



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

### **An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre**



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**I think the first thing I was actually just going to ask was how you got started Annie? Maybe can you remember the first time you even heard the pipes?**

Oh yes.

**Yes!**

I was eight years old when I first heard bagpipes and I had seen a pipe band in a pageant that had took place in my home town. It was a mediaeval town and had lots of history.

**What's your home town?**

Ashton-Under-Lyne. About ten or twelve miles outside of Manchester. We'd a big market town and it had had a Lord of the Manor who was supposed to be very cruel and they called him The Black Knight. In commemoration they had this Black Knight Pageant every year and the pipe band, we had Rose Fletcher's Pipe Band coming down the street with the dancers dancing at the back. My twin sister and I just thought this was wonderful so Mum can we learn to do Highland dancing was the first thing. My sister loved to dance and I said I want to play the pipes, we found out where the practices were held and we went along and we talked to Rose. She said she didn't really start children playing the pipes until they were twelve.

**Oh, four years to wait.**

And we were only eight but we happened to be quite tall for our age with long fingers and she said perhaps we could make an exception, we'll see how you go. So that was lovely, I was hooked right from the beginning. My twin sister had more preference towards the dancing; she played the pipes as well and was very able at playing. We just loved it and we were there every week at the practices. We didn't learn any tunes because in those days you were taught by the old Logan's tutor book so

you had to go through all the exercises, the finger exercises, from the scale and all the other finger techniques that went with it, doublings, taorluaths etc. You had to go through all those before you were given a tune.

**Oh goodness!**

In a way it did help because when you were given a tune you recognised all the techniques right away and you were able to read the music. So you were able to follow it very easily on the staves.

**But was that hard as a child to have to do exercises and not get to play a tune?**

I suppose it was but I love things where you had to do a lot of repetition of the skill, I love doing skills. Not only in music but in physical education work as well and ball handling skills etc.

**That sort of practicing a skill over and over.**

It was really you accepted you had to do this if you wanted to go onto the bagpipe so we diligently stuck at it. Then Rose affiliated to the College of Piping which had started up in Glasgow, Seamus MacNeill. She organised workshops and he came down to Manchester because she was just outside Ashton-Under-Lyne and he taught me my very first tune. So a wee 6/8 tune. It was lovely; I thought “Oh I can play a tune” [laughter]. Then of course there was no stopping us after that we went through tunes. You could pick up a book and thumb through and pick out, if you’d heard the tune at that age, you could pick out the melody if you’d already heard it. It was only later we got more adept at actual sight reading. I mean at that age it was actually quite difficult, well for us it was.

**So that was the College of Piping opened in Glasgow but were affiliated with?**

No, Rose affiliated to them.

**And so there was a wee exchange was there of teachers?**

Yes, and some of the girls in the band used to go to the summer schools the college ran on the islands. Unfortunately my twin and I couldn't go because the school we were at, the schools in England don't finish until the middle of July.

**Oh they've got different holidays.**

We were at a school that absolutely refused to let us have time off.

**Oh, that's very sad.**

It was sad, but we had to accept it. It was a shame because we felt we missed out on all the fun. And going and having piping tuition in Scotland itself we just felt we missed out on all that. Anyway that was it, it didn't feel that it held us back but it would have been adding to the more social life of piping.

**Absolutely, I think when you get involved in something.**

It was good. Of course the band we used to go all over the country taking part in carnivals and opening fetes. We used to have this big bus that used to take us, it was always breaking down. We went to North Wales to Oswestry in North Wales and we visited the hospitals there and there was a big carnival through the town and of course the bus just wouldn't go back. The people were very good and they put us up.

**Good hospitality there.**

They eventually got it going and we set off the next day and got back. Then Rose always came to Cowal Highland Games in

Dunoon and she always stayed out in Inellan Hall and we'd be about eleven or twelve and it was an adventure for us to come up. We stayed in this hall and we slept on, there was no such thing as z-beds then things like that, it was just kind of paillasse they used to call them which were sacks with straw in them. [laughter] You used to get your sack and fill it with straw, get a sheet and put it over it and that was your bed and a pillow.

**And take a sleeping bag or something?**

Oh it was hilarious. The fun we had.

**Was it warm enough?**

Well frankly you never seemed to mind it.

**I don't think you feel the cold at that age. So was that about once a year you'd come up?**

Yes. Cowal Games time. Every year at Cowal Games.

**So you had a connection up here through that.**

Yes. Then Rose got reeds from a reed maker who'd come to live out at Toward which was about four miles down the road.

**Is that Castle Toward?**

Castle Toward. Yes, well his wee cottage you had to go through the castle grounds and up at the back where the kennels were. There were old kennels that used to belong. He lived there. He used to be the piper to the Marquis of Bute and he had retired. He'd been in the army and he retired up in, he called it Strathclyde, this little croft which was the kennels. He'd change it and made it into a croft and all the kennels he'd turned into byres for the animals. We went along to visit him one time, we were up and Rose said would we call and get some reeds from

him. So we went along and eventually found it and we had a lovely time and we played for him and he was saying that he wanted to set up a wee piping school himself. So I said could I be one of your pupils, I never thought anymore about it. I came home and I got a letter from him in the October saying that it wasn't feasible where he was to do this thing but he'd been so impressed with my enthusiasm and my playing if I wanted to come up during the school holidays he would very gladly give me lessons and in return I would help him to make reeds. So I jumped at the chance.

