



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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This is Monday twenty-second..., and my name is Emma Coffield and I am here with Andrew Frater. Thank you very much for coming Andrew...

Pleasure...

I was just wondering if you can tell me a little bit about your early life.

Well I was brought up in the village of Kirkliston, which is about eight miles west of Edinburgh. And there were no pipers in my immediate family, but my father was quite musical. He played the violin or the fiddle and the melodeon, and of course I was sort of introduced to these instruments at an early age, mouth organs and melodeons. But anyway my involvement in piping started in the year of the Queen's Coronation which was 1953, and I was nine years of age. And it was a wonderful day, I think it was the second of June, and the village closed down for the day, it was like a gala day.

And we the school children in the village school were all presented with Coronation mugs and various memorabilia to mark the occasion. However the village had a pipe band. And that day the pipe band played at all the events in the village, and I was completely taken in by the sound of the bagpipe. I followed the pipe band about all day, and after that I pestered my mum and dad until I got a practice chanter and a tutor book. So my mum went to Edinburgh one day and came back with a beautiful Sinclair practice chanter and Logan's Tutor, and I went to the pipe band and I started lessons on the chanter and it just went on from there.

The pipe band folded up a few years after that, and my mother then took me up to Pumpherston which was a neighbouring town where they had a good pipe band. And the Pumpherston Pipe Band was supported by the oil industry because there was an oil refinery in Pumpherston in the days of the shale oil industry. So I was very

fortunate up there because the first Pipe Major I had in the Pumpherston band was a chap who died only recently called Robert Moir, and he was a good player. He played in the Shotts and the Pumpherston band and whatnot, so he tutored me for some time. And then he left to work in the coal industry in Newton Grange, and a chap called Alec Couples who is still alive in Canada he took me on. He was the pipe major of the Gordon Highlanders, but he had left the army by then this would be 1958, 59. So I got quite a lot of tuition from Alec Couples, he was a very good player also and I just played in pipe bands.

I got married in 1968 having been in Pumpherston band all that time, and I went to live in Falkirk. And I was asked to join the BP Grangemouth pipe band, they were a Grade One pipe band at that time. So I played with them for a number of years, and I then moved house to Uphall where I still reside. And I joined the Torphichen and Bathgate Pipe Band who were a Grade Two pipe band, and I played with them for about two or three years. And Alec Couples who was the pipe major of the Pumpherston decided to emigrate to Canada, and I got a letter from the pipe band secretary of Pumpherston asking me if I would take on the job as Pipe Major. So I hummed and hawed about that because it was quite a big step to take on a pipe band.

So that would be in the mid 70s, say 74, 75. So I took on the job as pipe major and wow that was quite a shock, there was a lot more to it than just playing the bagpipes. [laughter] However we stuck at the task, taught quite a number of youngsters and eventually we finished up with a very good pipe band. But of course the big job that a pipe major has is getting reeds, and a bagpipe without a good reed is not much good. So I decided that I would make reeds for the band.

As well [laughter]...

That was quite a task, so after many years of experimentation and practice and all that I was able to make quite good reeds. So the pipe

band improved tremendously because we had a supply of good reeds, so much so that in 1982 we won in the third grade nearly everything, and the band got promoted to Grade Two. And of course that was a very difficult transition because you can introduce youngsters to a Grade Three band, but you can't introduce youngsters as easily to a... And then of course I was working away as an electrical engineer, and I got a promotion through to Glasgow with the power company, and had to work longer hours and it became more and more difficult to become involved in the band, so I gave the band up.

So ever since then I have just been playing for my own amusement if you like, and I started to study piobaireachd, round about the mid 80s and that is still one of my major studies yet. And of course I still make reeds, and I have done quite a lot of tuition in the intervening twenty years or so. I have been in California eleven times in succession with the College of Piping summer school.

How did you learn to make the reeds?

Well I got some advice on where to buy the cane, where to buy the copper. I just set about making the tools, and I got some assistance with the tools from my friend who was a fitter in a big engineering works. I just made tools to what I thought was required and copied reeds. But at the end of the day reed making apart from having the skill to do it, you have got to have a good ear so that when you do make a reed you know how to tune it.

