



NOTING THE TRADITION

An Oral History Project from the National Piping Centre



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Hello. This is Veronica Hartwich, interviewing Thomas Turner of Irvine, piper, 26th October 2012 at the National Piping Centre. Welcome Thomas.

Hiya.

I gave you some indication of things that we might talk about, so perhaps if we could start out with, how did you begin as a piper?

For me starting the pipes, there was no pipers in my family. There was no musicians really. I had an uncle who was a bit of a jack of all trades, playing everything, accordion, playing piano, different things, guitar. There was nobody else who played. My grandfather, Moses Davidson, who was from Kilwinning. He just had a love for Scottish music. He was always playing Scottish music in the house, when we were on holidays. It was everything from good folk music to the typical shortbread tin piping, whatever you wanted to call it. I just took an interest in the Scottish music as a whole from then. The more and more I listened, the more and more I was hearing the pipes and I just decided that I wanted to learn the pipes one day. I said to my Mum and Dad that I'd quite like to learn the pipes, they took it with a pinch of salt. They didn't think there was anything really there because at school, my sisters had all had the opportunity to play brass instruments at primary school. But, when I was at primary school, when I got the chance to go and audition to see whether I was suitable to play a brass instrument, I took the test. The teacher at the time said that I wasn't suitable, to be honest, and that I didn't have a musical ear, that I would never play an instrument.

Oh Dear (laughter).

I don't know if I was a wee bit stubborn that I just wanted to do something a bit different. That would have happened in Primary Five. It was about Primary Seven that I decided that I wanted to. There was all these people round about with brass instruments. Although, I like sound of brass instruments, I knew that it wasn't really for me and I wanted to learn the pipes. I got that in my mind, that was it, I wanted to learn the pipes and I just kept pestering my Mum and Dad to learn the pipes. At the time, my father, he was in the Scottish Prison Service and there was a prison service

pipe band at the time. What he did was, he sent an email to the pipers saying that my son was really keen to learn the pipes, and could they point him in the right direction to get a practice chanter, tutor book, and where I could get lessons in the local area in Ayrshire. So, not knowing what he was going to get back, he got an email back from another prison officer who played in the band at the time, Kenny Craig, who lives in Kilmarnock. He was working out at Dungavel Prison, private prison, at the time. He said “go to MacKay’s Music and get a practice chanter and phone me. I live in Kilmarnock, I’ll teach you the pipes”. I went up one night and Kenny introduced himself to me and Dad and he was dead keen. He hadn’t taught anybody for a while. Kenny was a piper in the army before he went into the prison service.

Ah, so you got somebody with good experience.

Kenny wasn’t a famous solo piper. I remember he was a really good player. He was a really good teacher. When he was in the army, he was actually a boy soldier, when Iain MacFadyen was piping, as well he played alongside Ian McLellan, the pipe major of Strathclyde Police band. He got lessons from Donald MacLeod. He had a real solid foundation.

So there was a good history there.

Aye. Because I found myself, even when I started, like Kenny’s background, when I started playing, Kenny was always giving sheets of music from Donald MacLeod’s stuff. I kind of took an interest in Donald MacLeod’s music and background just because I knew this guy taught, this guy Donald MacLeod was a tutor to my piping tutor.

It’s nice to know that.

It was. Donald MacLeod had been a tutor in the army at the time and taught a lot of people, passed on his knowledge from there, but I was just very lucky because Dad put an email roundabout his work pipe band, and I ended up meeting Kenny. Kenny started teaching me and I was getting two lessons a week with Kenny one to one. I started that at eleven, and I think I was that lucky getting the one to one lessons. I started in the February and we started playing, and then when I started playing my first tune, my Mum and Dad spoke to Kenny, saying when should they get me a set of pipes. It

was a case of they decided that if I'd learned six tunes by August, then they would get me a set of pipes for my Christmas that year.

Was that an incentive (laughter)?

That was my incentive, to have the six tunes as my target. Then, what happened, it was the beginning of June. Kenny caught my Dad and he said, remember they were talking about the incentive for the six tunes by August for a set of pipes. He said he can actually play twelve tunes, but we can't hold off, we really need a set of pipes now. I was a keen learner. I never put my practice chanter down, which I suppose was a good thing. I never had a set place for my chanter. I didn't have a drawer or a shelf, or anything like that for it. It would get put down wherever I last played it, and it got picked up from wherever I last played it, and then get put down somewhere else. If I saw it I'd pick it up and played it. Mum and Dad, their friends had children learning instruments at the time as well, and down in my area, a lot of people do brass that is kind of flung on them and do piano lessons, maybe forced on them by their parents. Whereas, I never got any instrument forced upon me, I wanted to learn the pipes.