### **What age were you about then?**

I would be about fourteen. He was called Alec MacIntyre, originally he came from Islay, him and his wife and were Gaelic speakers, they had one daughter who also spoke Gaelic. So you picked up the odd word. I used to go up Christmas, Easter and Summer. All my holidays, I would get the mundane job where the reeds were concerned of varnishing them and putting hemp in the bottom. I never had to bother about my reeds. He'd a terrific ear for pitch because he would say "Right, let me see your pipes" and he'd put the drone reeds in my pipes, he would blow them "Oh that's right" he'd say. Then he'd get a chanter reed and stick it in and the pipes were perfectly tuned. He'd a terrific ear.

### **It must be a really great thing to learn to make your own reeds as well.**

He even let my try making one or two but mine never turned out the way his did they always fell apart.

### **You must have been picking up so much from them.**

I did. I picked up a lot of information with regards to reeds. It was very educational.

## **A great way to spend your holidays.**

Oh it was it was lovely, it was a great way to spend holidays and of course you weren't doing it all the time. You would go down to the beach or go round to the castle because there were tennis courts. They knew that he'd got visitors staying with him and they used to give us freedom to move about.

## **Lovely grounds there.**

It was lovely. I remember very fondly those days and I used to compete in the games. When I was older about seventeen, eighteen, I couldn't enter any of the juvenile events at the Cowal Games because they were for locals. It was only the local ones that could enter. I couldn't enter the Burgh Cup because you had to be resident in Argyll and the Isles as well as Dunoon so I had to enter the open competition against all the men. In those days there were very very few, I'm talking about the 1960's, there were very few lady pipers in fact if any. I remember I had entered (and it was just really for the fun of it) there were forty two men and me.

## **Wow**

[laughter]

It was in the march and the strathspeys and reels. The first time I played in it I got fifth in the March, I got fifth or sixth in the March and I was over the moon. Then the second year after I got second in strathspeys and reels

## **Fantastic.**

I thought this is absolutely super and then of course my education continued because I went to college and I didn't have the time to spend on the practice I wanted to.

**So it was a wee break?**

Yes I was at P.E. College but I took my pipes with me and I used to play them. If there was anything special on at college they would say “Annie would you be at the pipes” and I would play at these special things.

**So you just didn't have as much time to**

No because I wanted to get through.

**And focus there.**

It was good. Then I got married and I had the children so I stopped playing for quite a while. About ten years I actually stopped playing myself, I still played for enjoyment and I still helped Rose Fletcher, I used to go along and teach classes for her and I took my own children as well and they learned the chanter.

**And you were still down in Manchester?**

I was still down in Manchester at this time. I was teaching in the schools down there but not piping. I was doing physical education and science which were my subjects. Then in 1974, it was ten years after I'd come out of college, I thought I'd love to come up to Scotland to teach. A few years before then when I had left college I had thought I'm going to teach in Scotland but I needed Scottish qualifications. So what I did, two years after I left, I wrote to Moray House in Edinburgh and asked them about this. They said it would be no problem, just send us all the details of your qualifications and they transferred them over to Scottish ones.

**Oh right.**



So even though I didn't go straight away I still had these documents, qualification documents, Scottish ones. Then I thought, "Go back". I wrote to Argyll and Bute in Dunoon and asked if there were any physical education jobs coming up. They said "As it is yes, we're looking for a physical education teacher to work in Dunoon Grammar School and feeder primaries because we want now to start encouraging PE within in the primary schools" So I thought that sounds a lovely job and I had already done some work in primary schools with the school I was in. I had gone out to the feeder primary schools there and I thought that would be quite nice. So I wrote and applied for the job and sent everything that you had to write about. But in England you have to have your resignations in in certain months of the year. In Scotland you just need to give four weeks or six weeks whatever it is. In England it was terms and May was one and I'd not heard anything. So my Headmaster said ring them up and see if you've managed to make the short leet or what. So I rang them up and explained why I had done that and they said, "Oh there's a letter in the post offering you the job". So that was lovely. My Headmaster said, "I'm going to lose you" which I said, "Yes you are". I came up here in 1974 as a PE teacher. And when I was in the school they had a wee band it was just starting but it was from Strachur and a man from Strachur, Niall Campbell.

### **Strachur? Where's that?**

Began to teach the children in Strachur and district piping and the Grammar School had asked them to come in and then we had a change of Rectors at the Grammar School, headmasters. The Headmaster who took over was a fervent participation in the scout movement, so the idea of a pipe band appealed to him.

### **Good.**

Very much so. He also loved entertaining. So he eventually got Niall to become full time doing piping in the schools. Being

interested in piping I used to go along and Niall had heard that I was there and that I was interested and so I began to help him with the band. It helped having a qualified teacher with the band as well you see. So I would play along with them and help with some of their solo work and things like that. I really enjoyed it, it was very good and we would go places and play. Sir Fitzroy Maclean had a big house in Strachur, he was a friend of President Tito of Yugoslavia. He had done a lot of work in the war and working for the Yugoslavs and the rumour was Ian Fleming based James Bond on him, Sir Fitzroy Maclean. So anyway, Niall used to play at the big house with him, he lived near Strachur, and he used to be classed as Sir Fitzroy's piper. They had this folk group come over from Yugoslavia, Mareschka Folk Group and their singing was beautiful. And they did sword dancing as well, they looked like big warriors they would enact the culture, the dances. The Moors, Mareschka, The Moors who were you know great fighters. They came over to Dunoon at the Queens Hall and the pipe band played and they were so taken up with it we got invited back to Yugoslavia to play alongside.

### **To actually collaborate together.**

Sir Fitzroy meanwhile had a house on the island of Korcula and we were to take something back to the house as we were going, Lady MacLean wanted something bringing back. So we had a week on the island of Korcula it was absolutely fantastic.

