



## **NOTING THE TRADITION**

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



Supported by  
**The National Lottery**<sup>®</sup>  
through the Heritage Lottery Fund



**Interviewee**                      **Pipe Major Robert Kilgour MBE**

**Interviewer**                      **Howard Tindall**

**Date of Interview**              **6<sup>th</sup> February 2013**

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*This is 6<sup>th</sup> February 2013 in Edinburgh in the home of Pipe Major Robert Kilgour MBE, formerly of the Scots Guards with Howard Tindall interviewing for the Noting the Tradition project. Good morning, Pipe Major, many thanks for inviting me to your home to do this interview. You look like a fit man that might be in their seventies but am I right in thinking you're possibly a bit older?*

Good morning, well, I'm eighty-eight years old now and on 25<sup>th</sup> June I'll be eighty-nine. So I'm knocking on a bit.

*So that would say maybe born about 1925?*

I was born on 25<sup>th</sup> June 1924.

*So we've got quite a bit of ground to cover and to start us off can you tell us about the early days and how you got started on the pipes?*

Well, I think probably I have to go back now to 1940 in fact. In 1940, I was sixteen years old and my mother said to me this day "What would you like for your birthday, Bobby?" and I said "I would like to have a piano accordion" and she said "Oh, I can't afford that, it's far too expensive, why don't you take the bagpipes up like your old grandfather?" I said "Bagpipes are just as expensive surely"? She said "aye but you don't buy bagpipes, you buy a practice chanter first and a book to learn from". I said "where do you get such a thing"? She knew Davy Glen's at the top of Leith Walk in Edinburgh here, she knew them because of her father, he used to get his reeds and bags and things like that in Davy Glen, the bagpipe makers.

So off I went to Davy Glen's and I bought myself a practice chanter and it was made of coccus wood, sort of brown coloured stuff as opposed to African blackwood which is the normal and it actually had a real ivory sole on it and quite a nice ferrule made of I suppose what we called in those days German silver, we call it nickel now, and a book to learn from. The practice chanter cost me ten shillings, that's

fifty pence in today's money and the book cost me two and sixpence, so that's about a little over ten pence in today's money.

I marched out of the shop and I had been shown in fact how to take it apart, to put my hands quite close together, pull it apart and there inside was a reed, the old-fashioned reeds with a double-sided cane thing wrapped round a piece of copper tube and how to put it together again. I took it home and when I tried to blow it at first was so hard to blow, I got a blinding sore head with it so I thought "That old man, he blew it alright and I'm young and fit" so I took it apart. I had a look at it and I thought if I gave these two things a squeeze together so I learnt my very first trick you might say with regards to reeds and the bagpipes. I squeezed the reeds together and suddenly I could blow into it, it was pretty hard and I wet it a bit and it got easier and I thought "I'm learning on my own back without anybody showing me". That was k and I carried on with it and it took me about two or three months and I tried to fiddle about with it to try and find out how to get my fingers on the chanter, what holes to open and what to close. Then my father said to me one day "Bob, go and see old George Ackroyd".

This was an old Pipe Major in the Black Watch who had served in the Black Watch with my father back before the First World War and he lived in Shore Terrace, we were living out in Stenhouse at the time, and I knew where he was, I knew the old man. So he took me on and he said "It'll cost you three pounds for twelve lessons." I thought Ok , I was a sixteen year old boy and I had a few pennies, I've always been a bit of a saver, and so I paid him the three pounds and I went to get my first lesson. It was just before Christmas in 1940 and he said to me "By the way if you're late, if you're ten minutes late, you start here at seven o'clock until eight and if you're ten minutes late I will not stick the ten minutes on the other side, you've lost that" so I always made sure that I got my full hour for my money. Within about the first four lessons or roundabout I progressed so quickly that I'd learned some of the doubling and he took me on the very first tune that I was going to tackle called the Earl of Mansfield, one of the slow marches, the Earl of Mansfield's March. I don't know if you know

the tune or not (sings tune) and so I managed to make an attempt on that. I knew what the tune was and what I should be doing so I whistled and diddled the tune all the way home and when I opened the door I thought hang on, I had forgotten that my mother played the piano and I said “Mum, that first line, will you try and play it” and she played it, and I said, “I’ve got it” and I hammered it for about another two hours and I never forgot it again.

I just carried on like that and eventually the pipe major, old George Ackroyd, he taught me in fact to play an open C which most Pipers today close, although lots of them they’ll play it open if it makes it easier to play if it’s the very next movement they’re going to play, but in our case it was an open C and he taught me also to play what they call the redundant A on the taorluath because that’s how music was written in those days probably because you’re playing actual melody notes but you can’t play taorluaths on the piano so you have to give a little note in between to give the effect. When I went to see him first of all he was about seventy three years old and by the time he was seventy five he said “Bobby, I can’t take you any more, my wife’s gone blind and I feel I’m too old, I think you’ll have to try and find someone else”. I was a member of the Highland Pipers’ Society at that time which I joined near the beginning of my lessons from him and there was a chap there called George Robertson, who was an uncle of Pipe Major James Robertson of the Scots Guards so I approached him and he said “You come and see me” and I said “How much do you want”? He said “I don’t want anything, you just come and see me and we’ll have a session” and so I did. I went to him to him in fact for a number of years, two or three years possibly, certainly until I was ready to join the Scots Guards. He took me through some piobaireachd and things like that which George Ackroyd had started me with, “Too Long in this Condition” and “The Little Spree” and other similar tunes. Then he said to me one day “Maybe you should go and see Willie Ross up in the Castle and take some piobaireachd from him”.