It was your personal choice.

That was it. My Mum and Dad encouraged me, and I was getting the lessons. I think that was the difference from other children that had things forced upon them. Were forced to sit down for half an hour and practice, and then come in from school and practice, whereas I never sat down and practiced for half an hour. I just picked the chanter up and maybe over the day totalled two hours practice.

In other words, you were interested in what you were doing.

I just wanted to do it. That was it. I was lucky that I fell in the hands of a good tutor, and my mum and Dad were encouraging it as well. There was nothing put down to say there's a set of pipes, you need to play. I just took a notion that I wanted to learn the pipes.

You fell on your feet with the way things worked out with your father's connections.

It was probably one of the best decisions I've ever made, to learn the pipes. It's given me opportunities that I would never have had, if I wasn't playing the pipes.

So, you obviously must have carried on doing the lessons, and practicing and working with the piping through your school. What made you take the decision to go on and study because that's quite a big step?

Well, one of the things, I didn't really get much lessons through my school until I was doing Standard Grade music, because I was getting my own lessons.

That was the most important thing.

Then when you pick the standard grades, I picked music and picked the pipes. Apparently, legally the school at the time, had to make some effort to get you lessons. It actually took a year and a half before the school got me lessons. My school in my authority at the time. They're a lot better now but at the time in regards to the pipes, they were terrible. Personally, my music teachers were quite encouraging, but the authority weren't interested in pipers. I was the only piper in my school, and whenever there was any music things happening there would be pupils from school playing at them, but whenever they needed a piper, they'd call on Jim Butler.

Yes (Laughter).

I don't think it ever crossed their mind that they say "is there anybody learning the pipes in the school?" So, my Dad, he contested a bit, saying it was about time Thomas was getting lessons through school, because everybody else in school with an instrument was getting them. I would be going up to the College of Piping during the school holidays. I still got my lessons from Kenny and also a guy, Willie Gilmour because Kenny although he was in the army, hated piobaireachd. Then I started playing at Kilmarnock pipe band, and Willie Gilmour played, he was really into piobaireachd.

He was another Ayrshire piper?

He was another Ayrshire piper. Willie was a teacher for East Ayrshire and he played at Kilmarnock pipe band, really into piobaireachd, so he said he'd give me piobaireachd lessons. My week used to consist of going to band practice on a Monday night, I'd be at Willie's on a Tuesday night doing my piobaireach and band practice and then Wednesday at Kenny's and Thursday doing light music. It took about a year and a half, and my Dad just more or less said, if you don't get him lessons then I'll need to take him out the school, and send him to the Piping Centre or the College of Piping to get lessons during school time, so he is prepared for the exams that were coming up. At that time Jim Butler had sem retired, he was an art teacher in North Ayrshire and he had just semi-retired and started teaching round lot of primary schools. He came in and started giving me lessons. I then took on again, I went into Higher and got a qualification for music at school, and when I was in my Higher class what happened was, there was a load of people applying for the RSAMD at the time, but I didn't have the qualifications to apply that year. Then when I was in fifth year, I had to wait 'til my sixth year, 'til I was sitting the right amount of highers to be able to apply for university.

Getting the total and the range that they require.

Well that's one of the things. Also, the way my birthday fell, and because I was one of the younger ones in the year, I wouldn't have been able to go into university the following year anyway. I had to be in the sixth year.

Yes, it's getting the funding and things like that as well.

So, when I went into sixth year although I hadn't taken Advanced Higher I was still involved in the music department through a couple of different thing, my pipes and I was playing bass guitar at the time as well, so I was doing quite a bit for that. Application forms came in again for the RSAMD, and there was a lot of people saying they were applying for the academy and I decided that I would apply as well. I'll always remember this, the comment was "why would you apply, you don't even play a real instrument".

Oh dear (laughter) that's interesting.

It was just a culture there at the time, where you had to be playing a classical instrument, brass instrument or woodwind, but I got involved with the wind band and there was me the only piper in the school and not involved in anything other than my own stuff outwith...

Yes, that's right you wouldn't be able to be part of a school organised established musical group.

