

# Youngstars

The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland  
Newsletter No.19

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



## Shifting up a gear

**W**ITH a number of our founding members moving on this year, the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland is entering a new, interesting and dynamic stage of its history.

Of course, it has all been “early” history so far.

We are now shifting up a gear from what has almost been a kind of preamble: the whole business of establishing and breaking in our systems and our ways of doing things, securing adequate resourcing, getting to know the public and having the public start getting to know us.

I have to say that, despite all the difficulties of establishing a new initiative on the ambitious scale of the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland, our founding members have exceeded my initial expectations by a mile, they have opened my eyes and brought tears of pride to them — and they have far outrun every reason we could think of for establishing a National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland in the first place.

They laid down a formidable launching pad that will stand the test of time — I am confident of that. We can't claim to have never put a foot wrong, but we can claim never to have compromised the standards or ethos we have established.

Our founding members set startlingly high standards from the first — in performance, in conduct, in hard work, in commitment, in creativity and in professionalism — and these standards must not only be maintained but, wherever possible, constantly surpassed.

Our founding members made us a lot of friends, won us wide-ranging support and surprised the public and the music community with their capacity to rise to any challenge and deliver the goods.

They made moments of magic in the midst of a string of often astonishing achievements.

They can be very proud of what they accomplished with us.

I wish them every success in their career paths. Several, I know, are headed towards careers in music and I am sure some will become household names in a Scotland that is becoming increasingly proud of its traditional music.

On a bad Monday morning, I might find myself wishing I could just hang onto them all and run the band that way, but that is not what we're about.

We already find ourselves with a huge legacy on our hands, along with a duty to further enrich it and pass it on in our turn. New and current members of

the NYPBoS face the task of generating opportunities for young pipers and drummers yet to come that are even richer than the ones they've inherited.

My role as director has taken a very healthy beating at the hands of these talented youngsters.

My main function now is less that of a “director” telling band members what to do and how to do it than it is of acting as a “facilitator”. This means doing my utmost to provide members with the best possible contexts within which to flourish: to learn, to pick up greater artistic responsibility, deepen their experience and develop their playing and stagecraft skills to the greatest possible extent.

That, believe me, is a bigger issue than simply running things my own sweet way.

Its dynamic is much more complicated.

For one thing, for me to deliver, I have to go further out on more limbs.

I have to listen to our members, discuss things with our members and help to develop and implement strategies that will make their best ideas and most vivid dreams tangible realities on very public stages.

Fundamental to that is mutual trust: within the NYPBoS we have to be up front, honest and willing in all we do. **Continued on Youngstars page 4**

THE NYPBoS Launch Concert at the New Athenaeum Theatre, at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama on 8 August, 2003 — where the young players established the band's public credibility and set an exciting standard that has shaped audience expectations since.

Photo: Derek Maxwell



# Course a challenge — but fun

**B**ACK in mid-April, five young pipers — three members and two aspiring members of the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland — attended a small three-day, mixed-level development course at the National Piping Centre in Glasgow.

For the two foundation course students — 15 year-old Craig Sturrock, from West Calder near Livingston, and 14 year-old David Shedden of Glasgow — the hard and fast three days were an intensive introduction to the expectations placed on NYPBoS players.

“Foundation courses are designed to give people a chance to come in and test the water,” said Paul Warren, director of the NYPBoS.

“Rather than everyone auditioning and many of them having to be turned away, these courses allow people to come in, see what it’s about and show me where they are at with their piping. It introduces them to a little bit of the pressure members work under: learning tunes quickly, having to set their pipes to another pitch perhaps, having to think about breaks and stage presentation... and it’s my chance to see how well people cope.

“If I think they gave a good chance,” he said, “I’ll perhaps offer them a bit of advice and invite them to come back for an audition which they can attend with a fair expectation of gaining admission.

“It’s a bit difficult because they haven’t seen the full band with all the lights, the dancers, the backing instruments and so on. But we give workshops on sight-reading and memorisation, and a little bit about playing with other instruments because we usually work with backing bands and musicians. We talk about stage and presentation skills and then, for the second half of the course, let them get on with it and see how they tackle it.”