Okay.

And it's the tuning of the reed that's the important part, and it just takes a wee while to develop the skills to be able to do that. I still make reeds yet, not in big quantities but I make reeds yeah. And in recent times when I retired obviously I have got a very nice workshop fitted out in my garage, and I have been making bagpipes.

Oh right, the whole...[laughter].

So I am on my third set at the moment, it takes me quite some time to make a bagpipe because I don't work at it continually, there is other things in life. But I am making a very good set at the moment, well I think they will be good, they are just about finished.

How did you learn to do that?

Well over the years I spent quite a lot of time in some of the bagpipe maker's shops in Edinburgh, Inveran House, Jimmy Tweedy. And I saw how they made bagpipes, and in fact I used to sharpen Jimmy's tools. Being an engineer I was quite good at that so I used to sharpen Jimmy's drills and things like that, and I learned quite a lot just watching how they do it. And my father had a lathe when I was a boy, he was a carpenter. He turned handles for chisels and all that on his lathe, and I had seen people working at lathes all my days. So it's not that..., you just get started and you learn.

Blue McMurchie who is the current bagpipe maker in West Calder, if I get stuck I go there... I don't get stuck now, but in the early days Blue gave me some advice on how to do things. So that's how I managed to acquire these skills.

And what's the hardest bit to make?

Making the pipes?

Hmm...

There is nothing really much difficult about making a set of drones, I have never made a chanter yet so one of my objectives is to try and make a pipe chanter. But drones have got details of lots of different pipes, all the dimensions and sizes. So I made the drills to the sizes I thought would be the most suitable and it's all worked so far.

And how do they sound?

Very good, yeah. The set that I have been playing for quite some time, I have had them over two years and they sound really good.

And you were saying you had some experience as a..., first you learned from other people and now you are a teacher yourself. How do you find that?

Well teaching as I am sure many people in this establishment know is you either have the ability to pass on what you know or you don't, it's not just a question of showing somebody how to do something. The teacher has to understand the music and the mathematics of a music, so you can explain when you are playing a 2/4 what the time values of the notes are, or the 6/8, or a 3/4. And of course when I was teaching children in the pipe band as pipe major I learned a lot of that there, because I had to do my homework and learn how to pass it on. And I think I am reasonably accomplished that now, and I have taught quite a few people that are reasonably good.

And how did the kids come to you, did they want to come to be part of the pipe band?

Well it's just locally people get taken when they hear a pipe band, and I used to go along to the Boghall pipe band a little bit. And some of the parents there would say can you take my child privately and give them a few lessons, so over the years I have taught a lot of people. I only have two pupils at the moment now but they are both very good, one's a little lad he is twelve and he is absolutely wonderful, he has got a great musical brain. So I get a great satisfaction in that.

And what's it like to be part of a pipe band?

Well if it's a pipe band that is well run, with people of the same outlook...

Yeah.

It's great fun..., and if you can run a pipe band and have very little strife, and get people to enjoy playing in the pipe band you are half way there to having a good band.

And because you were a pipe major so what were the most important things for you?

Well the most important thing is to have competent players, people who can blow a bagpipe and give you a good sound. And just to have the ability to keep everybody working along the road in the same direction.

[Laughter] that sounds hard.

No it's not that difficult no, so I quite enjoy group playing even yet so... As you would gather in the conversation with James I am a member of the Glasgow Highland Club, but for many years prior to becoming involved in the Highland Club I was a member of the Royal Scottish Pipers Society in Edinburgh. I would go along there on the odd Friday evening and have a tune with the boys, it's more a social evening than a serious piping evening. But there are many accomplished players there and we have a grand time.

Sounds lovely [laughter].

Yeah.

So what advice do you think you would give to somebody who was starting to learn them?

Well if someone wants to learn the bagpipe, the first thing is they have got to have a little musical aptitude. If it is a youngster you have got to start them at an age where they are mature enough physically as well as mentally, so I would recommend for most people if you started the bagpipe when you were about nine you would do well. But if you start somebody younger than that they sometimes develop bad habits with their fingers because their hands are not mature enough,

and usually the person that starts when they are nine or ten they progress much faster than if you start somebody at seven or eight.