No, it didn't exist at that time. I know in North Ayrshire now, they have the schools pipe band and they also have the traditional music groups about the schools as well. I think there is a great thing now, it's something I missed out on at school. But, I didn't really miss out on it, because I still had my own pipe band.

You had an independent view point, and you were bringing something else in.

I think in the long run, I think music in the schools is great. But, I think as soon as you get the opportunity to move outwith the school, I think you're more likely to keep music on after you leave. My wife, she played the saxophone and when she left after sixth year, she had nothing.

There's not a follow on. It's very difficult. People move on without they move out of the area...

They don't have the music groups that they were playing in.

It just collapses.

Whereas, my piping never involved the school. I did it there at a school concert and stuff, but when I left sixth year, it was never a thing particularly since RSAMD, but when I was leaving school, it never crossed my mind will I still play this instrument when I leave school. Because, I was playing with the external pipe band, I was doing solo competitions. I then applied for RSAMD, and at that time I think there was five people that applied from my higher class and at the time. I was the only one that actually got in.

Got a place (laughter).

It was quite a, I'm not going to say good feeling that people didn't get in, but when I was the one that got told that from all the other ones applying, the ones that I said I didn't play a real instrument.

Yes, I can understand. A very difficult situation to be put into, for the age you were. Not very satisfactory.

No. That's what happened, and I applied for RSAMD and got a place but the decision, it's not that my Mum and Dad were pestering me. They found out that I was getting my place for RSAMD I was to go for that, whereas, I had other things in mind. Get out there and make money. So I'd applied for a load of apprenticeships as well, through the council, electrician, plumber. So one of my Dad's friends offered me an apprenticeship in painting and decorating, and when it came to it, about August time, I had been knocked back from all the apprenticeships. The only one I'd had was the painting and decorating or RSAMD I didn't want to be hanging wall paper and painting walls for the next four years. I just thought stuff it. I'm going to go to the RSAMD and I'll give university a bash. Again, in the long run that was a great decision that I made at the time as well. I don't regret that at all now.

Yes, you're lucky that way. Some people might regret having gone for further education instead of setting up. I think music does make a difference perhaps.

I just thought there are loads of people telling me, get yourself a degree, get educated to degree level, it will always assist you. I had the opportunity to do it, and on top of that I really enjoyed doing it, so I jumped at it. Sitting looking at the two roads I could have had, I know I won't enjoy painting and decorating. I went to RSAMD and spent four years there. I met a lot of good people, got lessons off Gavin Stoddart, Chris Armstrong, Allan MacDonald, Gordon Walker, Jimmy Banks. Also, introduced more, to playing other instruments at the time through Finlay MacDonald, because it was something that normally I didn't have any experience in, playing with other instruments like the traditional groups and how it works, or what key your tunes are playing in.

This was musicianship and the techniques and knowledge of piping

Yes. I think people sometimes get caught up in our own wee world, and they forget there is a different sort of behaviours that is expected when you are playing with other instruments. I like the way piping works, I think it's good to have a bit of both. You've got to have the knowledge of how to fit in with other instruments, so we don't look daft as well. When you turn up and it's like, here's a world class musician on the stage and one of them is a piper and if they have not been exposed to playing with other instruments... You just don't want piping to look daft as a whole.

No, if you've put the effort into a skill, you want it to work. Piping itself for your earlier tuition, seems have to have given you very good discipline, which you could apply to the new ranges of knowledge...

Well that's it. My earlier tutors at the time, both Kenny and Craig, and Willie Gilmour, they were both good, but they were both different. Kenny was of a background where he was in the army, and a lot of the tunes I learned that way from Kenny were influenced from his piping in the army. As I said earlier, a lot of Donald MacLeod tunes. What I really liked was piobaireachd experience and piobaireachd knowledge and Kenny, to be fair to him, he said I can play piobaireachd. He did a bit of piobaireachd in the army and he said "I could teach you the basics. However, I don't enjoy it. I don't have a great experience with it", and he feels that he didn't want to be setting me off on the wrong foot with piobaireachd. I respected him for that, because he wasn't going to teach you something just for ticking that box. Because, what was happening was, I was getting a bit frustrated because I'd be going to solo piping competitions and getting a first in the march, strathspey and reel then I wasn't even in the piobaireachd competition. Then when it came to the overall, I was nowhere to be seen. So people who were second and third in the march, strathspey and reel, were beating me overall so I was getting a bit frustrated that way. That's when Willie Gilmour started teaching me piobaireachd. He's just a guy who just loves piping. He loves listening to pipes and I think to be honest, I think he gets the greatest thrill out of teaching, in particular piobaireachd*. When he started teaching piobaireachd, he could go through a Kilberry book looking at tunes for me to play, and we spent a whole lesson just looking at tunes, because he would get so carried away just talking about background and how much he likes this, and how the

piobaireachd structure forms and the key of the piobaireachd. There was just so many tunes that he just had a fountain of knowledge for.