### **So where's the island of Korcula?**

It's the Dalmatian Islands. We flew into Dubrovnik and it was a big walled city, beautiful, and then we had a coach journey from there which took us down to wherever we were getting this wee boat across to Korcula. It's a wee island. We had a lovely time there with the Mareschka Folk Group and there was singing.

### **So it sounds really vibrant?**

It was it was absolutely gorgeous. It was amazing how communication was easy, especially amongst young children. When the youngsters get together they seem to be able to communicate, they didn't need a language at all.

**I guess they had music as well.**

It was amazing to watch this happening whereas we adults were kind of thinking "Gosh how illiterate we are" and things like this. The kids were having no problems whatsoever.

**They just made it up, made up some signs or taught each other.**

They understood each other perfectly.

**Brilliant.**

It was lovely. Then the second week we moved to Zagreb which was the main city, now which part of Yugoslavia were we at? Yugoslavia was in four sections.

**Right, my geography's not great here.**

We were in Zagreb and there was this international festival, folk festival, there. Everybody Russians etc. were all doing in this parade which was fun. Then we moved north to Ljubljana which was a different culture from the one we just left. We learned a few odd words of Yugoslav of the area we were at and they said "don't use them because they'll pretend they don't understand". Ljubljana was under kind of Austrian influence. Then coming back we got a big boat to Split and I think that took us to Zagreb. I know the Olympic games were held in Split one year. Then we got taken by coach up to Ljubljana, no train was it.

**Did you meet other types of piping in Yugoslavia, other traditions.**

Yes there were, there were different bagpipes because they culture still had pipes but because they weren't like the highland pipes.

**I had an inkling that they've got pipes there. Yes.**

They weren't like the Highland pipe at all.

**That would have been interesting.**

Then we came back by train from Ljubljana back to

**Zagreb did you say? It sounds a really exciting trip for the school. My geography of the former Yugoslavia is**

Well it was the former Yugoslavia. Then we flew home but it had been a lovely lovely stay.

**What an experience!**

It was and then you see it now after the war. Those who did speak English seemed to speak it with an American accent.

**I have a Slovakian family live downstairs from me. The children speak very good English.**

We travelled quite a lot.

**And this was a school band?**

Yes, this was a school band.

**Getting to do all this lovely travelling.**

The new Rector we had with being involved in the Scouts had friends out in America because when he'd worked out in Johnstone, that's near Paisley, he had kind of twinning towns with them and he still kept in touch and he organised a trip to the States for us.

**Wow.**

We were hosted by Maryland, the people he knew, the school there hosted us. Then we went to down South to Virginia Beach because of the American submarine base that was in the Holy Loch.

**Oh right. The connection.**

Do you see the connection, they had all the children at the school and there was a lot of functions went on. So we went as guests.

**They were very fond of the Scots then.**

We went as guests of the American Navy down there and that was an experience and that was lovely too. We went to Williamsburg and went to these theme towns they have and played. We took part in a fourth of July parade which was unbelievable. We took dancers, hired dancers, with us and oh the razzamatazz that went with it. It was unbelievable.

**So you were completely back involved in the piping now?  
Almost by chance with this school.**

Yes all by chance.

**But you'd made your way up to Scotland deliberately.**

Oh yes I had but I mean when I went I never expected all this to go on. Of course we had a lot of football going on in the town

and we had a youth group that used to go out to Germany and take part in games out there so of course the band would accompany them. Then in 1984, Niall retired and they asked would I take over the band. I said “I didn’t think I could apply for this job” I just thought they wanted an instrumental instructor for it. But they said “No, we’d like you to do it”. So I said “That’s ok” and I took over the piping and my responsibilities were I joined the music department but I had done music at college fortunately so I was able to step right into it. My responsibilities were to develop and establish piping as part of the music curriculum because it hadn’t been an actual part of the curriculum. It had been a thing where the piping instructor came in and had a little rota and he heard them and that was it.

**But it was kind of separate from the actual curriculum?**

Completely separate.

**It was just a sort of club almost.**

He had made up his own timetable, now we were to become part of the timetable of the music department.

**This must have been the first school to do that.**

I’ve no idea but that’s what I had to do is develop establishing piping as part of the music curriculum within the Cowal schools from Primary Five right through to Sixth Year Secondary. Now they have done O Grades, well it was O Grades then, but then the Standard Grades.

**In piping?**

In piping, aye, because Kate Macinnes was the first to do it from the school, the piping.

## **And where was Kate?**

She was from Strachur. She's still does a lot with Strachur and District, she's an excellent player, and excellent organiser as well. She was the first one to sit a piping in music in the Grammar School and she passed it with a very, very good pass. Then others followed because my son did, it was O Grades then, he did O Grade music, he took piping and passed it. But Kate was the pioneer. Of all this she was the first, it was lovely and she was a girl [laughter].

## **Of course it would be.**

Which it had to be [laughter]

## **I didn't know that you could actually sit your O Grades or what are now Standard Grades in piping.**

It just started I think when Kate, luckily at the right time, she was in school at the right time to do it when they introduced it as part of the music. This had been going on in Glasgow and I think in the Highlands but it was new to us. It was a new O Grade that had come into the music, you could choose pipes as an instrument which they hadn't been able to do before. Kate did us all proud.

## **Absolutely.**

But that was before I actually took over as piping instructor. As I said we were officially part of the music department and the head of music timetabled the piping for us which was better still because it was official. All I had to do was make up a rota for first and second years. That didn't come within the music curriculum because they didn't really have any set, it didn't work out that I was in the school when they were in their music lessons. So I made up a rota for first and second year and then in third year if they were going in for exams I had to let the

music department know who were going to be doing it for standard grades or O Grades then, or who was going to do it, because they'd started these SQA modules.