So, I went to see old Willie, it would be round about April 1944 and Willie said “Ok, I’ll take you”. He heard me play at the Highlands

Pipers and he thought I could actually play so he said “Ok, that’ll cost you three guineas”. He always thought in guineas, the old Victorian sort of language you could say, and I paid him the three pounds three shillings and he gave me a receipt which I’ve still got today somewhere. I carried on with Willie and I got one lesson every month for about five months. Then I managed to get a writ to be released from an iron foundry where I worked. That was a reserved occupation at that time and I got released because I refused to join the trade union, you wouldn’t be allowed to stay in the place and work and that’s why I said to the shop steward “I don’t want to stay here” and so I got a letter to release me. I called the Scots Guards and I showed them this letter. So they got that and they said “Ok, that’s fine, let’s take your height and let’s take your weight” and that sort of thing and at five feet ten I did not weigh ten stones, I weighed nine stones thirteen pounds. There wasn’t a gram of fat on me anywhere. I was as hard as anything, really tough, didn’t smoke or drink at all, I was as fit as a fiddle and so off I went to join the Scots Guards at Pirbright. To Caterham in fact, I got taken first of all to the Guards Depot and of course I had all the business of standing to attention and all that.

Previous to that I’d been in the Home Guard for two or three years so I knew about standing to attention and all that stuff. Eventually, I finished all my training and there were two Pipers called up to the squad of soldiers I was in training and they said “Who’s Kilgour”? I said “That’s me” and they said “Pack your bags, you’re coming with us” and I went straight to the Pipe Band. I was taken to the Pipe Store to meet the Pipe Major and he looked at me and said “Can you play”? I said “Yes Sir”. He said “Can you play Johnny Cope”? and I said “Yes Sir”. “The Regimental March, The Regimental Quickstep”, “Yes Sir.” “Brose and Butter”? “Yes Sir”. The other tunes are optional for retreat and that was all. Ok fine, so I got a pair of tartan trews, Royal Stewart Tartan Trews and that was me. That very day he said “You’re on duty today”. I was Duty Piper first day in the Band. I got a kilt and a set of belts, waist belt, sword belt and a dirk, hose tops and flashes and stuff like that but that they had no spats at the time; they were wearing what we call fox puttees with your boots on.

He said “We don’t have a decent Glengarry”, I said, “I’ve got my own one here”, “Oh that’s fine”. I got a Piper’s badge and got the cutaway khaki jacket with the Scots Guards flashes up here on the should and that was me organised. So, I carried on.

***Can I ask what year would that be when you first joined up?***

I joined exactly on 26 September 1944 so the War only had about four or five months to run and Germany collapsed. I’ll never forget that day, we heard, I was in the Pipe Band at that time and everyone came rushing into the barracks square and they carried the regimental sergeant major on their shoulders all round the square. He was an old chap called Welford, RSM Welford. That was that and I just carried on playing in that Band for quite a while and eventually I detailed off to go with some other chaps to Norway with what we call the Guards Composite, a company of Grenadiers, Coldstream, Scots, Irish and Welsh Guards. I think the commanding officer at that time was an Irish Guards Lieutenant Colonel, the Sergeant Major was a Welsh Guard’s chap, I forget what his name, but in any case it was a wee band with three Scots Guards pipers and three Irish Guards pipers, a Scots Guard bass drummer and a Scots Guards side drummer and an Irish Guards side drummer. It was a small band and we had to do Guard Mounting at what we call the Allied Headquarters in Oslo in Norway and that was fine. We did a few small jobs, sort of things that were organised by the officers for local dignitaries in Oslo.

***I read you played one night for King Haakon of Norway?***

There was one evening when Haakon came to the Officers’ Mess he wanted to see a Highland dance so Lance Sergeant MacKenzie who was the chap who was sort of Acting Pipe Major played and I did a Highland Fling, then I got a loan of an officer’s sword and did a sword dance for him and we had a glass of whisky from the King and gave the normal toast in Gaelic, Doch Slàinte an Rìgh, and that was it. It was a good day, quite a good evening, and then just back to normal duties the following day.

***I read in fact that it was a bigger glass of whisky than would normally have been the case?***

Oh no, no, just the normal.

***I read in the Memoirs of Pipe Major John T MacKenzie.***

His memoirs, by the way, are full of the biggest load of rubbish you ever saw, all that stuff about us going ashore in battle order with camouflage on our faces and that was tripe. We sailed from Liverpool on a ship called Stratheden and we sailed back from there on a ship called the Polar Stellaris and King Haakon was already in situ in Oslo and he had been for about eight weeks by the time we got there.