The concluding event is a short “show” on which the course members of all levels work together to produce.

SAID Craig Sturrock, a West Calder High School student who plays with the Boghall and Bathgate Juvenile Pipe Band: “It was a lot of hard work; learning and memorising the tunes was the hardest part.

“I learned new ways of memorising tunes; the way I had done it before was quite slow, but on the Foundation Course I managed to learn most of them over one weekend.”

Of the 10 or so new tunes that were put in front of him on the course, he felt confident of seven on the last day.

“It’s not something I’ve ever done before — no way,” he said. “In the band, you’re given a tune to learn over a couple of weeks rather than a whole load of tunes over a weekend. It was a lot different.

“But it’s been fun as well, being with everybody and having a good time.” And the concert was a good way to wrap up the course: “I was quite happy with the



NYPBoS DIRECTOR Paul Warren watches intently as course members show their stuff in a short show at the end of the combined course in April.

Photo: Mike Paterson

performance we did,” he said. “We could have played better but in the short time we had it was about the best I could have played. “I think something like this would help my band, to give them a bit of a push to help to raise the standard a bit.”

At the end of the course, Craig Sturrock was invited to audition for the NYPBoS and said he was thinking about it: “It’d be a lot of hard work.”

He had his introduction to piping when he was nine but, when his school’s piping instructor left the job, he was left for a time with no teacher.

Since September last year, he has been taking

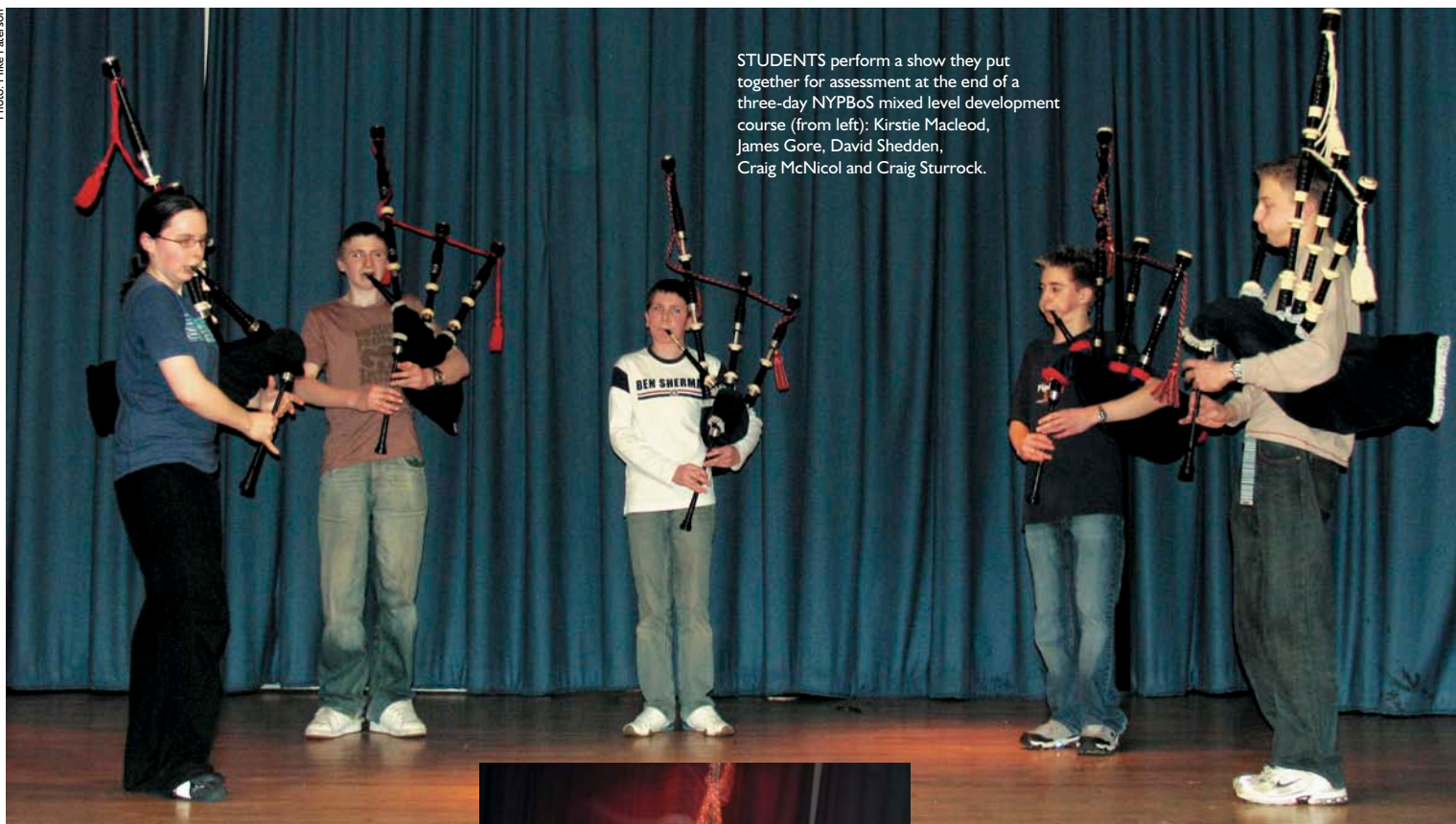
private lessons with Tom Speirs.

