



NOTING THE TRADITION

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This is James Beaton for ‘Noting the Tradition,’ and I’m here today with Major Bruce Hitchings, who is a soldier and a piper and a native of New Zealand. We’re going to talk to Bruce about his life and times in piping. So good morning Bruce and welcome.

Good morning James.

So Bruce, you’re a native of New Zealand, born and brought up in Hunterville in the north island, is that right?

Born in Hunterville, but not brought up there really, mainly brought up in Palmerston North, which is about a hundred miles north of Wellington and a hundred and fifty miles south of Hunterville.

Right. Okay. Is there much of a piping community there, much of piping background?

Well, I suppose today it’s more famous for the Manawatu Scottish Pipe Band that comes from Palmerston North. Although in those days I did play for Manawatu Scottish, many years ago, it was the first pipe band I played for, and of course Manawatu Scottish today is worldwide known. But really there’s not that much piping in Palmerston North, a lot of it is in Wellington and Australia and of course here in Britain.

Indeed. How did you get your start in piping? Was there piping in the family? Did your dad or any uncles or anything play?

Yes. I suppose the main piper was really my great grandfather, he came from Caithness, he was a Gunn and he was the one who went out to New Zealand, and I actually play his old MacDougall bagpipes from the 1880s, so he was the main influence. My grandfather played, but not to a great level and he gave me some lessons, and both my uncles play, and this is on my mother’s side. So that’s really where the piping comes from.

Yes. Right. So they got you started presumably with the instrument. And was there somebody who was influential in teaching you in the early days?

Certainly. I started in Palmerston North with a chap called Grant Ogilvie, who was a very strict teacher, but a very accurate man in technique and so forth, and quite demanding but that's what I needed. Then I played with the Manawatu Scottish for a number of years, and they actually won Grade 2 in the, well, the B Grade as it was called then, in Auckland in 1972. I was still at school, but just left school and started an apprenticeship in cabinet making. But after a couple of years once you go up to Grade 1 or in those days went up to Grade 1 in New Zealand, you couldn't compete unless you had twelve pipers, and Manawatu didn't have the twelve pipers.

So I think at the age of seventeen or I transferred the apprenticeship down to Wellington so that I could play with the City of Wellington, which was the top pipe band in New Zealand at that stage. And they were coming over to Scotland in 1975, and that stage I was probably influenced more by Frank MacKinnon, who was the Pipe Major of the City of Wellington and his brother, Lou MacKinnon, had been Pipe Major of Manawatu, so they had an influence on my piping as well. But I wasn't really playing much piobaireachd or anything at that stage, but playing a lot of light music and winning some prizes in New Zealand at the New Zealand championships, not major prizes, but getting seconds and thirds in the open piping.

Who were your contemporaries in the solo scene in New Zealand at that point?

Well, you still had Murray Henderson, he was still there. I think he came over in about 1973, so Murray was playing. But you had John Hanning still competing at the high level, Iain Hines, and Frank MacKinnon himself. So I was competing against these top players. Allan Dodd was still competing in fact, and Donald Bain.

Yes, Donald Bain, yes. I remember hearing Donald Bain in Scotland in the seventies when I was a teenager, a cracking player. So he was still very active in the scene. Lewis Turrell presumably had...?

He didn't compete much, but he did a lot of the judging, and Lewis was always very happy to give comments and praise and help.

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Yes. He seems to be a key figure really in piping in New Zealand in the sixties and seventies and the eighties and nineties as well.

A very, very capable man, what he did with the bands. But also I heard him play about eight years ago in New Zealand and he's still playing at a high level, a great player.

Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. So the City of Wellington came over to Scotland in what, '75?

'75.

Yes. And presumably played in Grade 1 here at that point.

Played at Grade 1. Came over for six weeks, didn't do the Tattoo, had a week in London. I'm not quite sure how that was organised, stayed in an army barracks down in Hounslow. But we competed at the World's that year, that was down in England.

In Nottingham?

That's it. Not Nottingham.

Or Derby?

Derby.

Oh no, Birmingham?

Derby. Derby.

Derby. Right. Okay.

But then we went over to Canada with the Grade 1 bands at that thing in Toronto. There were ten bands on the plane. I was twenty years old [laughter].

Yes, and seeing life.

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Well, quite the influence obviously to be in the company of all these bands and flying to Canada with them. I had a week in Canada and competed in Canada, and came back into Scotland, flew back into Prestwick, and then we stayed at Pollock Halls in Edinburgh, and we competed for the next three weeks at Dunoon, at Shotts, at Rothesay then.

Rothesay. Yes. Aye.

So I played at Oban in the solos. I didn't win a prize, but I played.

