great show.

It is important to the future of the NYPBoS that we make it a night to remember in Angus.

We can hope that we'll be giving piping there a bit of a boost by raising the interest level and giving the young people who see us a taste of piping beyond their wildest dreams.

COURSES

WE began the year's courses in February and have been having a busy run since — another is coming up 28-30 May.

The idea of the three-day development courses for junior members — introduced this year — is to try and give them some helpful time to build their skills and work on their particular needs.

Our junior members are youngsters who have previously auditioned, who have talent and put in a lot of effort but who are still not quite experienced enough to be in the concert line-up. But the strength of their commitment gave me no choice but to open this extra level of membership.

A problem they face is that, when we work as a Youth Band, there's simply not the time to help individuals in areas they may understandably be finding a bit difficult. It is a case of rehearsing; we're working with big numbers and to a very high standard... and it's all driven by an awareness that a top quality performance is required at the end of it.

It's tough enough for those with the experience. If

someone is struggling a little, it can be very difficult.

The main priority on these new courses is instrument work: trying to spend time with people working individually on their instrument and looking at issues like blowing technique and instrument maintenance. Ultimately, it's all about sound — not about setting chanters but about a player's ability to have a good sounding instrument and blow a steady, consistent tone.

These are issues that generally come down to the individual and his or her blowing technique and often, too, their instrument handling skills: that general slickness with the instrument players acquire in a serious competition band.

Those who are in competing bands generally find it easier to play with us because their general instrument handling is good. Things like getting the pipes under the arm, coming in on cue, cutting off cleanly, being aware of what's happening around them, blowing a good full bagpipe and getting a good, steady tone and playing good sounding reeds are skills they have acquired with their band.

These skills tend to be a bit patchy: while anybody from a decent grade 3 band upwards will probably have it all covered, anybody with less experience probably won't.

So we spend a lot of time on these courses on instrument maintenance and set-up, blowing skills and technique.

Young people candidating for the NYPBoS tend to assess themselves on the basis of their technique, on fingering skills; and most adults typically assess them the same way. But keeping a bagpipe going at a decent level is where young players quite often show a weakness.

I see numbers of candidates with great fingers but lacking in what I call 'band skills': their ability on the instrument very often doesn't match their ability with their hands — and with the NYPBoS you need the whole package.

Another area we look at is repertoire and learning the music.

Dr Simon McKerrell gives a very good workshop on sight-reading and learning and memorising music. A skill we need in the NYPBoS — and it's something that some very good players can struggle with — is being able learn new music very, very quickly.

When we played with the Chieftains, for example, we had a call the same day as the performance.

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KEN ROSS — “I’m one of those frustrated parents who’d have loved to play the pipes” — is the amateur impresario responsible for the National Youth Pipe Band’s engagement to perform in the 12th century Royal burgh of Forfar in Angus on 3 June.

“I’ve never done anything like this before,” he said.

But the town seems to be opening its arms to the NYPBoS and more than 100 tickets to the show were sold before the end of March. “It’s quite early I suppose,” he said. “But everyone we have spoken to has been very helpful. The posters and tickets, for example, were printed locally — all free of charge.

“We haven’t had anything like this in this area for years and years. Everything the National Youth Band does has always been in the Central belt and it’s nice to bring them up here.”

The venue — the historic and elegant Reid Hall, built in 1871 with funds put up by confectioner Peter Reid who made his fortune making ‘Forfar Rock’ — has been booked. Ken Ross and his friends have put up posters around the town and the surrounding areas and are looking after ticket sales.

“The local paper has carried a feature on the concert and they will be running another one before the show,” said Ken Ross. “The pipe bands in the area — the City of Brechin, McKenzie Caledonian in Dundee, Buchan and up in Aberdeen — they all know about it and are interested in tickets. Iain MacCrimmon teaches in the schools in Arbroath and Brechin, and I’ve given him posters and he’s determined he’ll be bringing his pupils... we’ll get the crowd I think.”

Ken Ross was acting on impulse when, after hearing the band’s performance at Partick on 4 December, he put the idea of a Forfar concert to NYPBoS director Paul Warren.

“My son, Glenn plays with the NYPBoS and we were always having to travel down to Glasgow for concerts and weekends at the National Piping Centre,” he said. “Everything was down there.

“They had a concert at the Partick Burgh Hall and my wife and I and a friend, Ian Murray, were down for that and said among ourselves, wouldn’t it be great to bring them up to Forfar, so we talked to Paul at the end of the show and we’ve taken it from there.”

Ken Ross does not pipe himself: “I’ve always liked pipe bands, and I’ve tried... I know what you have to do but the fingers are that old they won’t do what they’re told,” he said. “I tried the drums for a wee while when I was a child but I wasn’t taught properly and you have to be taught properly from the start.”

His son Glenn, however, is an exceptionally talented young piper who, having played for the last two seasons with the Drambuie Kirkliston Pipe Band at the top end of grade 2, this year will be out with the grade 1 Robert Wiseman Dairies Vale of Atholl. In May, he will celebrate his 15th birthday.

“He’s done quite well at his young age,” said Ken Ross who, for the past six years has been kept busy at weekends and holidays driving his son to solo competi-

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tions, band competitions and other piping events.

"We've planned holidays around piping engagements, and I think if we'd had a bigger family we wouldn't have been able to run Glenn around quite so much," he said. "So he's been lucky."