“The course was my first encounter with NYPBoS,” he said. “I’ve heard them perform but I’ve not seen them, though I do plan to see them next time they play.”

He has a keen ambition to make the Boghall and Bathgate grade 1 corps — “I know most of the guys in it.”

David Shedden also has grade 1 pipe band ambitions, and aspires to top-level success on the solo competition boards, emulating the success of his father, Stuart Shedden. “My dad really encourages

Photo: Mike Paterson



STUDENTS perform a show they put together for assessment at the end of a three-day NYPBoS mixed level development course (from left): Kirstie Macleod, James Gore, David Shedden, Craig McNicol and Craig Sturrock.

me,” he said. “I’d like to play gigs too.

“I’ve got a couple of friends in the NYPBoS and everybody I talk to thinks it’s really good,” he said. “And it’s been great fun over the last couple of days.

“The course was good. Having to learn all the tunes that quickly is a bit challenging but I picked them up fairly quickly because I’d heard the NYPBoS and other bands play most of them, so I had a rough idea of them. The memorisation workshop was interesting.

“I learned about 10 tunes,” he said on the last day of the course. “I could play nearly all of them now... no, all of them.”

David Shedden began learning the pipes when he was nine. Now he gets light music tuition from Gordon Walker, while his father gives him piobaireachd lessons. And he plays with the grade 2 Phoenix Honda Glasgow Skye Pipe Band.

He was comfortable playing on stage, he said. “I’m quite calm on stage, I know that now.”

He too was invited to audition and was looking forward to it: “I’ll enjoy it.”

TAKING the Band Leadership option was 16 year-old Kirstie MacLeod, originally from Inverness but now living in Edinburgh where she attends James Gillespie’s High School.

This is her second year with the NYPBoS, and she played for the last two seasons in grade 2 with the Drumbuie Kirkliston Pipe Band under Iain Duncan.

She gave solo competition a rest for the past two years but, with the demise of the Drambuie Kirkliston band in January, she is concentrating on solos again this summer.

Said Paul Warren: “the Band Leadership course Kirstie came on is about helping people to develop their skills, especially in setting up and tuning a band



Photo: Mike Paterson

and teaching.

“Essentially, I told Kirstie, ‘it’s your bag, away and run with it’. I tried to coach a little bit but it’s essentially about hands-on experience.

“She did a great job, I was proud of her and she actually surprised me. She has a very nice manner, takes charge when she has to and gets the group involved in the right way... I was delighted.”

Kirstie MacLeod said she hadn’t known what to expect of the course, “but it’s been really good and the guys on it were all nice.