**Oh yes.**

And who was doing the module groups rather than the Standard Grade music. They were timetabled accordingly, so they had an hour on their timetable each week for piping. Which was good, it was good from my point of view and it's good for the music department too because we felt like we were working together. As it was we then got a new musical instrumental instructor who loved the pipes and would include us in all his concerts.

**So you began to be really integrated.**

Yes and we would collaborate with the wind band and orchestra giving a wee selection with pipes and orchestral instruments or wind band instruments which was fantastic.

**So actually the orchestra and pipes playing together? Right. And did people write music for that or was there some repertoire there already?**

He adapted, well we kept to our own skill, but he would obviously change the keys of the other instruments to suit the pipes.

**Oh that's great.**

But he had come from the Army and he was used to working with the military bands and the pipe bands so it was easy.

**Not every musician would know how to incorporate pipes.**

No, but he did. He was brilliant at it. With him he organised a trip for the orchestra and the wind band to go to Hungary.



## **Oh great and did the pipers go?**

Oh yes, the pipe band went as well. The pipe band and the wind band we went as a group. We visited Hayden's place at Esterhazy or somewhere? Anyway, we went round there and that was steeped in all these little European villages that had the market squares. Oh they love music, you know there would be a stage set up and you would play for them and they seemed to have a broader musical education than what we have over here.

## **Interesting.**

It is, you know they would come and they would listen and the audiences were terrific, the numbers that used to come. Whereas sometimes when you play over here with the pipe bands that it's just mums, dads, grannies and grandpa's that come and listen.

## **You get more appreciation abroad.**

You don't get the wandering man in the street coming in who don't know anything about it.

**I wonder if that's anything to do with, you were talking about market squares and things in your own home town and some sort of central place where people gather and share things together as a community.**

Yes that's right because I remember in my home town we used to have bandstands in the park and you used to get brass bands playing and different instrumentalists playing and you'd go on and listen to them and the pipe band used to play in the park as well.

**Up in Glasgow just now they're trying to restore some of those bandstands. One in Queens park.**

I always felt when you're abroad, especially in Europe you get this love of music more, it's more for everybody, not just for certain ones, the whole community seem to be steeped in music. It was when we were in Yugoslavia, not Yugoslavia, Hungary, we saw these pipes that looked like they were made out of a goat. One of the girls was playing it, the bag was nothing like the Highland pipe, you try and shove it under your arm and this big thing was hanging down. They didn't seem to have valves or anything that stopped the air. It was quite strange to do. But it was all good fun it was absolutely terrific. It was a good trip and then we went to Italy.

**Well they say Italians love musicians.**

Unfortunately the instrumentalist who had come from the Army had tragically died and we got this younger one who had been a member of the school anyway, he took over and stepped in the breach and took us too Hungary. Then he said wouldn't it be lovely to go to Venice. So anyway somehow this Venice trip emerged and we all went to Venice [laughter].

**Did you play pipes on the gondolas?**

No we didn't. We didn't even play them on the canal buses. They were dreadful, these boats used to come in and they were like cattle boats and you'd get on and you'd think "all these folk cramming onto this" it's a wonder they didn't sink. Your heart was in your mouth.

**Did you do something in Venice?**

We did, we did quite a bit of playing but it was more in the evening because the weather was very, very hot.

**Oh Gosh yes, playing pipes in the heat.**

He had helped to set up a stage.

### **Does that affect tuning or anything? The heat?**

Well the heat does affect the reeds. They dry up so the evening was the best time to play them really. Oh we had a great time, we used to love it. We went on a bus about thirty six or forty hours on a bus but it didn't seem to matter. I couldn't do it now. You didn't mind. Then we also used to when Argyll and Bute were part of Strathclyde, before they had the reorganisation of the boundaries and everything, so we came under Glasgow which came Strathclyde. Our Director of Education was based in Glasgow.

### **This is when it became part of Strathclyde.**

We were with Strathclyde for quite some time which really did a lot for us. Especially the pipe band because the band was doing quite well in competitions at that stage as well and we would ask to go most places. We played for the Moderator at the Church of Scotland, World Youth Rally at the Usher Halls in Edinburgh. We played in the Concert Halls in Glasgow and we played for the Duke of Edinburgh at his awards scheme when he came to Glasgow.

### **Gosh you got everywhere.**

With a result we got asked to represent the youth of Scotland in the VE Celebration in Hyde Park down in London. At the time the exams were on for a lot of the children. But the parents so much wanted their children because they said its part of your history, so they must have come to the decision they didn't have an exam on the Monday or the Friday and if parents wanted their children to go they could go. Unfortunately there was only one child who couldn't go, it was a shame. They had the big parade down to Buckingham Palace, we went in the grounds and stood under the balcony and the Queen and family came out and

then we were directed through the back gardens of the Palace and you came into Hyde Park. There was a huge stage set up and we had to play on that in the evening.

**There must have been hundreds or thousands?**

Oh there was, that was the first time we'd ever experienced being miked.

**Oh, miking bagpipes.**

You know to play on this big stage and having sound tests, it was amazing.

**Oh that would be phenomenal.**

It was. Also we'd had a composer in residence, I don't know exactly what year this was in but I always remember this young girl coming. Sally Beamish she was called and she came and was composing, she wanted to compose this tune but she'd chosen the story of the Lost Pibroch by Neil Munro and the story goes if you've heard the lost pibroch actually played it was usually the men, they would leave the village and the womenfolk disappeared completely. It seemed to have the Pied Piper effect on them.