So quite an extended tour. And how did the band do? Was it quite a challenge coming straight into Grade 1?

It definitely was. The band came over and sound wise we didn't have it. I think we changed chanters halfway through to the new Warmac chanters, and the MacAllisters were involved, we spent some time at Shotts. So sound wise we improved. Drumming of course was toiling because although Wayne Hobbs had been over, he was a leading tip and played in Scotland for a year or two, we were well behind in drumming. So in those days of course the bands we spent about two years raising the money, nobody paid individually, we raised the money through car raffles and street collections and all that. So I think the band was a bit disappointed with the results, but realistically probably expected too much when we came.

Sure. Sure. I think yes, then found out what the standard was here and certainly something to aspire to I suppose, and of course pre-YouTube days, pre-internet and all the rest of it, very difficult to get a sense of what the standard would have been like here at that time.

Correct. Correct. And I think it was a good learning curve for the band, we didn't disgrace ourselves, but we weren't certainly in the top six, which I think some people might have expected, but I think we were in the top twelve.

Aye. So now, did you go back then at that point or did you stay on?

No, no, I went back to New Zealand. I was living down in Wellington and I'd finished my apprenticeship, and the guy that owned the company I worked for he got cancer and they brought in a manager and I didn't really see eye-to-eye with him, so it was pretty much on impulse, I just jumped on my motorbike one day, went down and bought a one-way ticket to Scotland. [Laughter]

Okay. So we've spoken to Murray, he took the boat, six weeks and all the rest of it. I take it you flew back.

I flew over, yes. [Laughter]

Okay. So a one-way ticket to Scotland and you're back here and where do you head for?

Well, funny, it was August time, so I came over and spent a couple of days in Edinburgh, and I got on a train and went up to Oban, and just listened, because I was too late to enter, so I listened to Oban, but met many nice persons. I remember Evan MacRae talking to me, and Tom Speirs very kindly offered to give me a lift down to Darvel and I was going onto Dunoon, and that started a long friendship with Tom Speirs.

I then though went up to Dundee and settled in Dundee. Jimmy MacIntosh helped me, he had a pal that was involved in a building company, so I got a job as a sort of shop-joiner, making cupboards and windows and doors and stuff. So having got the job in Dundee, I settled there, this was in '76, and started a few lessons with Jimmy, but also I had quite a few lessons, most of the lessons with Murray.

Right. Yes, he would have been well settled in Scotland by that time.

He was well settled and married.

Yes. And would have won his first gold medal by that time.

He'd won his first gold medal by that stage, yes. And doing well, doing very well.

Yes. And going to the Nicol-Brown...

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Yes. Brown was dead, but I think Nicol was just ... maybe.

Yes. So that was that, and presumably that took you on with your light music and with your piobaireachd and things like that as well.

More with the piobaireachd, because Jimmy and Murray it was mainly piobaireachd and getting into the Silver Medal. But then we were playing at... Geoff Ross had come over from Ross Bags, and he had shared a flat with me in Wellington, with another chap called John Paterson. But Geoff had come over and Geoff and I shared a flat in Dundee, and Geoff was tinkering synthetic reeds then and different things, you know?

Yes. Ah huh.

So we were playing one time at some games and the judge was Colonel G.B. Murray, Graham Murray.

Yes. I know the individual.

He was the Commanding Officer of the TA Regiment, although he was a full-time Queen's Own Highland Officer, he was a Commanding Officer of the TA Regiment at Perth. And he wrote to us and said "come along and join the TA and I'll pay you to play the pipes." Which he did, which was fantastic. [Laughter]

Right. And that got you started with your army connection.

I was playing in the TA. And really he was very clever, he slowly drip-fed me the idea of joining the regulars and I joined the regulars on what they called an 'S Type Engagement' a special type, for one year, and to go to the Queen's Own Highlanders with Iain Morrison being the Pipe Major, the world famous Iain Morrison. But also I'd been at Inverness and seen the likes of Robert Barnes who won the Silver Medal, and Pete Fraser and all these top players who really seemed to be enjoying themselves, getting paid for it and winning prizes. So I thought the Queen's Own would be a good bet. [Laughter]

You bet. So off to the Queen's Own, and under Iain Morrison.

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Under Iain Morrison. What G.B. didn't tell me, Colonel G.B. didn't tell me, was that I had to do my basic training and all that, and my first year was six months basic training and then off to Crossmaglen. [Laughter]

Yes. A wee bit of a shock to the system I can imagine.

But I think he was quite clever in that he just told me in wee bits.
[Laughter]

Yes. So the basic training would be what, Glencorse was it?

Glencorse, yes.

For six months and then...

Five months.