***I won't stir up any controversy but I had heard you had played for King Haakon but going back to these early days as an Army piper, I mean it was war time, in peace time some pipers joined the Army to advance their piping. Was there much time for piping or was it the working, ceremonial and regimental duties that you were involved in mostly?***

Well, no, you could say even in London, for instance, where I spent quite a number of years, your day if it was a guard mounting day from first thing after breakfast in the morning you got organised and got your pipes working properly and got yourself into full dress uniform, or in wintertime they were greatcoats which all the Scots Guards wore as did the normal Guards as well. So down you go on to the barracks square and they had a big parade where they form up but before that I used to get the Pipers down the stairs, by that time, I was probably a Sergeant, and I would go round tuning the drones and making sure that the Pipes were working properly. The Pipe Major would come down the stairs and he would have a wee listen, then "Ok fine" and we formed up on the square and you marched up to Buckingham Palace and you took turn about with the big Regimental Band, that's the big band with trombones, trumpets and clarinets and all that sort of stuff. It was quite a big band, in fact, you might say in those days

with the Regimental Band and Pipers, there were more musicians marching up to Buckingham Palace than there were actually Guardsmen going on guard duty behind us. [Laughter]

The afternoon, that was spent on practice chanter and some dancing, we always had to have a dancing team and in those days although my legs are a bit wobbly now, I could do the Fling, the Swords, the Foursome Reel and the Argyll Broadsword no problem at all.

***Starting at sixteen on the Pipes and joining up about nineteen, twenty, or thereabouts, would you say you were the finished article as a Piper in that short period of time or did you continue to develop your playing?***

You would get some guys who would come along who had maybe had a couple of lessons on a practice chanter but they didn't really know how to play properly and you would take them for a while and you'd say to them "we'll take you for three months" and if you make the progress that we think you should do we'll advise the Commanding Officer that you should come and join the Pipes properly but, if not, then you'll stay in the duty company that you're in as an ordinary soldier. That's more or less how it went. Roundabout 1951 or 1952 they started what they called the Guards' Piping School at Pirbright and young potential players from squads that were in training could come when their training was finished and into the Piping School and Pipe Major K G Roe was in charge of that for a number of years and they would do practice with him all day. Eventually, once he thought they were ready, he would send them to the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion as he thought necessary.

***These Pipers would be getting trained up to become Band members?***

Yes.

***Would other people be sent to the Army School of Piping if they had been identified as future, say, Pipe Majors and they were being trained up for that?***

Yes, to do a Pipe Major's course, well, as you can see up there on the wall, that's my course, when I did my Pipe Major's course and there were ten of us on that one, with the wee red D in the corner, and five of us passed with distinction and there were five that passed without distinction but they passed nevertheless. I think I was probably the youngest Pipe NCO in the regiment, at the time and I did that in 1946. I'd only been there a few years at that time and when I went on the course I had two stripes in the Guards, because you don't get one stripe in the Foot Guards, Lance Corporal was two stripes in the Foot Guards and I was what they called a Local Acting Unpaid Lance Corporal, you could say the lowest of the low. When Pipe Major Mackenzie came to me and asked me if I wanted to do my Piping course, that would be the middle to the end of March 1946, and he said "Would you like...are you planning to do your Pipe Major's course"? I said "Yes". He said "Well, you have to have five years to do on completion of the course". "When does the course finish?" He said it finished on 3 April, five months later and I said "Yes, I'll have five years and about three weeks to do". In any case, I had signed on for seven years, I'd hardly completed two years at the time and so he said "Ok, fine I'll let you know" and off he went. He came back the following day and he said "Right, out of here, pack your bags and come back up to the Pipers' Room and tomorrow you'll be in for of Commanding Officer's Orders with regard to going off to Edinburgh to do your Pipe Major's course".

So I did my Pipe Major course with Willie Ross. I got on extremely well with Willie because he knew me and he knew my father and mother because we'd been members of the Highland Pipers' Society. I didn't pass with distinction just because of that. I could in fact play quite well at the time and did the course and you know by that time I hadn't in fact actually served in what you might call a service battalion. I'd been in the Guards Depot, I'd been in Norway with the composite battalion but up to now I'd not been in the first or second battalion. When the course was finished I got a bit of leave, embarkation leave, after it and then I got sent out to Trieste in Italy and there I joined the First Scots Guards with Pipe Major K G Roe

and his brother Lance Sergeant J S Roe and the whole band. My own younger brother was in that Band at the time, my brother George.

***Could I ask a bit how Pipe Major Willie Ross was as a teacher?  
There are a lot of stores about the man.***

Willie Ross was a very, very good teacher but Willie might show you once or twice how to do something but if you didn't get it immediately he would never show you a third time so you had better keep your ears open and keep your eyes on his hands. Willie never ever sang piobaireachd, never. I think he was determined that whatever you put on the practice chanter that is what would come on the Bagpipes. For instance, I found out over the years, that I hear some people, they maybe sing the first round of the ground of the piobaireachd and I hear them playing the thing later but the timing's not the same, it's not the same. So it's just one of those ups and downs you might meet as you go through life in the piping world and decide for yourself what is the right course but you can't go, of course, too far to one side or the other. There is a correct way and the least little nuance on one note or another can make all the difference between just an ordinary performance and a really beautiful performance and, of course, also the sound of the bagpipes has got to be right. The more beautiful your Bagpipes sound the more beautiful your piobaireachd sounds.

***So, there was both the light music and the piobaireachd when you were at the Castle?***

Willie in fact didn't on the course really bother about the light music, it was mainly piobaireachd that he concentrated on, because he expected that all the players who came to take that course were very good March and Strathspey and Reel, Hornpipe and Jig players before they came there and that he didn't have to go teaching them how to play a March or a Strathspey and Reel. They should know that.