Ah interesting...

Aye, yeah usually they do.

And why is that with the hands?

Well because they have obviously been at school, they are in the habit of learning things, they have got good fingers by that age. Usually they can pick up the chanter and make a much better job of it than somebody who is really small, yeah.

What was it like when you were learning as a boy?

A bit different from now, we worked with an old tutor book called Logan's Tutor. And you had to learn all the exercises and movements before they even thought about putting you on a tune, whereas nowadays the tutor books are designed as such where you learn just fundamental movements after the scale, then you are put on a simple melody. And that keeps the children or the young interested because they can go home to mum and dad look what I can do, play a tune that they will recognise. So the method of teaching now is different from when I was a boy yeah.

Did you play to your parents?

Did I...?

Play to your parents when you were little?

Yeah I did I suppose, I played every day so they had to hear me [laughter]. I think getting enough interest in a person, such that they practice, practice every day is the key. When I came home from school..., I was in secondary school the first thing I did after four was go upstairs and get my pipes out. And I would play every evening before my evening meal, and over a number of years that was how

you progressed and begin to manage the pipe yeah so... But the great difficulty with the bagpipe is being able to get it to sound properly, and getting the reeds all set up properly, get a real good sound because you have obviously got the drones and the chanter and getting them all tuned together.

So that is basically the sort of background to my playing, but what I am more interested in now is the sound from the bagpipe. And that is why I am interested in making bagpipes, because you can change the sound from drones by changing the bore sizes. So of course the great experiment is to try to get a really good drone sound, some of the old bagpipes have got wonderful sounds. They were made in ebony which came from Africa I think, and there is very little good ebony about now. And most bagpipes are made with African Blackwood which is a different..., it's a very hard and oily wood. And the drones have a different internal finish to the drones that were made in ebony, and that I think has a big impact or a big part of the sound is the material the drones are made from. Some people reckon that it doesn't matter, it's the bore that counts. But there is more to it than that, the wall finish is very important inside.

So what do you make yours out of?

Well the sets that I have made today are African Blackwood, but there are other woods that people have been experimenting. But in the main pipes are still made with African Blackwood because it looks like a bagpipe.

And so this idea sorry..., that older ones sounded differently, old bagpipes sound different...?

To the cultured ear they are different yeah.

In what way are they different?

The drones have got a much broader mellower sound, more modern pipes have got a stronger sound but I don't think it's just quite as mellower musical.

And does that make a difference to the music?

Not in particular, but it does make a difference to the performance do you know what I mean. If you have got a really good sounding bagpipe, I mean all the great players and there are many great players nowadays, they all have a good sound. And some players would have what I would call a signature sound, you don't need to see them you know it's them because of the sound they have from their bagpipe.

It's that distinctive?

Yeah.

Interesting..., and so can you get two bagpipes to sound the same or is everyone...?

Oh yes in a pipe band you get them all to tune the same.

Right...

It's a difference between sounding the same and when you hear them all at the same pitch. When you hear them individually they have got a slightly different character in them, that would be a good word.

What kind of character do your bagpipes have?

I suppose it's my character really..., they have a..., I like a nice mellow sweet sound not a harsh hard sound. You get there is that difference.

And you say the reed has made that difference?

Huge difference yeah, it's all about the reeds as well as what we have been discussing with the materials. But the reeds I suppose are ninety percent of it.

And what do you make the reeds out of?

Well the reeds that..., everybody uses reeds that are made with a material called Arundo Donax, and that is we call it cane, right. It's like bamboo but it's not bamboo, but it is a cane with the nodules on it. And the cane that's used for reed making comes from Northern Spain or South of France, in the Mediterranean.

Hmm...

The climate in the Mediterranean is ideal for this particular plant to grow, and there are people in the South of France and Spain that grow cane purely for reed making. I mean they grow tonnes and tonnes and tonnes, and it is a plant that grows to about fifteen feet...

Wow [laughter].