Five months, and then off to the regiment presumably after that.

Yes.

What about piper training at that point? You presumably were able to play and you were able to play and all the rest of it by that point, so I guess was no piper training factored into that then?

Not at basic training, not for adults. The junior soldiers had piper training, they were the ones between sixteen and eighteen. At that stage I was twenty-two or twenty-three, so straight into adults and no piping really for the whole time in basic training. But then off to the regiment and of course just being part of that band, and I think the whole time with the Queen's Own when we were younger I didn't really appreciate, none of us appreciated just how good a pipe corps we had, the calibre of the players. I'd already mentioned Robert Barnes who won the first Silver Medal, and Pete Fraser, Peter Fraser won the Strathspey and Reel at age eighteen before grading, so he was in the Former Winners at eighteen. Roddy McCourt, Alasdair Gillies, Niall Matheson, Michael Gray.

Was D.J. MacIntyre...?

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D.J. MacIntyre and all these guys that are of top quality.

Yes. That's a body of very, very good players. Under a man who was a magnificent player himself.

Yes. But we didn't really appreciate that. But you learnt so much because even though you weren't maybe getting formal tuition, when you played your pipes you knew they were listening to you and when they played their pipes you were listening to them, in the billet, in the accommodation. But we did learn off each other and of course we went to competitions together. We'd all go off in one car or in two cars or on a train somewhere.

And once you'd got to the regiment and were in the pipe band was there formal, you were talking there about an informal way of listening and learning, was there a more formal piping education as well and exams and all this kind of thing?

Well, not in the regiment, but mainly through the Army School. So what you had to do was get up to get nominated to go to the castle, and you did what at that time was called the Senior Piper's Course, which was a six week course which was run at the castle in conjunction with the Pipe Major's Course. And some of the students on the Pipe Major's Course would help teach the senior pipers with part of their training.

Part of their development, yes.

And at the end of those six weeks you would be recommended to go back on the Pipe Major's Course. Now, the Pipe Major's Course is six months long and you had to have that before you could be promoted to Sergeant or to Pipe Major. So that was a very prestige thing and you had to wait for your turn and you had to get the recommendation from the Senior Course and then it was up to the regiment and the Pipe Major when you would be recommended to go back on the Pipe Major's Course because there would be quite a number of people waiting.

Sure. And there'd be all sorts of things that the army would be looking for you to do in between and all that kind of thing.

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You'd have a routine and so forth. But in those days there was only one person a year that could go through that course, and of course you couldn't be promoted until you'd got the course. I was very, very lucky in that because I'd joined on the S Type Engagement, I only did a year and the regiment was going off to Hong Kong, and in 1979 I won the Silver Medal at the Argyllshire Gathering, and it had fifty-four competitors, it wasn't limited in those days.

Right. That's not a competition, that's an ordeal I think.

[Laughter] And the regiment was due to go to Hong Kong in 1980 so I didn't sign on and they said to me "We want you to sign on," and I said "Well, I've come all the way from New Zealand and I don't want to go particularly to Hong Kong, I've been there, I don't want to go there for two years and miss out on the piping." So they made me an offer I couldn't refuse really, they said that I could stay behind and do the Senior Piper's Course and they'd already spoken to Captain Andrew Pitkeathly, and then I would stay up at the castle and go onto the Pipe Major's Course. It didn't make me the most popular guy in the Pipe Band.
[Laughter]

I'm sure it probably wouldn't, no.

Because I just jumped about six or seven guys to go to the front of the queue to get the course, but I did have to sign on for six years. But I did that and no regrets at all, thirty odd years later I was still in the army. That was a great experience to be up at the castle, particularly with Captain Andrew Pitkeathly, and it was his last course and he was so knowledgeable, he was such a great teacher on piobaireachd.

And he used to come and judge junior competitions at Inveraray when I was a youngster and I thought he was a tremendous man. I really thought he was an absolute gentleman.

An absolute gentleman. A modest man, but what a great player.

Yes. Now, I've never heard him play, but I think his track record speaks for itself.

He didn't like competing, so he didn't. He won the Gold Medal in 1949, after Donald MacLeod. He had lessons from Donald in Fort George, and then when he was the Queen's Piper from '66 until '74 I think, he had every summer with Bob Brown and Bob Nicol and he just soaked up all the knowledge of them, and he was very, very happy to pass on the knowledge. But he didn't see competing though as just... more to play pibroch and to play it properly and understand it and if you did that then you'd win the prizes. He wasn't interested in teaching people to win prizes; he used to make that quite clear. But he was very happy to teach people piobaireachd, and tunes, once you'd learnt the tune he'd move on, and he wouldn't just teach you four tunes, because Alasdair and myself and Gordon Walker, we all went to Andrew, right up to his death, but he wouldn't just teach you four tunes for the year to play in a gold medal, once you'd played the tunes you'd have to play other tunes.