***But when someone who had been on the Pipe Major's course went back to his regiment would piobaireachd feature much in regimental playing, it's solo piping, it's not the band?***

How do you mean?

***Well, I'm thinking that most of the Army Pipers were getting trained up to be Band members and the Pipe Majors to lead the Bands; piobaireachd doesn't really feature in Bands?***

A Pipe Major like myself, if there was somebody in my Band who showed an interest then I would sit down and take them a little bit on piobaireachd but otherwise a Piper in a Band in the Army has got to show some interest to a Pipe Major that he's really keen on doing something like that and the two Roes, KG and JS, they weren't really piobaireachd men, they could play a piobaireachd but it's not something that they really concentrated on whereas I liked to play a piobaireachd, a ground or a few variations of a tune to myself in the Pipers' barrack room, you might be sitting around having a cup of tea or doing their kit or whatever and they would listen to what I was doing and any of them in fact that feel they might wanted to do something about it, they would do it.

***I'm thinking about peace time now rather than during the War and I have read that perhaps in the past an Army Piper could be a Piper first and they'd be a soldier second. Is there any truth in that?***

An Army Piper is really a soldier first and is a piper afterwards because at the time of War, you have an arm, you have a rifle usually and a bayonet. The Pipe Major usually has a pistol, not that a pistol is any use, they are absolutely useless and purely decoration because unless you're a very good shot with a pistol you could miss somebody who was only twenty yards away. [Laughter] But in any case you're always part of what you might call the Battalion Headquarter Defence Force, in other words, roundabout the Battalion Headquarters in defence, you also have to be trained in First Aid, so you could bandage up somebody who'd been injured. You might not be able to

do a great deal about the injury but at least you could make them comfortable and stop their bleeding a bit and that sort of thing, just to calm them down and assure them they would be away very shortly in a carrier or an ambulance.

***With the amalgamation of the Scottish Regiments that is taking place for many years now and the cutbacks would you say that Army Piping has suffered as a result or is as strong as ever?***

Army Piping might suffer, I'm not really sure whether it will really suffer. I think that remains to be seen. That will depend a great deal on where the cuts come and how much there is of cuts because there is still some value for the Army in keeping its, you might say, showcase which is a way of describing what Army Pipe Bands do, the Tattoo and that sort of thing.

***We see the crowds every night for weeks on end.***

If they cut down too far eventually you'll get no Army Pipers on the Edinburgh Tattoo at all. They will all be away with whatever small elements of the Army is left and the Bands coming up to do the Tattoo, they'll all be civilian Bands.

***When I think of Army Pipers I think, of course, of Pipe Major Donald MacLeod, Pipe Major Angus MacDonald, I think of the Scots Guards like yourself, and more recently, I think of Alasdair Gillies, I think of Gordon Walker, Greg Wilson. Do you think we will still see top flight Army pipers of that stature in future years?***

Well, I hope so; I certainly hope so because it's helped Army piping. Chaps like Donald MacLeod especially, he is one of the really top players who encouraged playing.

***And composition?***

Competitions as well.

***Sorry, composition, I'm actually thinking about Donald MacLeod's tunes.***

And composition, exactly. To make new tunes because really you might say the hornpipe and jig repertoire has expanded a great deal with what wee Donald did. He composed quite a number of very, very good tunes and almost immediately he'd composed it, there's a marvellous Strathspey that he composed, and it became an automatic 'in' when people came to present their Marches and Strathspey and Reels for big competitions.

***Which one are you thinking of, Susan MacLeod?***

Susan MacLeod, exactly, yes. That became famous almost overnight, it was included, it had to be, it was such a marvellous tune so beautifully put together.

***So many of his tunes are as popular now, perhaps more so. You have the MBE. Can you tell us the background to that?***

[Laughter] Well, the MBE, of course, I did not get from the Army for a start. I lived, worked, played and taught in Denmark and Sweden for about twenty four years. I was married to a Danish lady who also plays the bagpipes, we're divorced now but I have two daughters and they still live over there and a grandson whom I am going to be visiting on his third birthday on the fifteenth of this month. I'd been the Honorary Piper of the St Andrew's Society of Denmark for twenty years and so some of them got together and said when I decided that I would stop being their Piper, I would still be with them but I would stop being the official Honorary Piper in the Year 2000 and so they thought they must try and get something for Bob. Well, it would be impossible for them to get any kind of recognition of any kind at all from the Danish Royal Family, the Danish Royal Court, but there might be a possibility if they tried to get something over in Britain. So they wrote to the Regimental Headquarters of the Scots Guards and asked their advice about it. They said "We'll back it up", and I

think they also contacted Pipe Major Angus MacDonald and he also said yes.

So with one way and another all the representations bore fruit and suddenly one day my telephone rang. I picked it up and said “Bob here” and the voice said “How would you like to be an MBE”? I said “who said that, who’s this talking to me, what are you talking about MBE”? He said “Well, how would you like it”? I said “Wait a minute, who am I talking to”? He said, “It’s Philip Ashley.” Philip Ashley was the British Ambassador in Copenhagen and I knew him quite well, first name terms in fact, so I said, “Philip, what’s this all about?” He said “Well, I’ve asked the Queen for an MBE for you, do you want it”? I said “Yes, of course I do but how did this come about”? “I don’t know but the Queen wants you to have an MBE, do you still want it”? I said “Yes, of course” and he said “Ok, you’ll be contacted in due course about all the ins and outs of it.”