And they grow it in rows and harvest it in the winter time, when there is no sap coming off it when the growth stops. And then it has to be cured, dried in the sun. And then cut to the length for the various instruments, so drone reeds use the very top of the plant where the diameter is small, and the chanter reed is made from the stronger parts of the plant. So for pipe chanter reeds we use the cane about an inch in diameter, the drone cane is much smaller eight, ten millimetre diameter something like that. Nowadays most pipers play synthetic drone reeds they're made from plastic...

Right...

In the drones, because drone reeds are a single reed whereas the chanter reeds is a double reed..., it has two blades that vibrate together tied on with a little staple, like oboe reeds, bassoon reeds. And that's an area where if you are learning to make reeds, you can learn quite a lot from getting literature on how to make oboe reeds, because oboe* players a lot of them tend to make their own reeds.

Whereas bagpipe players they don't..., they usually buy their reeds from a recognised reed maker.

Would you recommend that they learned to make their own reeds?

Well I would recommend that they try and make reeds because it's a very time consuming pastime to learn how to do it, but what they need to do is learn how to tune reeds and that would be a skill that would serve them well. And I have done classes on reed making obviously in America at the summer school, but I have been across in Brittany several times shall we say to conduct a reed making workshop. There are one or two lads in Brittany that now make nice reeds, and they came to my workshops and I showed them how I made reeds.

So how do you make reeds?

Well you have to have this material...

The cane...?

Aye the cane, you cut it to a certain length and split it in four. And these four sections make two reeds, and then you have to gouge. You either have a hand gouge which is a bevel chisel, or a gouging machine which is like a plane. But it has a blade that is not flat, so you gauge the cane and then you have a shaper to shape it. And then you have different profiling blocks that profile, and then you tie the two blades onto the staple with a little winder. And it's not difficult, but it takes you a long time to get there.

[Laughter] so how long will it take from start to finish to make one reed?

Oh well if you have good equipment it doesn't take that long, and as I say initially it takes ages because you waste a lot of time. The problem initially, when you buy cane it is not all suited..., it looks

alright but there is different qualities even between two pieces. If it's too soft it's no use, if it's too hard it's no use. So you have to learn by trial and error what is the best cane for making a reed, so I am now at the stage where I can do the initial gouge that's too soft and I don't do any more, I just get another bit until I find a nice piece of cane and make the reed from that.

And you make the reeds for all the pipe bands in Edinburgh?

Well I made the reeds for my pipe band, I make the reeds for a number of people but not big numbers. Just I keep it more a hobby, I am more interested now in playing pipes, experimenting with my lathe making a pipe and making reeds. But I do make reeds.

Am I right in thinking that you were involved in a chanter replica project?

That's right..., everybody here will know Barnaby Brown. Barnaby is quite a character, clever lad. And he wanted to..., he got this old chanter it was supposed to have been played by a chap called Iain Dall MacKay away up Kintail. And this chanter was over in Canada, and it finished up coming back here and I think it is in the museum here. And anyway Barnaby was desperate to make a replica, so he got a pipe maker called Julian Goodacre who made several replicas. And he finished up coming out to me to see if I could make a reed that would make this replica sound half decent, and we spent many, many hours at it over a long period of time.

And it was the staple i.e. the little brass tube or copper tube that the blades are affixed to that we experimented with, and eventually we were able to make a staple which is completely different from the staples of today..., much bigger, wide. We got a staple that when you had a reed with it, it gave you a reasonably true scale in this old replica chanter, so Barnaby was quite pleased about that because he was able to play a tune on it.

[Laughter] What did it sound like?

Well it sounds alright, it's a bagpipe, it's got a different pitch from the pitch of today. It's quite nice for piobaireachd, I mean modern bagpipes are a much more accurate in scale or chanters anyway. But this was an exercise to make this replica work, and I suppose the idea was to try and produce a sound..., which was the same sound as Iain Dall MacKay. So that was a big project [laughter], Barnaby spent a lot of time on it, I mean he was meticulous. Measuring everything, comparing all the reeds and then we would try another design, eventually we got there. But it was hard going that.

How long did it take?

Oh Barnaby has been at this for years, but I suppose he was coming out to me off and on for two years. He still comes occasionally to get another couple of reeds in it.

So you are still making reeds for him [laughter]?