**So it was a dangerous piece of music.**

The basic story goes these two pipers going through a wood and they came across this old shepherd. They're trying to find out about this lost pibroch. They were playing tunes and the old man was saying no he had heard it and that's not it. They were playing different well know pibrochs, the MacRae's March was one of them and others which were mentioned in the story. They had send to me at Dunoon Grammar School for the piping side of it and Sally was wanting to compose the actual Lost Pibroch herself. She was going to write this pibroch. We spent

some time talking about the structure of the pibroch for her so she knew.

**So you were sort of teaching her a bit about pibroch?  
Sharing your knowledge of it.**

Yes about the structure of it and the variation on the theme and how you had the basic theme, the groundwork which was just a nice melodic air and as they progressed finger work got more complex and then at the very end they went back and played the ground again. She was very very interested in this and she did write the theme, the ground, for this pibroch and I took the theme notes and wrote out the other finger techniques for the other variations. It's really very well done.

**Wow what a lovely collaboration.**

Then she put on this piece of composition in Oban in the Corran Halls and she had children from all other schools playing other various instruments to represent sounds which they had come across to create the effect and the pipers were always in the background but they were never on the stage. Always playing in the background because they'd be too loud otherwise you only had the snippets coming through. They got us as far back as they possibly could [laughter]. The youngsters in the band played snippets from the grounds and if there was any kind of extra finger technique to be done or variation I'd play it in the background. Then at the very very end one piper suddenly appeared walking across the stage playing the ground of the Lost Pibroch. It was very very effective. For Sally to say she knew nothing about pipes or pipe music or anything she did a tremendous job.

**She really took on the idea of piping and learned more about it.**

It must have touched her quite deeply because about a year later I got through the post a tape and a programme and it was the Yehudi Menuhin Trust down in St Martin in the Field and they'd organised this musical evening and Sally played in the string quarters. A very accomplished player and she had written this piece of music and it was kind of bordering on the pibroch to try and blend the instruments together.

### **So the pibroch music on strings?**

Yes. She'd composed this for this wee group and she sent me a copy of it and a copy of the programme and she dedicated it to me. I thought, "Oh that's lovely". I had never given any more thought and then a couple of years after I often thought "I wonder how Sally's getting on" and then I was travelling to one of my wee schools and it was Women's Hour that came on and they were talking about women music composers. This lovely piece of music came on and it was so sad and haunting and they said that was by Sally Beamish. Of course my ears pricked up straight away it was just lovely. They said it obviously comes from the heart because she had just had a miscarriage and of course she brought it out in her music. Then, oh gosh, a year later, I had been put forward for (is this year 2000) I had been put forward for the Yamaha Scottish Instrumental Teacher of the Year award by Argyll and Bute. I didn't hear about it until I got a letter inviting me saying I was in the finals and I was to go to Edinburgh. So of course they wanted all the details about what you had done and things like that. I sent them off. We were interviewed by this distinguished panel of musicians and one of them, we were talking about piping in general and I loved the job, I had a lovely job going around all these wee schools in Argyll teaching piping. The children would so look forward to you coming because some of them would never see another teacher from one week to the next.

**Of course, being so remote.**

It was nice and of course we would play outside too sometimes, much to the amusement of tourists that happened to be there because these squeaks and squeals which came from the pipes would be unbelievable. But they loved it, these little children trying to blow these pipes.

### **And the panel were asking you about all this?**

Yes I was telling them about it and then I mentioned about having done this, the composer in residence coming to Argyll and how we had taken part in this project with other instruments and things like that and what fun it had been. I said, "I often wondered what happened to Sally Beamish who'd done this" and then I heard on the radio her name mentioned and then suddenly one of the panellists said, "Be careful what you say about Sally Beamish because this is her husband". I said, "It's all good, Sally was lovely, a lovely person" and I remember saying that tune was just lovely. He happened to say, "That was me playing that on the cello." It was just delightful. It was good.

### **How did you get on in the finals?**

I was speechless because I won it. My daughter was with me because the first time that she'd been speechless in her life. Then I saw Robert Irvine later on in the night and he said he'd phoned Sally and told her that, she had remembered. He said he'd remembered Sally being quite taken with the pibroch.

### **It really sounds like she has and influenced her music.**

I know she's still composing and has gone from strength to strength.

**I certainly hear her name around in very high regards.  
That's a lovely story.**

It was just out of the blue. Then my pipe band had been doing well because in 1999/2000 we won the World Championships.

### **The World Championship?**

The World Championships in our category we won Novice Juvenile. Yes we won the Worlds that year. Also Champion of Champions so that was the biggest accolade we could ever have, it was good. When I had started teaching the pipes in the school I thought I'd better learn something about managing and teaching a pipe band because I'd been more inclined towards the solo side of things. So I thought, "Right, I'll go to the Royal Scottish Pipe Band Association" because they were doing courses at the time, certification courses. I thought well I'll sit those. So I took a wee group of kids along with me.

### **And would that have been in Glasgow?**

In Glasgow, yes. The first exam the elementary and I was doing it with them. I thought there was no reason why I shouldn't start it. But the instructors took me on one side and said will you just do that paper, they gave me a paper to do and I think they wanted to see whether I knew anything or not. Fortunately they came back and said, "No, we're going to put you up into the next group". I said, "Yes but I'm quite happy to work with the children" and they said, "No, because the paper we've given you was the elementary test exam paper and you got the required marks on it". So I got stuck into the intermediate. I managed to pass and most of the kids managed to get their elementary so we were really pleased. Then I got a letter because I must have done ok in the intermediate, asking me would I go to do the advanced level. I figured why not so I went and did that. I was awarded the Pete Shaw Memorial Gold Medal for being the best student on the advanced course. Then from there I never looked back, I sat my adjudication certification part as well and got through that. No, I sat my instructors first and I did a lot of teaching for the Pipe Band Association.