Eventually, I got all the bumph about it and I said to my two daughters and to the Danish girlfriend I had at the time, “Your daddy is going to get an MBE; I can either get it in Edinburgh at Holyrood House, or in London at Buckingham Palace”. My daughters said “Oh, Buckingham Palace, Dad, please” so they all came down and that was it. So I went and we stayed in a hotel just off Bayswater Road, and on the 5<sup>th</sup> June 2001 we all traipsed round to Buckingham Palace. You’ve got to have special tickets obviously to show to the police and in we went. They checked the name umpteen times and eventually we got up to the front of the queue and they just call your name out and we walked forward and the Queen is standing on a little dais with of the officers and some of the Yeomen of the Guard. I walked up and she hangs your decoration and she speaks to you and she asked was I still living in Denmark and I said “Yes Ma’am, I’ve been living out there for over twenty years”. Really, when you speak to Her Majesty the Queen, really the very first utterance you should make should be “Your Majesty”. Well, I wasn’t quite tongue-tied but I didn’t at the time and thereafter you say Ma’am, you don’t say “mawm”, as in jam, ma’am, ma’am, ma’am. She then asked “Do you still play the pipes”? and I managed to say “Your Majesty, yes,

Ma'am, I was together with a hundred Pipers of the Scots Guards serving in Earls Court in 1997 on the occasion of Your Majesty's fiftieth wedding anniversary". And she shook my hand with a big grin on her face and when she shakes your hand, so that's your time up, you buzz off, you take a step back, a wee neck bow and off you go.

***A great story and a great honour. Not directly related to your Army career but your piping was a big factor in that honour and it was by your Army contacts, they were supportive.***

Of course, yes. You could say it has taken not all over the world but certainly to lots of places and really and truly to have done the sort of travel and visiting countries and eaten a lot of awful food and all that sort of stuff, all those years I was in the Army doing this and even afterwards in Denmark, to have done all these things as a civilian I would have had to have been a very, very rich man indeed. [Laughter]

***I am conscious I have fast forwarded from the Army to the late twentieth century and I want to go back a bit and ask you when did you leave the Army and what did you do in civilian life?***

I left the Army after twenty two years in 1966 and, of course, you get a month's, you might say, demob leave you might say. You could take it or not as the case may be but I was in no hurry to start work and so I decided I would just take my time with this. A week went past after my demob leave was finished and so I went and spoke to the folks down in Drumsheugh here, to the Sailors', Soldiers' and Airmen's Employment Association and this chap interviewed me and said "What can you do"? I told him I was an Army Pipe Major, an Army Piper, over the last twenty two years, I can play the bagpipes. He asked me what I could do apart from that and I said "I don't know, I in an iron foundry before that but I don't want to back to a job like that, and I worked in a pub as well", and the very the first job I had as a fourteen year old boy was to push a message bike for a local butcher. Otherwise I didn't have any work qualifications at all. He said "Well, you were a good few years in the Army, just give me a

minute” and off he went, he was on the phone for a couple of minutes, he came back again and said “What do you think about the civil service”? I said I would quite like to have a job in the civil service. I told him I didn’t know anything about it either, but in any case he said “I think I’ve got something that might suit you, you might like to go and work in the civil service as a civil servant in Headquarters Scotland Army out at Cramond Bridge”. I knew where the place was and I said, “Ok, I’ll do it”. He said, “I will telephone them and they’ll let you know”.

That was a Thursday I think and the following morning I got a postcard to go and see them. The post was fairly early, about nine o’clock in the morning, so I jumped into my car. I had a car in those days, it was one of those little smart Morris 1100 with a front wheel drive and off I went out to Craigiehall. I saw somebody out there and they said “We want you to do a wee exam”. I got put in a wee room on my own with some paper and a pen and a questionnaire. So I did that, it only took about 10 minutes, quarter of an hour to do the whole thing, and about twenty minutes later this girl came in and asked how I was getting on. I said “I’m finished” and she said “Already”? She took it away and came back and said “That’s fine; I’ll take you and show you where you’re going to be working”. I was taken back up to an office and introduced to the chap who was in charge. There was another young boy there at the same time. So that was me, this chap said “Ok, we’ll see you on Monday morning sharp at 8.30 in a suit and a shirt and tie”. And that was me. I was back home by 11.30 that morning and my Mum said, “How did you get on?” I said “I’ve got a job”. “Already”? she said. “Yes, I’m starting in the civil service as a Temporary Clerical Officer”. That was me.

I was about eleven years in the civil service before my wife and I upped sticks. Actually, first of all, I went to work with my brother, George, in 1977. He was making bagpipes in a shop here in Edinburgh near Abbeyhill, Montrose Terrace in fact. I was working with George, mostly working with the rough blocks of wood, boring them and making rough shape for the pipes and he would do all the finishing off. Then it was my job to tie a bag in, season them and

make them go. That was quite successful but a cousin of mine died in America and we fell heir some money and my wife and I decided to go to Denmark with my oldest daughter, she was only about two and a half at the time.