Aye, aye... So aye I mean because Julian Goodacre has made the odd chanter and sold it to somebody, so they need to get a reed to make it work they usually come to me.

That sounds nice.

Aye, so that was a nice project to be involved in. I got a bit of fun in, and you also learn something by doing these unusual projects. There is always something to be learned.

Have you done any more projects like that?

I have made unusual reeds for other chanters yeah, I have got one at the moment that somebody sent across from France. The chanter was made in 1890 in Edinburgh, and he has the bagpipes this guy. So he was keen to get the chanter to sound..., so I have made one or two reeds for that. And I have got it sounding reasonably good, but you

have to get the reed to match the chanter. And modern reeds, they are made specifically for the modern pitch, and for these older chanters you need something different.

It's a lower pitch isn't it?

Lower pitch..., so you get the staple adjusted to suit the chanter aye. Anyway it's..., they are all challenges [laughter].

It sounds lovely, I hadn't realised it was so international?

Oh it's very international...

Yeah.

I would reckon there are many, many more pipers in America and Canada than we have here.

Really...?

A big market for bagpipes is overseas.

Has that always been the case?

Well for many years now aye, when you go to America there are thousands of people learning to play bagpipes.

Why do you think that is?

Well the bagpipe has a unique sound, and it's a sound that attracts people. And of course the Scottish element there as well, so there are some very, very good players over there. But there is hundreds and hundreds of people that just want to learn how to play a tune or two, but it is a big market for bagpipes. And in the Continent in France the Bretons are very good players, and in Germany now there is a big interest in bagpipes as well.

Really...?

Yeah Belgium and then Scandinavian countries there is bagpipe bands as well. So the pipes themselves are quite universal now.

It sounds very social that everyone can get in touch with someone..., it sounds really nice like that?

Aye there is websites on the internet where people are posting questions and looking for answers all the time, so there is a huge... I mean look at this place, it's a huge industry.

It feels very community like to me?

Pardon?

It feels like a community to me?

And in many respects it is, I suppose it's the same though for most things. If you are interested in a specific subject there will be a community interested in that subject yeah.

But every city that you went to in Scotland there was a pipe band that you could join?

More or less, and that is still the case lots of pipe bands. And in more recent years I have got involved in doing a little bit of judging of the piping competitions.

And how is that going?

I have done it for a long time now, I quite enjoy it but it's a... I quite enjoy going round some of the games doing a bit of judging, but it's a very..., stressful is not the right word..., but it's a very tiring thing to do. I mean if you have to sit all day listening to bagpipes and people competing, you have to be alert from the minute you start to the minute you finish and you have really have to concentrate. And therefore by the time you have finished and you come up with the result you are usually quite tired.

What do you look for?

Well you look for the music, not everybody has the same... Some people are really musical, and if they have a good day they play well. Basically you just look for good music and technique, you know there is a lot of technique involved in playing the bagpipes. Doublings and taorluaths and so on and you make sure that the person that wins has got good technique, you have to have it otherwise you are not going anywhere. So there is quite a lot in that yeah.

Is it very different being up on the judging side as opposed to the playing side?

Oh it's obviously different aye, when people play there is a lot of stress. But on the other hand there is quite a lot of stress on the other side of the bench, you have to take it seriously and you have to really listen. And you know what you are looking for..., you are just looking for a good polished performance musically. And of course the bagpipe has to be good because you can't play well on a bagpipe that is not just spot on..., it's like a singer you can't be a good singer unless you have a very good voice, you can't be a good pipe player unless you have a very good pipe and you have to know how to blow it and tune it. There is a lot to it you know.

I have asked you this before you have been involved in playing bagpipes or involved with the instrument for a really long time now, what has that meant to you?

Well it's meant a lot because basically I have given a big part of my life to piping, but on the other hand I have had a lot back from piping. Travelled and I have met lots of interesting people, and have lots of interesting friends that communicate one way or another with phone calls, e-mails. You know as you said before it's a big family and we are all part of that, but I think what really makes me a wee bit different I was trained as an electrical engineer and that was my

profession. So physics is a big part of electrical engineering, so when I started to make reeds I was trying to find out how they worked. Not just how they sounded, how did they work? And of course it's all physics, so I have had this desire to find out how things work. And that aligned to the playing has made it an interesting study, and when I do these workshops I try and explain to people how the reeds work. So that they have a better understanding on how to tune reeds because I have given them some idea how they work.