**And this was outside the school?**

This was outside the school work. Then I took the adjudication certification and became the first female piping adjudicator for the RSPBA.

**When was that?**

Oh gosh, it would have been in the 90's.

**First female.**

First female piping adjudicator they'd had in the RSPBA. I must admit the RSPBA were very, very helpful. I can't praise them enough.

**And there's more.**

Then in the year 2002 I retired. I said I was always going to retire when I was sixty and I did and someone else took over the job.

**But did you still keep playing? Were you still playing?**

Oh I was still involved and I went along to teach at the Strachur and District Piping School which had been going since Niall started it all those years ago. Then when he retired I took over the organising of it and then when I retired it was Kate Paton, the first piper to do the O grade. She's taken it on. She's doing a fantastic job. I go along and teach for her.

**And is she still doing that job?**

Oh yes. I go along and help as one of the instructors. Then Cowal Games rang me and asked would I take over as piping convener for the solo piping convener for the Friday because

they have all the solo piping on the Friday. It's a very big competition where you have the Competing Pipers Association with their grades A, B and C when they restructured their grades. They had so many it did need an overhaul. There was John Angus Smith, he was the instigator and he wrote to us at the games and we were able to accommodate him with a competition for his newly formed C Grade.

### **What does a piping convener do?**

You organise the solo piping. Arrange for all the judges and the stewards and the order of events.

### **So you need to know the set up really well.**

On the day it's co-ordinating everything together because we have the adults on the top field and the juveniles on the bottom field and you co-ordinate between the two. Luckily I have great stewards and they know what they're doing and I can just then go around and see that everything is running smoothly. We introduced also coverings over the platforms.

### **Much needed in Scotland.**

Well it's because of the weather and so it's all taken shape really well. The judges are always very good and willing and helpful. So I still am involved quite a lot in piping.

### **It sounds like you're very involved.**

Both my grandchildren play the drums.

### **With a pipe band?**

Yes. They played with the Inveraray and District Juvenile Band which is run by, the whole piping in Inveraray is run by Stuart Liddle and he himself is one of Scotland's top players and I go

along and just kind of give a wee help with the wee pipers in the band. Kate does too, she goes along. We go along and try and help Stuart.

**That sounds great.**

The best we can.

**You were showing me earlier a lovely wee book that you did for children. I don't know how you pronounce that.**

The Feadan. It means chanter in Gaelic.

**I'm really admiring the lovely chanter pictures. Wee cartoon chanter.**

I wrote that years ago in the 1980's. I think it's got it on.

**'81.**

My twin sister and I she gave me a hand so we put both our names to the book. We dedicated it to Rose Fletcher our first tutor. Because she was in the age group that that was written for. She used to have lots of little ones, her grandchildren and my children when they were young. It was good fun.

**It's a lovely book.**

It was just imagination and it was just trying to get the children to even look after their own wee chanters and how to maintain them.

**And a story is a lovely way to do that. A wee character.**

We decided to let the chanter tell the story. [laughter].

**Lovely, it's really lovely. You've got another book here as well that you've produced.**

Oh the tutor book. That emerged after I'd retired, I did that in 2002 even though I had kind of started on it before then. It was just that when I first started teaching, levels of abilities in the school, there was no books to cover. Not what I wanted. I'm sure there must have been one or two, the College of Piping used to have one. I wanted to have one that taught the children to help to read the music as well and so to start the music right from the beginning. I just used to do them in sections. I thought there was no lesson plans either, so I made up all my own lesson plans. This was a way of having lesson plans made out. I did them book one. Of course it didn't work out with some children that they had one lesson each week and then they did the second lesson the next week because some of them, if they were bright enough, they moved at their own pace. So they could get through the first book in the first couple of weeks, whereas others it would take them a lot longer. But they all moved at their own pace and they all had their own bit that they had to practice and you know you could move them on. So I had the three books at different stages and then they got onto bagpipes and then the fun started. Of course it was so different to the chanter, co-ordinating the blowing.

**Goodness.**

As all pipers will know. I think we must be the only instrument that doesn't actually get taught on the instrument that you end up playing.

**Oh yes, I can't think of another.**

A flute, you play on the flute. A clarinet you play on the clarinet. The bagpipe you play on the chanter. Then you get this bag with lots of pipes stuck in it which you have to keep

blowing and fingering. Some take longer than others to adjust to it. It's just a thing you've got to be patient with.

**Do you remember yourself the first time you attached them.**

Oh God yes, they were falling all over the place. Squeaks and squeals. My Mother was deaf, perhaps it was a good thing she was. She used to send us into the garden and my sisters used to go wild with us "Can't you stop those two playing".

**I was going to say, what's it like, what would your neighbours think, where could you practice?**

They thought it was quite funny but I think if you played them too long but I think when you're learning you can't blow them too long. Because they just don't stay up. We came from an era where there was no synthetic pipes bags. You had sheepskin bags or hide bags which you had to keep lubricated with this smelly special seasoning they called it. And you poured it in when you were heating it up. But we survived it.

**How did you get your first pipes and things like that.**

I got them in Manchester. I went to a music shop and they had some in so I got these and I didn't know one set of bagpipes from the next and they turned out to be a set of Hardie bagpipes which were the best you can get at that time and it was in the 50's when Hardie was making his best drones. Pipers will understand what I mean by that. I've still got.