### ***To live and work in Denmark?***

Yes, we went to Denmark in 1979. I was lucky as sin out there as well. I couldn't speak the language, just the basic things like yes and no and things like that, ja nei, skol.

### ***Was your wife Danish?***

Yes, my wife was Danish and almost the very first thing after a couple of days over there, there was this Scandinavian Championship. That was being held in Malmö in Sweden, just across from Copenhagen, across the Sound, and we stayed in some university campus for two or three days while this was on and there was a chap who saw me there whose name was Helge Lind. I didn't know the guy at all but he had seen me seemingly on the big parade. I was not actually competing in the band but when all the bands came on to do the salute to the Chieftain, they stuck me on the right in the middle of the bands and so he asked who the old guy was. He found out what my name was and what my telephone number was. About two days later the telephone rang, my wife was shopping at the time, and he said "Have you got a job yet?" I said "No". "How about you come and work in the theatre"? I said "I don't know, I don't know anything about theatre work, all I've done in the theatre is stand on a stage and play for Highland dancers". He said "You come and work with me and I'll show you what to do". I said "By the way, what is your name"? and he said "Helge Lind". I said "Say that again" and he "Helge Lind". I said "No, I'm not getting you properly, never mind, give me your telephone number". So I worked it out, and that was fine and off we went. About 10 minutes, quarter of an hour later my wife came in from shopping and I said "Bente, I've just had a chap on the phone and I've to go and meet him outside the Royal Theatre, I've got a job working in the theatre". She said "Oh, that's fine, what's his

name”? I said “I don’t know”. She said “Oh, you bloody fool”. I told her I had his telephone number and she got on the blower and she was on there for about a quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, laughing and joking and all sorts and then she put the phone down. She said, “Yes, you have got a job and you’re to meet this chap outside of the Royal Theatre tomorrow morning at 8.30”. I told her to write his name down so I could see what the devil it looked like. So she wrote it down, Helge Lind. You don’t pronounce it like that, you pronounce it like this “Hoye-lin”.

That was me started in the theatre. I was on the lowest rate of pay, 40 kroner an hour, and because I was on such a low rate, I became entitled to Boligstøtte, help with the payment of my rent from the government almost immediately. It was so generous in fact that my wife and I in the evenings we could sit down and have a nice meal and a bottle of wine to ourselves.

*You landed on your feet again by the sound of it.*

It was really wonderful.

*When you were over in Copenhagen I understand you were quite actively involved teaching the Danish and Swedish pipers?*

Within about a week or so and almost you could say within a day or two of beginning to work in the Royal Theatre I went to a band practice with the Heather Pipes and Drums, my wife was also a member of that organisation, and I was welcomed there with open arms because I had a very good bagpipe. Then I got involved in teaching lots of them who wanted to hear what Bob could show them! I was just an ordinary Piper in the Band for the first year and then at the end of the first year they said “Bob, we want you to become our Pipe Major”. I said “Ok, I’ll do it for a year” but they had no intention of letting me go at the end of the year and then near the end of the first year they said “Bob, we want you to stay”. I said “Ok, I’ll stay for another year” but at the end of the second year I said I am not going to carry on. I’ll carry on teaching whoever wants my

instruction but I said I was not going to stay on as Pipe Major. I said to them “In any case, you’ve got a perfectly good young chap who’s quite capable, a very good young player, who will make you a very good Pipe Major” and at the end of the second year that is exactly what I did. I said “You’ll take Tom here as your Pipe Major” and so Tom became the Pipe Major and he stayed with the company for quite a number of years in fact.

There were some changes obviously along the way but I got involved in teaching a Band in Malmö in Sweden so I used to go over there weekly. I did that for nearly six months and I also went up to Stockholm two or three times to teach one of the Stockholm Bands. There was one day, I think it was the first time I had gone up to Stockholm, in fact, and I had my Pipes with me. When I was taking the Malmö Band I’d always use my practice chanter and I’d stuck it in my pocket but making this trip to Stockholm, I took the pipe case and the pipes. The system in Scandinavia, the three main countries, Norway, Sweden and Denmark, they can move quite freely without having to show passports and all that stuff but if you’re not Scandinavian, a national, you have to show your passport so I had it ready just in case. I went through this thing when I came off the ferry at Malmö and this Customs man said, “Come over here, sir”. I put the pipe case down and he said “Where are you going”? I said “To Stockholm, to teach some Swedish pipers”. I showed him my passport and put that on top, so that he could see I was a British National and he said “What’s in the case”? I said “There is a bottle of whisky and a set of bagpipes”. He asked, “Can I see them?” so I opened them. There was the bottle of Scotch and the set of bagpipes and he said “Oh, that’s fine”, he just closed it, put a chalk mark on it, and said “Have a nice weekend” [laughter]. That was it, no problem.

***Did you have to change your teaching methods when you were teaching civilians rather than Army pipers?***

Yes, they were all civilians obviously and I would say even in those days if you spoke to somebody in Copenhagen or any of the cities in Sweden, anybody between the ages of say about thirteen to fourteen

years old, you'd speak to them and you'd get an answer in quite good English. In Denmark, possibly also in Sweden and possibly in Norway as well, English is compulsory from the age of ten years old. You will learn English whether you like it or not! Every schoolchild that goes to school has to learn and now you could say up till fifty or sixty years old they can speak quite good English. A lot of the films you see over there are American, I would say the bulk of the really good films that they get over there are American or British.