Yes. So it was actually about really perfecting your education as an all round piobaireachd player.

Exactly. Yes. To make sure you had the knowledge and understanding, so that when you won the medal if you were fortunate enough, that you could move on.

And that you were a rounded player as well, yes.

And going back to the course, because I was very fortunate, we would go into Andrew's office for piobaireachd and then you'd come out and Big Angus would be standing, he was the Pipe Major and Angus would wave you into his office and he'd take you in and you'd be playing marches strathspeys and reels.

Yes. One of the great march, strathspey and reel players.

That was the only course because it was Andrew's last and Angus's first. So it was a great opportunity, a really fantastic time.

Yes. And who were the other instructors there at that point?

There were only the two.

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Only the two?

Yes. Because on the Pipe Major's Course there was only about six, although I think there was ten on our course. But Angus was at his top form, that's when he won the Falkirk Tryst in '81, he was winning the Glenfiddich, he was on top form then. He took a lot of knowledge from Andrew Pitkeathly as well, particularly on the piobaireachd side.

Yes. Who had taught Andrew Pitkeathly?

Originally taught by his father. And then he went into the Argylls and then he was Corporal with Donald MacLeod up at Fort George at the Highland School, so he got that knowledge. And then the other knowledge he got obviously through the Bobs, they'd got the understanding of pibroch. But Ian McLellan of the Strathclyde Police, he was in the Argylls under Andrew Pitkeathly, and he's told me several times that he's not modeled himself, but he took a lot of the way of Andrew. And there are a lot of similarities there, the quiet manner.

Yes. But of course, well, I suppose Ian never really went in for the pibroch very much, but with the light music. So you're at the castle, you're getting taught class tuition daily. What happens next?

Well, back to the regiment, but only for a short time and then I got posted up to Aberdeen, which was the boys' Service, and Iain Morrison was the Pipe Major there, he was up there as Pipe Major, so I was back under Iain again to get general tuition, still competing, winning prizes, I think I got a second in the March and a second in the Strathspey & Reel at Inverness. Winning prizes, but no major prizes. But then in '85 I went back to the regiment as, '84, sorry, I went back to the regiment as Pipe Sergeant, so I got very rapid promotion, once again not making me the most popular person. But I got that back as Pipe Sergeant, and I didn't really compete again because I'd seen other people and I did soldiering courses and I dedicated myself more to the job of being Pipe Sergeant, Platoon Commander I was, and I gave up the solo piping side.

Right. You were actually responsible for a group of soldiers and all the rest of it and that must be time consuming business.

Well, I could also see the way the army was changing and although I didn't have to, I went off and did this soldiering course, I found them very easy, in fact Angus had said to me soldiering was common sense and fitness, and basically a lot of that is if you have the right attitude and you're reasonably fit, it's pretty easy.

It's fairly straight forward, aye.

So anyway, and then of course I got to Pipe Major in 1986 and just dedicated myself to doing that, but I was also the Platoon Commander, but the pipes and drums also had to become the SF, the machine gun fire, sustained fire, the machine gun Platoon. So I did all those courses as well, I did the Senior Brecon; I did the military type courses.

Sure. Who had been the Pipe Major prior to you?

Ali Reese.

Right. Okay. Yes.

Who composed Raigmore and other tunes.

Yes. Sure.

But at that time I still had a great band, I was very, very fortunate that the band had some of the names I mentioned, Alasdair Gillies came back as my Pipe Sergeant, and then I had Niall Matheson and D.J. MacIntyre, Michael Grey and a lot of other good players. I think in '86 we won thirteen prizes at the Northern Meetings between the various grades, with Alasdair winning the Former Winners, down to...

There's a nice photograph that I've received from D.J. which is of I think, himself, Donald MacKay, Niall Matheson and Alasdair Gillies, and they had all picked up prizes in the light music at the Northern Meeting.

Fantastic, yes.

It's a cracking photograph.

Of course there's another name, Donald MacKay.

Donald MacKay, yes.

There are just so many good players. Just about all the guys in that band went on to make a living when they left the army, through piping, which I thought was great as well.

Yes. Which is excellent. Yes, absolutely. So Pipe Major.

Pipe Major of the regiment and not doing so much on the solo side, but running the band, shifted to Germany, obviously did tours in Northern Ireland and so forth, kept the band going well. We didn't have the opportunity to compete much as a band, we did pretty well, we did in grade 2, but once again the drumming, from the Highlands you don't pick up so many top drummers that are probably Central Belt, it's easier to get drummers, you know. But however, we did well, but the main focus of the regiment really was on solo playing, and every year, even when we were in Belize or when we were away, we always sent at least four to six guys back to compete around the games and gave them the opportunity.