“It was nerve-racking at the start but I was the oldest which helped, and I had good experience playing

with Drambuie behind me. I knew that I knew a lot, and I’m the kind of person who’s happy to ask other people if I don’t know.

“But it all went well: everybody had the same aim: to put on a really good performance at the end, and they all worked as hard as they possibly could; nobody slacked.

“Obviously, I knew the tunes at the start but I found it really interesting seeing which parts of the tunes other people found difficult.

“Setting up the chanter was interesting; you watch your pipe major do it all the time so you know what has to be done, but you don’t really get that experience — you find different people have different strengths, and you see how different people are doing. It’s really good fun if everybody works hard.

“But we were starting at 9 a.m. and didn’t finish until like 10 p.m. at night. It’s been a lot of work,” she said.

Overall, she felt the group did well. “The sound at the start of our show at the end of the course was really good; it tailed away but everybody tried their best. There’s going to be things that could be better in every performance but, if everybody gives their best, you can’t really ask for anything more.

“I’m happy I came... I can sleep for the rest of the holidays.”

She enjoys the NYPBoS and is looking forward to taking on more responsibility in the pipe corps,

“It’s really good, but it is hard work because you have to learn a lot of tunes to learn in a certain amount of time, and you’re not practising together every week,” she said. “But it’s good fun when you put on a good concert and it’s good fun meeting people from all over Scotland who play the pipes as well and have the same interest as you.”

LOOKING to move up into the front rank of the NYPBoS, 14 year-old Craig McNicol, from Windygates in Fife, plays with the grade 4 Methil and District Pipe Band.

He started piping when he was nine years old, learning from Robert Barnes at his pipe band. A member of the NYPBoS for the past year, he played at last August's *Piping Live!* show in the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, at the *Celtic Connections* Festival and Partick concerts.

He now takes weekly lessons in piobaireachd and march, strathspey and reel with Pipe Major Jimmy Banks.

"I'd like to be a music teacher when I'm older," he said... "piping and another instrument. And I would like to win some of the big solo competitions... the gold medal.

"I don't like listening to piobaireachd but I enjoy playing it," he said. "I got second at the Scottish last year with it."

He too found the April course a lot of hard work crammed into a short time. "It was good, hard work but fun and exciting. It was definitely worth coming for.

"We got workshops on working with other musicians and memorisation and sight-reading which were helpful and interesting, and we learned some new tunes. It was a good experience, useful, and we got to play some new tunes as well. It'll help back in the band too.

"But the NYPBoS is something different: we play different tunes with different musicians and we play big concerts. The performance we did at the end of the course could have been better but it was quite good for the time we had."

Said Paul Warren: "Because we don't have regular rehearsals, players might get into the band on the basis that they're good players... but then there's all the material to deal with and the way we do things, and this takes time to learn.

"But our newer members, when we get together, don't get time for teaching. When you come to a rehearsal, you have to have your instrument going and you have to have the music off; rehearsals are

about rehearsing with the backup musicians, sound engineering and lights and things like that.

"For our existing members who want to progress in the band, these three days are about fitting in some teaching and letting them work on their material a little further, and prove themselves able to move up into the up front team."

James Gore, 15, travelled up from Yorkshire to attend the course.

"I'm the only English player in the NYPBoS at the moment," he said. "I really enjoy it; it puts you under a bit of pressure but it's really good. The whole concert experience... it's quite experimental, really enjoyable and a lot different from pipe bands." He is keen too to make the front rank.

As well as piping, James Gore plays bass guitar with school soul and rock bands... "and a bit of whistle," he said.

He was introduced to piping in Yorkshire when a friend's grandfather, who was then the drum major of City of Bradford Pipe Band, the late Bill Balmforth, had the idea of inviting the local youth rugby team along to a practice in the hope of recruiting a few new, younger members.

"It's quite a demanding instrument and I was the only one who took to it... it went from there," said James Gore.

"I began coming up to Glasgow from time to time as I could for lessons, I went to a new band and started competing. There's a lot of travelling involved but I enjoy it and that's why I do it.

"Then Paul invited me to audition for the NYPBoS."