### ***So English or language wasn't a barrier?***

Quite often they had the text down below at the bottom of the screen but most of them didn't even bother because they understood what the people were saying.

***Excellent English. We've got top flight pipers from America, Canada and New Zealand but many of them have some form of Scottish connection but the Scandinavian pipers most probably didn't. Is this Scottish connection important in piping or is it more the skill someone brings to the pipes and their understanding of it?***

I wouldn't say that it was all that terribly important for over here but for them it's very important. You might say the father of Scandinavian piping was a chap called Mogens Zieler. He produced a book as well, two books in fact, of pipe music and some of the tunes in fact are Danish tunes arranged for the bagpipes. He was a very, very good friend at one stage of Pipe Major Angus MacDonald of the City of Glasgow Police Pipe Band and he got a lot of instruction from Big Angus or Angus Mòr as they used to call him over there and, as I say, he was more or less the father of pipe music in Denmark. I think you could say he started the ball rolling as it were and it was mostly young Danes at the time and that was going back to the early seventies. You would say now it was a fun thing to do to learn to play the bagpipes or being in a pipe band, and playing the drums and that sort of thing. Eventually they were so enthusiastic out there, at least the Heathers were, they managed to get some place, a sort of cellar type place, under a block of flats and they divided it up into a couple

of small rooms where they could do some chanter practice and a bigger room

***For a band hall?***

Where they had a bar, a regular bar.

***Even better [laughter].***

They used to have parties down there, and when they got better at it and people got to know about this band, as the years went on they got involved in weekend jaunts to go and play and quite often they would say they were playing at this do, that do, and whatever they were playing at would maybe be finished by six o'clock in the evening and they would go back to what they called their Piping Centre. They all had lockers there where they kept their full dress uniform and put on their normal civilian clothes again and then quite often two or three of the girls would say "just wait here, we'll be back in ten minutes, quarter of an hour". They'd go to the local supermarket and they would buy a whole mass of food, Danish black bread and the sorts of cold meats and pickle and usually a bottle of Schnapps as well and there would be a party then. Quite often you wouldn't get back home until one, two or three o'clock in the morning. [Laughter]

***Sounds like a good way to make practice popular.***

I would say most of them would be between the ages of, say, about seventeen and twenty-five at that time.

***It was good fun rather than a driving ambition.***

Yes, they thought it was a fun thing to do at that time.

***They weren't aspiring to be top grade one Pipe Bands winning the Worlds?***

Eventually they decided that they would try their hand at competing in Britain and from time to time they'd sneak their way into a third prize somewhere, even up here in Scotland, they did that a couple of times as well.

***So, just switching the subject a bit, I understand you're an honorary member of the Eagle Pipers' Society?***

Yes.

***Can you tell us a bit about your involvement with them?***

Well, I joined the Eagles maybe about 1969 I think possibly. I had been out of the Army about three years and I was already, of course, a member of the Highland Pipers and had been from 1941 or thereabouts. So, I joined the Eagles and there was a chap there called Kaj Larssen, he was over there to take some instruction and he was probably only about eighteen or nineteen years at that time.

***Sounds like a Danish name?***

Taking some instruction from John MacLellan who was the instructor at Edinburgh Castle at that time and so I got to know Kaj in fact quite well by being over there with my wife eventually and my family and really knew Kaj and his wife, his son, and their family. His father, old Axel, ran a jewellery shop and he made jewellery, gold and silver jewellery with precious stones and things like that. He did a job for me too, I have a gold Albert that I wear to go with my gold watch; it's missing a few links now.

***What is an Albert if you don't mind me asking?***

It's a gold chain that you wear across your paunch.

***On the front, on your waistcoat, right.***

And old Axel did that job for me. In any case, Kaj and I we've been firm friends since then.

***Is Kaj a Danish man or a Scottish man?***

He's Danish.

***In the Edinburgh Eagle Pipers' Society?***

Yes, he joined the Heathers, I should say the Eagle Pipers at the same time as me and now when I go across, I have done now for the last several years, going right back to 2003 when I came back over here from Denmark to stay, every year when I go back at least once or possibly twice I go and stay with Kaj in his flat and that saves me hotel bills and also I arrange for him, and have done now all these years, to get me a ticket with one of the Scandinavian Airlines and presently for the last two or three years now I've flown with what they call, Norwegian Air and because he books quite early, you could say at least three, four or five months beforehand, you get a cheaper ticket then because you're booked very early.

***This was the Eagle Pipers' Society quite a long time ago?***

He pays for the ticket over there and then when I go back over I pay him and I take some Danish Kroner with me to pay the ticket.

***Ok, so that's Piping and the Scandinavian connection again. So, you've had a long life in Piping and probably parts of it that we haven't touched on or had enough time to go into in detail, is there anything in particular that we've possibly missed that you want to pick up on just now?***

Maybe my journeys to North America. I've done three tours in North America; the first tour that I did with the pipe band, I was not a Pipe Major at the time, I was a Sergeant back at the time in 1955 and it was the Pipes and Drums of both the First and Second Battalion of the Scots Guards and the big regimental Band, the military Band. We all

went over there with, I think it was an old Russian multi-millionaire, I think he was a Russian Jew, a chap called Sol Hurok, and it was what was called Sol Hurok Attractions and this man used to take the Russian Bolshoi Ballet over there and send them on tour round America, he would take some of the big British orchestras, he would take them across there and tour them around and some of the best pianists and violinists and all sorts. This was a new adventure for him taking a Scottish Pipe Band with dancers and in those times I danced as well, so I danced all around the eastern half of the country. The first tour we did was you might say, Chicago and Kansas City, Kansas and all the way down the country to Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Texas and all the other big cities on the eastern side. We started off first of all in Washington DC; we put the show together there and stayed with the US Marine Corps people in their barracks, at 8<sup>th</sup> Street and I Avenue, and New York and Chicago.