**The first pipes you got, you've still got them now?**

Yes.

**And that's the 1950's you say?**

1950's. They were real ivory mounts which you can't get now because of the embargo on ivory. Then an old Aunt who died left my twin and I some money, I had my pipes silver mounted, still kept the ivory but had silver mounts put on as well.

**Have you played them all these years?**

Yes.

**You've not had to get different ones.**

No. I've had different bags put on them, because the bags don't last all that time but the pipes do.

**Right, I didn't know that.**

And chanters you change, because the pitch of the chanters gone higher. If you're playing with a band you have match chanters. The old Hardy chanter was very low pitched, I mean really low pitched. With all these new drone reeds that are coming out it doesn't blend with them at all. I don't like too high a pitched sounding pipe and especially in piobaireachd. I think the slightly lower, but the Hardie's was really low compared. But apart from changing the chanters I've still got the same pipes. All those years. They are now, because I am coming up for seventy, so I've had my pipes, they must be about fifty, sixty years. I did have a set before then, a second hand set which I'd bought then Mum realised I was very interested in piping and decided to buy me a set. This new set was for my fourteenth birthday even though I'd been playing them since I was eight. Nine, I got my bagpipes and then I got my new set when I was fourteen. My twin sister got a set as well. She's still got hers, they sit under the bed most of the time.

**You were saying you still play as well?**

I get them out now and then and give them a wee blow. But I practice chanter a lot. And I've still got my very first practice chanter I had when I was eight years old.

**That's a great thing to have.**

I've still got that little wooden one.

**Then was it in 2005 you got another award.**

Oh I did yes, the biggest accolade anybody can get and it was Services to Piping and that was the Balvenie Medal issued the Glenfiddich competition. William Grant and Sons run the competition and it's a big solid silver medal with the picture of the William Grant on it. I was awarded that. That is the best kept secret in piping, you do not know you are going to get it. I was actually at the Glenfiddich that year and I was asked to go to give a wee talk on Rose Fletcher and she'd been given it about five years before. I think because she was coming up for her ninetieth birthday they were asking would I give her this. Then somebody began to talk about the recipient of the Balvenie Medal and I thought, "Oh gosh that sounds like me".

**You started to recognise somebody then?**

I started to recognise various things coming out. It was just a tremendous feeling it's like in a fairy tale. To me that's the most prestigious award you can get in piping. Everything I'd done in piping I'd done it because I'd loved doing it and enjoyed doing it.

**I can tell, just talking to you.**

I did really and I loved teaching. The years just seemed to fly by. I just loved every single minute of it. That is the biggest accolade of my piping career. It's one thing I always will remember.

## **What a wonderful moment for you.**

I don't know I just do what anybody else does who loves bagpipes.

**Well it sounds like you really inspired a lot of young people in the schools to get involved and got them involved in all those trips.**

And they play in bands, they come up to me, I go to pipe band competitions and you see them some in Grade One bands and you think "oh gosh".

## **This is where they started**

I think what helped me to enjoy it, I know some piping instructors when they take piping, they just want everybody to be good at it. I look on pipes as a musical instrument and they are to be enjoyed. You'll get some who are born competitors and you will take them to the heights they can go and you've got others who just love to play. Then of course you've got others who don't really want to take pipes but Mums, Dads or somebody really want them to play. Then when we had the Americans, "Oh Mum wants me to play the pipes" they were lovely these American children because they were so open. They would come waving a whole chanter one week and the next week they would say, "I've got my chanter, but I've not practiced, it gives Mum a headache". I'm not surprised, then you'd come in the next week with the bottom half of the chanter, "Oh I've no reed". I'd say, "Well it doesn't matter I've got spare ones". Then the week after they'd come with the bottom half, "I've lost the top half". Next week they'd come without the bottom half but the top half. I'd say, "Never mind, we've got a ruler you can finger". Eventually they'd be stopped. But they were so funny. You have to accept that you're going to have a lot of failures as well as a lot of



successes. It's the same with these school pipe bands. They come in circles, some years you have really good bands and then other years you've come in bottom and you're starting again. It's just the mix of players you have and the attitude of these pipers and then latterly I got a group that was as keen as me and it's wonderful when you get that.

### **Things really happen.**

Oh they're superb. Both in solo and band so you had the combination of expert finger work and the group playing as well.

### **That must have been a magical time.**

I mean it really was lovely, but I mean you have your ups and downs and you've got to accept that. Foremost accept that it's to be enjoyed because I know some will say it's not for me and they get frustrated and they start to get stressed with it. They shouldn't do that.

### **A lot of it seems to centre around competition.**

Yes it does and they think if they don't do well in competition they've failed. Now that's not true, they've got children playing bagpipes, they've got them doing an interest, a hobby, which keeps them off the street. Parents know where they are. It's a healthy interest and is something that will last all their lives, they meet new people and it's one big family a happy family. It's fantastic.

### **It was a real community among the pipers.**

Yes, I can go to the Highland games and go anywhere within the piping circle on my own, you don't need to go with anybody. As soon as you get there everybody's the same whether you're a piper or a drummer.

**You're all part of the clan.**

That's all that matters you know.

**It sounds lovely.**

It is lovely. I feel still strongly part of it even though you kind of move from one thing to the next and you move in a different direction but piping's piping.

**Great.**

I know I'm so thankful that when I was eight I took them up and I've been lucky with that. All the steps I've been through have given me some wonderful experiences.