He has been with the band for about nine months. He played in the concerts at the Partick Burgh Hall and *Celtic Connections* in January.

"I enjoy performing," he said. "If you're in the NYPBoS, you obviously have the playing ability so there's nothing to be scared of: you just get in there and see how they respond.

"They're all good people in the band and I've made friends; I wouldn't have known many people in Scotland had I not joined."

The April course was something he enjoyed: "The course was good; I think it's great and I'd recommend it to anyone," he said.

"I think I improved as a player, even over the weekend. We got all the tunes, we had to write harmonies, get into the tunes and raise a show with just the five of us in a day and half.

"It throws you in at the deep end and that's a way to learn fast. I knew most of the tunes but one or two were new and it was easy.

"In my band, they once gave me harmonies on Thursday to play on the Sunday, but that's the quickest I've had to learn music there; they typically give you six months to be able to play a tune well... in the NYPBoS you might have a few days to do it in."

James Gore is setting his sights on finding his way into a grade 1 pipe corps and a professional music career.

PAUL Warren said he was delighted with the students' achievements on the April course.

"They were all really nice people, which is important. Character is one of the things I look for, and these students all represented the bands they come from, their parents and families and schools very well. And I was very pleased with the way they worked together without direction.

"There were sound issues in their performance but they got a good sound.

"The playing was good, tempos were a bit fast with the adrenalin, and the biggest issue was a set of drones that weren't up to it and need to be replaced, but everyone kept it going.

"That's professionalism because things can always go wrong — it's how you deal with it that's the mark of a professional.

"Overall I was very pleased."

And he is happy with the general format and structure of the courses.

"I think they achieve what they set out to do, and I'd encourage anyone who's interested, at any level, to give me a call," he said.

"You'll work hard... but you'll enjoy it." ●

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This calls for initiative on the part of every member: picking up loose ends, pitching in where there's a need, speaking out where we see potential problems. If there is a problem, or a mistake is made, we don't gnaw away at dishing out blame: we sort it and move on.

We need to be free to make mistakes or creativity will be stifled. We also need to readily acknowledge the mistakes we do make, and learn from them. If you can't learn from mistakes, there's not much point in making them. If, on the other hand, you learn from mistakes, they maybe weren't really mistakes after all, but experiments.

We need to say freely what we think, and willingly do whatever is best for the band as a whole. We all must help each other and be able to rely on each other. We have to appreciate each other's talents, support each other and cultivate each other's morale so that everybody gives of their best.

We have to be attuned to the fact that nobody looks good on stage if anyone else is made to look less good. We are a corps; we are committed to giv-

ing every member his or her best possible showing and opportunity.

We can improve only to the extent that we work together; for some that might involve humility, for others that means speaking up and showing us what you can do. Don't be shy and don't hide a talent: talk to me at least.

We have to conduct ourselves in ways that do credit to our standing as representatives of Scotland and Scotland's musical heritage.

These are the kinds of things we need always to be aware of, and we need to ensure they are embedded into every aspect of the NYPBoS ethos and experience.

And in other ways — artistically, creatively, musically and in terms of sheer showmanship — we need to innovate.

The NYPBoS is a forum in which you can compose, create and float ideas. You can find support for taking your music where you want. You can experiment and find what works and what doesn't, and why, and how.

So — new members will be joining the NYPBoS, and more junior members will be invited to step further forward and pick up new responsibilities.

Don't worry — if you're in the NYPBoS, you have all the playing ability you need or you wouldn't be on board. And so does everyone around you. Make the most of it.

Just feel encouraged to take on whatever new tasks come your way. It sounds like a tired old cliché, I know, but it's true that the more you put in, the more you will get out of it.

And remember, those guys in the front rank at the Royal Glasgow Concert Hall on 8 August were a whole lot smaller and greener when they joined — and so were those retiring members who this year embark on BA (Scottish Music — Piping) degrees at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama and the National Piping Centre.

Give it what you've got this year!

And all the very best with the rest of this summer competition season — with your band and on the solo boards. ●