And that was then much encouraged by the regiment?

Very much. And the playing of piobaireachd and the tradition was encouraged by the regiment. The regiment was very proud of its history, the fact that Donald MacLeod and D.R. McLennan and John MacDonald of Inverness were part of the regiment's history, Willie the Muc just so many, Iain MacFadyen, and John MacDougall.

And Hugh MacRae, people like that. Yes. There's a nice photograph that I've seen of about the 1970's, all the Queen's Own Cameron and Highlanders and Seaforths, that won the Gold Medal.

That's a great photo that, yes. And just with Iain Morrison and he'd just won the medal and I think they'd put it together, yes.

Yes. And D.R. was there as well. Yes, absolutely, yes.

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So the regiment was... which made it quite easy to be the Pipe Major, you had great support, although as Pipe Major in an army regiment people think it should be easy, but it's not that easy. You're stuck in the middle, you have to keep the officers happy and their expectations of what they want from the band, but then you have to keep the guys happy as well, you're the sort of middle man between the two. But they're a great bunch of guys and it was a very good band and a big band, thirty strong, twenty odd pipers.

But then in '92, well, in '91 we had a busy year; in 1990 we went to Belfast and did a tour in Belfast. When we came back from that Alasdair came, he wasn't there and when we came back from Belfast he came back as my Pipe Sergeant. Then we were deployed later that year to the Gulf War, so in '91 we were in the Gulf War and then when we came back from the Gulf War we were only back for about three or four months and we went on an American tour, where we toured America, North America and Canada for three months, nearly three months, and the last show we did was in Madison Square Gardens, I played the night, it was solo and I played the solo I think the first time in the tour.

There's not much point in being the boss if you can't... [Laughter]

[Laughter] But then I said I handed over to Alasdair. So that was a sort of an official handover, if you like, Alasdair took over the band. And I got posted for about a year and a half to the Depot at Glencorse, which was the, Milton Bridge which was part of Glencorse, which was the junior soldiers, and then went up to the castle in '93 as the Senior Pipe Major.

So you were teaching, was it beginners really at Glencorse?

A lot of beginners. But at that stage we were still recruiting guys that could play. Later on we just ended up training soldiers to be pipers, but at that time we were still getting guys coming in that could play. And then of course in '93 I was very fortunate and honoured to get the job at the castle as a Senior Pipe Major Chief Instructor, and really the job that Angus had had and if you want really to back, Willie Ross and John MacLellan and great footsteps to be following. Back in the old school and it was just a great time to be there and be responsible for teaching the

future of the army, as we were still getting through at that stage some great players, Niall Matheson was still coming through Donald McKay came up on the course, and these sort of guys.

Who was the Director at that point?

Gavin. Sorry.

Gavin...

Gavin Stoddart.

Gavin Stoddart was the Director, yes.

He was the Director the whole time I was there. Gavin was there from 1990 until 2004. So the Pipe Major's Course lasted for a year and then you had the Tattoo and that was a yearly rotation. In 2000 I was finishing my twenty-two years regular service and I was all set to leave, and Brigadier Hughie Munro, and at that time the army was starting to have trouble recruiting pipers, so he took me out for lunch and I ended up getting commissioned into the TA, but to set up a cadet pipes and drums centre, and I helped develop the whole cadet piping and drumming throughout Britain, but mainly in Scotland, and to run the TA side of piping and drumming as well. So that was me until a year and a half ago, until 2010 I was involved in and we set up, we had a very good set up with the cadets, developed a whole structured learning system using actually the PDQB.

Yes, and the kind of exams that we do through here and all the rest of it, yes.

It worked well on the cadets because when you have weekends or camps you can put the cadets into different categories, who's on level 2 and who's on level 1, who's got this and who needs to work. So you could work that way for their personal development, but then obviously put them together for band practices to get those skills as well. It's a great organisation for kids to come together to have weekends away, to be in a structured learning, but also in a structured place for a lot of them. We run

camp up in Inverness or a whole week and we have almost two hundred cadets, boys and girls.

Any noticeable name pipers come through that system?

Ben Duncan has come through it. There's probably more, I just can't think at the moment. But certainly Ben Duncan was one. And quite a few that are in the regular service where they go on obviously to... if they're thinking about joining the army or the military, they're as well going into the cadets to see if they like that type of way of life, it's not a recruiting tool, but it's there.

No, but it lets them see if it's what they like doing and stuff like that.