*The whole mid-west by the sound of it, everywhere down to Texas.*

Yes, everywhere and the second trip we did in 1958, that was, coast to coast. We went across to Los Angeles and San Diego and Sacramento and all these places, up through Oregon.

*And Washington State?*

Yes, and to Canada and Vancouver, Calgary and Edmonton, Saskatoon and all these places, and each time, we were over there for about twelve weeks and it was all buses. We had in fact four buses, one bus with all the Pipes and Drums; we had two buses with the military Band and the other bus purely instruments and a few members. We took all the seats out and there were rails along the side the bus and all our uniforms were hanging there with band drums and all that business. It was fine but it was quite hard work. Within a short while of starting on one of these tours you began to be a little bit leery of people who liked to come and see you and say “Oh, yes, my grandfather, he was Scots Irish, come with me and I’ll show you a good time”, you do that once and as you can imagine you don’t get back to your hotel till about four o’clock in the morning absolutely

drunk, so you'd be a bit careful about that sort of thing. But the American man and woman in the street were very pleasant people, very nice people, I always found that.

The third tour we did was in 1965. By that time I was Pipe Major and again that was you might say, the eastern half of the States and that went very well indeed. I also did a month with a sort of Edinburgh Tattoo type thing in Madison Square Gardens, that was in the old Gardens where Joe Louis, and Max Baer and Primo Carnera fought the prize fights, and we stayed on Governor's Island with the First American Army and that's right down near the Staten Island Ferry. The last thing I think we did was about six weeks' training in Canada in New Brunswick and we attended a Highland Games in Nova Scotia at a place called Antigonish. One of my young pipers who had an auntie who stayed in Vancouver, that's about 3000 miles away across Canada, and we were told that we would have a week's holiday where we could go where we wanted to go and I said I would go to Montreal and stay with some of the Canadian Army guys that I got to know. Then this chap came to me and said "Pipe Major, could I go and see my auntie in Vancouver"? I said, "You could if you had enough money to fly there and back". He said "Oh, I don't have to fly, there's a good bus service". I said to him "My dear boy, by the time you get there it'll be time to say to your auntie hello and goodbye and by the time you get back with buses you'll be absent". He said it couldn't be as far as that and I said "Right now we haven't started, we're only in London. You know where Moscow is"? He said "That's away over in Russia". "Well" I said "Moscow is only half the way from where you will be in Canada, from your auntie, three thousand miles at least". [Laughter]

***You gave him good advice. Saved him being put on a charge.***

I don't really know what he did but I still see this young guy from time to time when I go to the Guards Club whenever there's a piping night down there, which I do these days.

***When you look back at your life in piping and I'm drawing things to a close now, what gave you the most satisfaction or what would you say you are most proud of?***

I think that is probably the most satisfying thing I ever did, to attend the Piper Major's course as a young lad, as an Acting Local Unpaid Lance Corporal, and to pass it with distinction. That happened very, very early you could say in my life and I've never, ever forgotten it and, of course, at the same I'm also a Piper to the Royal Household which you get as a Pipe Major and Drum Majors also become Drummers to the Royal Household and you get that thing there, This one I got, I got an MBE signed by Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip. That one there.

***That's the Pipe Major, Edinburgh Castle, Willie Ross?***

If not that, equal with that is the fact that I actually made it to Piper Major in the Scots Guards. I actually eventually made it to where I wanted to be before I left the Regiment.

***When you think back to, when would it be, 1944, you've left the foundry, you've joined the Army, did you have any inkling as a young man then?***

Well, at that time, when I left to join the Scots Guards, you know, I just wanted to be a Piper in the Scots Guards. The position of being a Pipe Major never entered my head at that time, never ever entered my head at that time. No never, never entered my head at that time. Never, that was such an exalted position, it was like being catapulted into the Royal Family as the King.

***That was about , doing the arithmetic, about sixty odd years ago and it took you all over the world.***

All over the world, the only places that I haven't been are Australia, New Zealand and the furthest round I've been in was eighteen months in Malaya, that was an awful country, I suppose it's Ok for some

things but in those days there was a problem with the local Chinese who were inclined to have a communist side at that time and it was quite a dangerous place.

***Not the best time to have visited but you survived Malaya and you probably survived a lot else and so I think you've led a very interesting full life. As you say, right up there at the top, Pipe Major in the Scots Guards.***

As I said, to have lived the life that I've lived, seen the people I've seen, and visited the countries I've seen, eaten the food and stayed in the place that I've stayed, being accommodated here and there, well, again I would reiterate I would have had to be a very, very rich man as a civilian to have done all that.

***Many thanks for sharing all these stories with us, Pipe Major Robert Kilgour, thank you.***

You're welcome.