**It sounds magical. The places and the different people.**

You know it's another world. As I say you've done things and met people who you wouldn't normally mix with. It's just so nice.

**Brilliant. I wanted to ask you about another wee area of piping because the part of the project is women in piping and what it's like in particular to be a woman and be a piper. What that's meant? I've been reading a lot of different opinions and experiences of people and I just wondered if you would say a wee bit about that side of things?**

I think when I first started piping I was young. You were looked on more or less as a young girl, you know a youngster. The men obviously were much stronger and could blow. Some of them didn't like the idea of lady pipers, female pipers and they would make it quite clear but you didn't let it bother you. I never let it bother me.

**It obviously didn't stop you.**

That is the way they'd been schooled. That is their way and they're entitled to their opinion.

**Did it ever stop you entering a competition?**

No, never. One time women couldn't enter competitions.

**I was reading something about that. There were certain competitions.**

I think there was one, Rona McDonald I think. She received the Balvenie Medal a couple of years ago and she was saying then that she couldn't enter the Northern Meeting because they didn't allow female pipers. Now she was an excellent player and she could have won a Gold Medal but they wouldn't let her enter. It was so male dominated. But you see I didn't enter the Northern Meeting or things like that because I'd only just, I was quite happy to centre on local games and things and doing the wee circuit and enjoying that. I did love solo piping and I could appreciate the really good players. I did play in the Northern Meeting a few times, I was lucky enough to get.

**And has that changed now? That women can do it.**

Women can enter now yes. But Rhona was the forerunner of everything. She does a lot of Gaelic as well along with the piping and pibroch. Her and Alan McDonald do quite a bit, they talk about pibroch and the Gaelic music. They bring it to life. She's a wonderful lady. In fact all the ladies in piping are wonderful because they just love playing. I don't think you go out to say "Oh I'm better than the men" or try to compete against the men. But you have to compete against the men because it's a piper your competing against. Whether it's male or female it doesn't really matter. It's the piping that counts.

I've probably been very lucky with my experiences in that line. I think some women have come across some antagonism but I've been lucky. Even in the RSPBA they couldn't have been more helpful.

**Is that the organisation that actually doesn't allow women?**

No I was the first lady piping judge in there. They're the Pipe Band Association. There's lots of girls and women. You don't see that antagonism in there, I've never come across it.

**That's good to hear and you've been very involved in lots of areas of the piping.**

Then of course it's usually some of the snidey remarks are made by people who are not very able. So you just think "hmmm".

**Just let that pass.**

Don't get drawn into it.

**When I was reading about women in piping I came across some stuff about the dress that you wear with it being primarily a man's attire.**

It doesn't need to be. When I played in solo piping I never wore the kilt. I used to have a skirt and a wee jacket, a wee velvet waistcoat and it wasn't even a kilt a wore. It was just a cotton skirt and wee heels.

**You got to wear heels, with your pipes. So is there a sort of official dress for men and women pipers?**

I think if you're a lady, they don't like to see you too male orientated in dress. Because it doesn't score any points on the way you play, it's how you play that counts. The only time I really began to wear a kilt was when I played with band.

Because you all want to look alike. I always had a tartan skirt, a wee waistcoat and a white blouse.

**Great, great. That's good to hear that it's never been a problem. That's really heartening to hear.**

You find too that, alright your pipe may not be as loud and heavy as a man's, but then physically you're not built the same. You don't have the same power or strength. As long as it's sweet and balanced and the tune is musical and well played.

**It's the music that counts.**

Yes.

**Just to finish off, what do you think are the best things about piping or the benefits of piping.**

The best aspects of piping are I think, it's just the wild discordant sound it makes. It's not a true scale. There's something primitive about it and yet it can produce all these lovely, lovely melodies and it's only got a scale of nine notes. You don't have any sharps or flats or things like that. If you're playing in a group you can have harmonies and things like that. It's such a basic instrument really when you think about it. It's just a bag with pipes stuck in it. Some of these bagpipe makers now have got it down to a fine art, the sound you can get from the actual wood they use on them. They're amazing. Also they wouldn't get that amazing sound if the person playing it couldn't master the instrument very well.

**What do you think are the benefits of being a piper or being involved in piping.**

It keeps you fit.

**Ah yes.**

It's apparently very good for asthma because you're blowing out all the time. I used to have a lot of children in my band who were asthma sufferers and had inhalers and it did help them. It controlled their breathing out. Since I stopped playing over the past few years I seem to have developed asthma which I've never had in my life. Anyway I went back to blowing my chanter a bit more and you can hear it, it does help.

**That's a wonderful plus.**

It is. And it gets you out in the fresh air. Some of the days you play you think "I must be mad, standing in the middle of a field" and it's gales and everything else. You think what am I doing and then you go back the next year. You're still standing in a field and it's throwing it down.

**What draws you back to part of this community.**

I think it's the piping and pipe band community. You're all there for the common thing, you love pipes and everybody listens to a band they give their opinions. At the end of the day it's the person who's walking around with the pen and the board, it's their decision that counts. It's so subjective it really is a subjective thing.

**It's very hard to be objective about music. Well that's fantastic.**

It's good fun. And you can be any walk of life. I don't know what they do or where they live. The pipers they're so and so.

**And you know you'll always meet them at the gatherings.**

It doesn't matter, backgrounds or anything else. You've got a common purpose and aim and the bagpipe draws you together. It must say something for the instrument.

**Well that's superb. Thank you so much.**

You're very welcome.

**It's been lovely to hear. I'm sure there's more I can ask you.  
I might think of more over lunch.**

I know we had a discussion at the beginning about the actual musical side of it.

**Well I'll switch this off now.**