I think like a lot of youth organisations it also gives any of the kids involved confidence, and you certainly see that, you see them come in quite quiet or quite loud, and they just balance out by the time they leave.

Sure. Did you have staff to do this; you weren't a one man band or anything like that?

Well, I was very much to start with. [Laughter] But success breeds more success and people get involved and Jimmy Stout, who had been in the Queen's Own Highlanders with me and gone on on his own, had been the Queen's Piper, when he retired he came in as the assistant. But he took over from me, he's running it now and the whole thing's moved on. But also just setting up... we brought in four music advisors, Brian Eldrick and people, Willie MacIntyre, Brian Eldrick, and these people came in as music advisors, they could help go around the unit and help train and so forth.

So you had almost a network throughout the country.

Then each cadet battalion had its own pipes and drums and so on, and Pipe Major and Drum Major we were there to assist them and to give them administration and training and so forth, and to help get the money through to assist them.

Aye. Which is another side of these things.

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Well, because a lot of time is spent with meetings and down to London and so forth.

Yes. And I think with budgets tightening and all the rest of it, it becomes increasingly difficult, yes.

But the TA wasn't quite as successful, but the cadets because we got them established and we got them nice uniforms and they now play at Balmoral for the Queen every year when she's up.

Yes. And they have their own competition and things like that.

Yes, they have their own competitions and they've started to do overseas trips and so forth.

Because I certainly seem to remember people from here going to judge at the cadets competitions.

Yes, certainly. Yes.

So that was that part. And in terms of the TA side of it during that particular post, and you're saying that it didn't really take off to the same extent, was there any particular reason for that?

It didn't have the same structure and you were dealing with a different budget and a different organisation, the cadet organisation very much has its own organisation based down south that has its own budget and has its own structure. The TA side comes back a wee bit under the regular army and that the soldier/fighting thing becomes most important. So on the cadet side I would say that the people you were dealing with were in post almost permanently, so you could set something up. But the TA side you're dealing with a Commanding Officer RSM's that change every two years.

Do they tend to be regulars?

They are regulars and their perspective could be that they thought the pipes and drums was a good thing or they thought the pipes and drums would be soldiers and stuff like that.

And also presumably with an eye to their careers and things like that.

Well, that became another very difficult thing because piping is not a recognised trade in the military, so the pipers are really infantry soldiers and this became, I believe it's sorted out to a certain degree now, but for them to get promoted they had to have the soldering courses, so this became very complicated because they really wanted to be pipers, but if they didn't have the ticks in the box for the soldering courses they couldn't be promoted.

Right. And does that differ from the other music branches?

Very much so, yes.

The military band type branches, they presumably are musicians primarily and that's the side of things that they go for presumably?

Yes, they are musicians, that's their trade, they're not trained soldiers, whereas the pipers and drummers are all trained soldiers first. So piping really is not far off being a hobby these days because they just don't get the time and they don't have the time here to get into the whole politics thing. But that's the difficulty, I don't blame at all, the army's having a hard time with piping and drumming and I don't blame the personnel at all, it's the lack of manpower, overcommitment of the regiments and it's the pipes and drums that have suffered.

I think the army seems to be fairly heavily committed in various places at the minute.

And that's taken its toll on piping and drumming because it wasn't structured. They military bands they only do military training, but they have suffered in that there's very few left and they're talking about amalgamating them again. When I joined every regiment had its own military band. You went down to Scotland and Lowland and Highland Band, that's now gone, there's only a Scotland Band, all the other

divisions have lost their bands and I think they're even talking about restructuring again. So the whole thing's been affected.

Yes, so the whole thing's been affected by that.

When I left the regular service I set up the Highland Reeds and developed my own drone reeds and moisture control system, drove valves. That was really because I anticipated retiring completely...

Much earlier than you did in fact, yes.

...And going up to Achiltibuie and set up in Achiltibuie. So I developed that side of it and so I've had the business and the products and I'm still working on that at the moment and I'm looking at improving it.

Yes. And has that been something that has been I suppose a kind of new line for you, you obviously saw a gap in the market and thought, right, there's room for something here.

There was in 2000, because there were only about three products on the market. Now there's about thirty-five products on the market [laughter] and they're all taking their share. But that's okay; it keeps us on our toes. I've always looked at how to improve things, always using the principle of the cane reed on the reed side and how we can improve it.

A lot of the products on the market today I think are copies or they haven't brought much new to the market place. But I think that the products that are there and the ones that have put a lot of thought into it, will develop and stay with the market, and some will fall by the wayside.

Of course the other thing I'm involved quite heavily in now is judging, and when you judge a lot today you don't hear any really bad bagpipes because we've got, there's no real excuse for bad bagpies because we have synthetic reeds and synthetic bags.