How do they work?

How do they work? Well I don't think we have got long enough this morning [laughter], but the reed itself is part of the instrument..., like the chanter reed. So there are nine notes on the bagpipe, so basically you have to get the reed tuned so that it plays all the notes correctly. So when you change from one note to another the frequency that the reed vibrates has to change, so you have to get the reed designed and tuned so that it can do that. Some reeds might respond to most of the notes, but then there is two notes that they don't..., very well anyway. So you have to know how to adjust the reed so that all the notes are sounding true, but the physics of how any instrument works whether it be a drum, a pipe organ, or an accordion, or a bagpipe are really, really interesting.

And of course you can go to the university, well I have been in Edinburgh and they have an acoustics lab, and they research like trumpets, trombones and they can tell you how all of those things work exactly. And it's the same with woodwind instruments, I often feel that we in the piping world could put a little bit more effort into research to get a better understanding of why some instruments sound better. But that is a scientific study.

And have there been..., I mean are there a couple of things that really stand out for you in your past experience that has been really important moments?

Well I suppose I was really a happy boy when I was able to get my pipe band to sound really good because it was my reeds, and that was a big achievement you know..., that was my contribution to the set up. And the Piping Society in Edinburgh they have an annual competition and I played in it this year, it was in April. Anyway I did quite well, and it was on my own bagpipe with my own reeds and that was quite something. Just a bit of fun really...

That sounds amazing [laughter].

Just a bit of fun...

And so just before we finish, is there anything that you would like to add or anything else you would like to say about your involvement with piping?

Well I hope I am involved in piping for a wee while yet, the great thing in piping is appreciating what other people can do, and really appreciate... There are some wonderful players and I really appreciate what they can do, and I suppose it's the same in all walks of life. We are not all experts in everything, but having an appreciation and an understanding of how other people are really good is really something. So I don't have any further ambitions other than making a pipe chanter, [laughter] but hopefully I will never stop experimenting with the reeds in the chanters and the pipes because the sound is ninety percent of the instrument and that is my big interest. I love to hear a good bagpipe being played well, it's just really nice. So I don't think I can add anything much more to that... You would need to get a video if I was going to do anything else, which I could show you how the reeds work at least...

We should do that, we should film you [laughter]. A how to video...

Aye how to video, actually I did that.

Did you?

Aye, I have a how to video. And this year I was invited across to Lorient in Brittany to be one of the adjudicators at the..., it's an international Celtic festival to judge some of the piping. So I we had to do a workshop one morning, it was a big audience. So I took this video across, and showed the video to the audience how I made reeds and then I gave a talk on how the bagpipe worked. And considering that a lot of the audience were just lay people that went down quite well, and then we played the bagpipes myself and a fellow adjudicator, Patrick Molard who is a French or Breton guy. Patrick is a good player he brought his bagpipe along and he did the interpretation actually, he has got wonderful English so he played. And Fred Morrison who is a famous piper here, Fred was there at the festival so he played. So we finished up having a wonderful morning of piping which was just supposed to be a workshop [laughter].

That sounds great.

So yeah a video is a good thing, it lets people see what you do. And most people they are interested but they will never actually try and do it themselves, but they are interested enough to watch the video. At the end of the day they have got more of an appreciation of what's involved.

A better understanding...?

Aye, aye... And of course nowadays with little cameras you can do a video quite smartly, it's not difficult so there we are.

I will tell James to video you [laughter], to send a camera crew round.

I have actually done talks in here on acoustics and reed making, but not for some time but in the past I have done some talks to students.

It sounds like a good idea to learn?

Pardon...?

It sounds like a good idea to learn?

Aye, I would like to think that you know there is always somebody interested in making reeds and learning and how to do it. But at the end of the day you can make a good reed, but understanding how it works it makes a big difference.

Well thank you very much for coming in today, it's been really nice to talk to you.

Thank you.