It was Ken Ross' best friend, Ian Murray — of Ian D. Murray Bagpipes — who introduced piping to the family.

"I've been friends with Ian since we were in the Fire Service together. He used to work with Gillanders and Macleod in Forfar here, and then he started up on his own.

"He actually started his business in our garage. So there were pipers coming into the garage, playing their pipes and so on, and Glenn picked it up.

"I've definitely encouraged him but it's something he's always wanted to do himself. I've never pushed him. He does it because he enjoys it, as they all do at that age, and they pick things up a lot more quickly too.

"He has his heart set at the moment on joining the Army and hopefully getting to the Army School of Piping."

At the age of eight, he took his first tuition with Jack Stewart, a local piper in Forfar. Recognising the youngster's talent, he introduced Glenn Ross to the Arbroath Royal British Legion Pipe Band with whom he piped for the next four years. He went to Ian Duncan for tuition and Ian Duncan took him into his Drambuie and Kirkliston corps in 2004.

In his first year with Drambuie Kirkliston, the band won the British and Scottish titles. The following year it made a sweep of the majors and was up for promotion to grade 1, but disbanded for want of a sponsor this year.

"We don't have a band in Forfar," said Ken Ross. "Brechin would be the closest. Forfar is big enough to have a band and at one time the burgh had a very good band but that was a few years ago now."

He said it was his hope in bringing the NYPBoS to Forfar, that seeing the band on stage would encourage local youngsters to take an interest in piping and drumming.

"And it could be good for pipe bands in this area," he said. "I'd definitely encourage people in other areas to explore whether their communities would be keen for something like this. We were down in Glasgow and I was talking to one of the other fathers, from Aberdeen. I told him about them coming to Forfar and he said, 'we'll have to see about getting them to Aberdeen as well'."

Meanwhile, Ken Ross is more focused on ensuring the NYPBoS members are well fed when they arrive in Forfar on the Saturday morning.

"We're putting in place arrangements with two or three people to feed the youngsters when they arrive. They'll get their lunch and their tea before the concert. I've spoken to some local shops in the area and they're willing to put forward food — everyone's being very helpful.

"We'll see how this one goes and, if it's a success, I'm sure Forfar would gladly have them back. It's a trial venture at the moment — but we may build on it." ●

Junior Winners



Photo: Derek Maxwell

NYPBoS MEMBERS Keith Bowes and Emma Buchan were close rivals for top honours at the Junior Piping Championship at the National Piping Centre on 11 February. Emma Buchan won the Junior Piobaireachd and March, strathspey and reel events; Keith Bowes won the overall Junior Champion title as runner-up in the Piobaireachd, 3rd in the March, strathspey and reel and winner of the Jig. Pictured above are the day's prize winners (from left): Keith Cowie (winner of the novice piobaireachd, Ground), Emma Buchan, Iain Wilson (overall chanter champion), Keith Bowes, Graham Drummond (3rd in the novice piobaireachd, 2nd in the novice march and winner of the novice strathspey and reel), and Faye Henderson (overall novice champion).

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And it was the same with Carlos Nuñez on one occasion: he was in Glasgow and faxed us through a piece of music he was playing — a Galician piece. It had to be transposed, the members of the band had to finish school and then get through to the National Piping Centre by 6 p.m. At 7 p.m., we were set up in B-flat with the tune memorised and on stage for a sound-check.

That's the kind of speed our corps players have to be able to operate at. And, unlike most bands, where you have your set competition tunes and weekly band practices, we have a full concert repertoire and we can't get together for regular practices.

We get together usually, if we're lucky, for one or two days before a concert and we have to put it all together in that time. It can't be about learning tunes; players have to come knowing them. It's about making changes because of backing requirements, details of stagecraft and so on.

So members need really good sight-reading skills, really good listening skills, and the ability to learn and memorise music quickly — and to be very flexible

with it as well.

Some of the youngsters struggle with that. And, if you turn up at a two-day band camp prior to a performance and 90 per cent of the team can run with it and you're not quite there, you're going to be a bit unhappy, no matter how good your fingers are.

On the junior courses, we do take a bit of time to go over the repertoire but we also do an introduction to stagecraft and put the pressure on the group to stage a small performance. We hit them with new repertoire so they are forced to go through the process of having to learn quickly, and then having to work out all the stagecraft issues.

A part of a recent course was a 'band leader' course where two of the more senior members were invited along to take part in the instruction of the course and get hands-on experience of setting up sound and delivering workshops and lessons.

Another opportunity exists for people who are not in the NYPBoS but who are interested in the band. It is not an audition; it is a foundation course.

Foundation courses are about giving people an

opportunity to come and learn a bit about the sorts of skills that are required within the NYPBoS and what the NYPBoS is about without the anxieties of failure.

The standards are now so high now in the NYPBoS, and the demand for places in the band is so high, that I was having to turn down a lot of auditionees. That is not a good experience for them, or for me.

So here is a way for people who are interested to get something of the experience, and see what an audition course is like and what is expected... and it gives me an opportunity to identify those I feel should come back for an audition with a very good chance of success.

We have had a number of people coming on these courses and they have proved very helpful. From them, I've already identified a couple of players I'm hoping will come back and audition.

These courses are running through the year. And anyone interested should contact me at the National Piping Centre — especially those who have not been involved with the NYPBoS and would like to give it a go. ●