That's actually been something that's become a kind of theme throughout this series of interviews that we're doing, is really the change in the instrument over the past forty years or so, because quite a number of people have said that you don't really hear a bad set of

pipes now, and I think that's just been borne out by what you've been saying.

But I think what you do hear though is a lot of mediocre bagpipes.

That is a very good point.

And a lot of that is in my opinion down to the different reeds and stuff on the market could be consistent and steady and so forth, but maybe don't give you the higher harmonics you want. I also think that a lot of people because they have steady reliable bagpipes they're not producing the outstanding bagpipe, and when I'm judging quite a lot now you get a lot of good bagpipes, but you only get one or two that have good... whether they're playing traditional or whatever they're playing, you really have to listen to the very top level at the Clasp or the Open Piobaireachd, which was a very good competition this year, outstanding competition both at Oban and at Inverness, to get that really good... but I find it very interesting even there to get the different styles of bagpipes, the more smoother ones or the ones that are a bit heavier in drone sound.

The kind of names that spring to mind when you're talking about instruments, like Stuart Liddell for example, a magnificent...

A fantastic sound. And Iain Speirs.

Yes. Roddy. Absolutely. Willie MacCallum.

And the interesting fact is that they're all not playing traditional, they're playing a variety of reeds and setups and so forth.

Yes, absolutely. Yes.

In fact I don't think any of them are playing traditional. But it's interesting that they get... obviously the other thing that I think a lot of the young players forget today or the younger players forget today, it depends on the bagpipe you've got, they all tend to talk about the reeds, so they say "oh, what reeds are you playing in the piobaireachd?" But there are certain bagpipes that will only produce a certain sound. And the old MacRae pipes that Stuart has, have a fantastic bass drone, so you get this

nice rich deep bass drone, and most of those bagpipes are older bagpipes, I'm not taking away from the more modern pipe, but you'll only produce a certain sound out of the bagpipe, but it's important that people do work on sound.

A few years ago somebody played in a Gold Medal, and they said to me "I thought I played well," and I said "You did, but your bagpipes weren't good enough," and they said, "Oh, but my bagpipes were good," and I said "Exactly, they were good, but if you want to win the Gold Medal, they need to be outstanding." They need to be the tops. Good is not good enough.

I know, and they need to actually stay steady throughout the performance and the intervals need to... and the chanter needs to be... and all of that stuff, all of that stuff.

Good is not good enough when you want to win the Gold Medal.

No. Exactly. And I think my own view is about actually blowing to try and get the best out of the instrument as well, and these guys that we've mentioned they're excellent at that, the way they handle the instrument.

They can lean into it. When you know it you can feel them leaning into it to get that note and if the instrument's not right they won't play.

No. Indeed. No, that's right. And I think going for that rich sound is really what these top players are all about. Murray Henderson's another individual who's always got a tremendous bagpipe and the technique is just magnificent.

Yes. And he's still playing...

He's still playing, I know.

After forty years, isn't it?

I think so, yes. Is it forty years next year since he won the Gold Medal, I think.

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Aye. Aye.

Yes. He's still doing it, which is amazing and magnificent. I think in terms of players you've obviously with the army and with the band played with some tremendous players, the likes of Alasdair Gillies and so on, and who would be the folk really that you've listened to and thought, my goodness?

Well, out of the people alive today, Iain Morrison, the best strathspey player I've ever heard, and Iain was responsible for teaching Alasdair to a certain degree. Alasdair Gillies of course, just absolutely rock steady, all the expression was within the beat or the bar and just a magnificent player. Stuart Liddell I think is an outstanding player. Now, there are many other great players, and Roddy and Willie and Angus MacColl.

Angus MacColl, yes, absolutely.

And all these guys that put a lot of work and dedication into it. Iain Morrison, Alasdair, and Stuart Liddell has got something I think that...

Yes. It's that wee bit extra, yes. Aye. We've obviously spoken about pipe bands and your own involvement way back in the seventies with the City of Wellington and so on. Any bands over your involvement that really stand out?

Well, I do like the Field Marshall. I think the Field Marshall has something, they put a wee bit of music into it, and even when they're playing their jigs they've got a wee pose to it, right, it's not just all straight lines. I think a lot of the pipe bands and a lot of the young players today are all just playing the straight line stuff, and to me you can still play fairly straight line but you can put a wee pulse. Now, the Field Marshall can do that.

Of course Richard was a very good jig, he won the jigs at the Northern Meeting I think on a number of occasions, is that not the case?

Yes. Yes. But they're not just playing jigs fast and straight, they are, but they've got a wee pulse, so it's got just a wee bit on that first note that just a wee bit of the phrasing, and to me they are sound wise and musically one of the best. I think a lot of the pipe bands today I get a bit bored, to be honest. Now, last year I didn't make it, but the concerts before the World's, good bands playing, but if you go and you're just listening to two hours of jigs and various playing for two hours, to me that gets a bit boring. Just playing a bit of musical stuff, a good 3/4s, some good 6/8s, that's the sort of music I would appreciate, along with the other stuff as well. I know the bands want to go on and show how talented they are and what they can play and big repertoire. Personally I think that's another mistake that they make at the concerts, is that putting out four or five or six solo players, I've come along to hear the best band in the world, if I wanted to hear good solo players I would go up to Inverness.

Yes, or Oban and hear them there, yes. I suppose I think certainly working here as I do, you get the impression that the piping's as healthy as it's ever been, and the youngsters are really getting into it and there's some good young players out there and the boys and girls are keen. Would that be your impression as well?

Very much so. The only thing I would say though is I think piping's as healthy here and in America and Canada, or around the world piping's very healthy and it's great to see the young talented kids coming through. I do feel though that we can't lose sight of what an outstanding instrument, because there's so much nonsense that's spoken about what sound is and so forth, people need to hear the likes of these top players and these top sounds, to fully appreciate how good it is. The same with the playing, I think that if we're not careful we could lose really good march strathspey and reel playing, and it's becoming more and more straight lined and the pulsing now, a lot of people, you can get into different arguments on what you think is musically and what isn't, but I really am concerned.

I think piobaireachd's fairly healthy, although I think in a way sometimes that's becoming a bit straight lined, a bit 'out of the book,' you hear quite a lot of competitors... because a lot of people don't go to the old scholars now like they used to, they tend to win a Gold Medal and then they don't keep going, whereas the old players went to John MacDonald, they kept going to Donald MacLeod and Bob Brown and Bob Nicol, until they

couldn't go anymore. So I think some piobaireachd is becoming a bit straight lined as well, but particularly some of the light music at the lower grades.

Yes. It's becoming more looking at the technique and over emphasizing technique at the expense of music really.

Correct. I think that, and if I dare say it, a bit pipe bandish.

Well, that's right. But it's about piping I think in some ways in that Scottish music tradition as a whole, because if you look perhaps at some of the older players, they were actually listening to accordion players playing these things, they were listening to fiddle players playing them, and maybe there's a wee bit less of that in some regards now, in that there's not the background.

No. Actually I disagree with that.

Right. Okay. Go on then.

Because I feel that that's where people get confused. I think the people that composed, Hugh MacRae and Angus Mackay, Hugh MacKay, sorry, it was Angus MacKay that composed the first marches, competition marches, they were piobaireachd players and I believe that the 2/4 competition march was based on 2 bar phrases, on a phrase system pattern, and it's musical and it has nothing to do with accordion music or any other type of marches, it's nothing to do with quick marches. I also believe the competition strathspey and reel, if you like, were specifically composed, the four-parted competition for the bagpipe, and although it has the same medium, the strong medium weak structure that's based on strathspey and reel, it's different to dance music because dance music has to have a set pose and a set rhythm for people to dance, the same with the quick march, if they're dancing the polka or something. But I believe that the competition type strathspey and reel, is specifically for bagpipes and shouldn't be confused with accordion music.

No. I was actually looking at it from a different way in that you get the 2/4 pipe march and you get some of the accordion players taking that on, the likes of Bobby MacLeod's and people like that, and I

think that people like him actually really drew the music out of it in some way and that there was a sort of strong culture around about that type of music, which is maybe not so apparent nowadays.

Yes. Okay. A lot of people who are here today and a lot of top players talk about the double pulsing or the up and down beat of a 2/4, so double pulsing for it. I disagree with that because if you go for long notes and the essence for a 2/4 march, and Alasdair Gillies used to say this and he was the master at it, is control and flow. So you need to get the expression of the long notes, but if you overdo that you lose the flow. So it's getting that happy medium, and I think you can't just get that, you have to get the dit, dit dit, but then the real secret of the expert is to get the flow. Control and flow.

Control and flow. Yes, and I think one of the best 2/4 march players there's ever been, if that's his view I think that we need to go with that. Well, Bruce it's been a fascinating exploration of your life and times in piping and the army, New Zealand, cabinet making, all sorts of things. And I think that it's been great speaking to you and just hearing your views on all of that and your experience. So on behalf of 'Noting the Tradition' and the National Piping Centre, Major Bruce Hitchings, I'd like to say thank you very much indeed.

Thank you James for inviting me.

It's been my pleasure. Thank you.

Thank you.