It was very good for you.

Oh yes. Actually, Kenny made the right decision saying I would rather not teach you piobaireachd, and he opened the gates for me to seek lessons elsewhere from Willie.

So, it sounds to me as if, correct me if I'm wrong, that the different types of tuition you got from your two teachers, probably gave you a wide range of possibility of knowledge, which then would be useful once you got to the academy.

Definitely. The other thing that was good from Kenny's perspective, was he always spoke about standards about having your pipes up. He was always going on about being in control of your tone. He always just made sure he gave me a good standing in how to set up a good bagpipe, so that it was in tune, it was steady and I was getting a good quality tone from it.

Aye, know your instrument.

Later on, eventually when I was playing with Kilmarnock Pipe Band, Kenny MacLeod from MacCallum Bagpipes, he took over as Pipe Major, and he also started giving me piping lessons for solos there as well. I took on a slightly different form because both Kenny and Willie gave me a good grounding, and technical ability, and musical ability but when I started working with Kenny, he started to bring my standards up, and my technical ability and also the quality of my pipes as well. I knew what sound I was looking for, and Kenny helped me achieve that really. Getting taught through one of the joint owners of MacCallum Bagpipes, I had a great resource there available to go and test things out.

It had given you quite a sophisticated level of knowledge.

Definitely. One of the things is, I was one of these guys who'd work and work away with my pipes, and I'd be happy with my pipes, go to a competition, and I'd play the junior competitions, and then I'd stay about and listen to the seniors. I would hear Gordon Walker playing and that was

it, I wasn't happy with how my pipes sound. I know that at the time, I was never going to be achieving the sound of Gordon Walker, but I wanted to achieve a better sound than I was getting at the time. So, the next thing, I'd be going back again, and I'd be footering with my reeds and changing tape and drone reeds to try and get the sound as close to the professionals as I could. Obviously, that was not a bad thing. I might have wrecked a lot of reeds at the time.

Yes, but you were learning every time (laughter).

I was learning by my mistakes, and when Kenny started teaching me, he gave me a bit more guidance than on how to achieve the sound I was looking for. So, I had a good grounding and different experiences, because I was getting taught through different people. The likes of Jim, when Jim Butler started teaching me in the school, one of the things was he felt, Jim kind of underestimates himself a bit and felt that he couldn't really do much with me at the time. But, one of the things we did was, Jim was one of those guys who was forever going through music books, looking for new tunes and he would come in and say "oh, I've got this tune, this is a good tune, why don't you try this". The amount of tunes I learned for just Jim handing me a bit of music, and we just sat and played together. Again, it expanded my repertoire quite a bit. Because, at the time, I was just always on the tunes for competing, and I think you can get a bit narrow minded, and you're missing out on a lot of the stuff that isn't just about competing. That's not what piping is about.

I suppose that there's a risk, that you can get caught in the competition world.

Definitely, because I found myself getting caught up a bit in that. I was always looking at the next march or the next strathspey and reel. I could play on the next piobaireachd, whereas there are so many three fours, four four marches and six eights, that I wasn't learning and it's just because I had to open a book and start learning them. That's one of the things that Jim reminded that I needed to do, and that's what I did with Jim. We'd go through books, and sheets and sheets of music, and I've learned a lot of good tunes that way that I still play regular.

A new tune brings a new challenge.

That's it.

So it sounds like you've gained a lot as a person from the piping.

Definitely. It's the opportunities that it brings. One of the things was, I wouldn't have been able to get into any other university. That's one of these things, the piping degree gave me the opportunity to get educated to a degree level, using my pipes to do something I enjoy. Whereas, it's the likes of although I was into sport, it wasn't my specialist subject so to speak. There are people who are good at maths, good at English, good at science, who are naturally going down that route, whereas I was given music, in particular the pipes. So, the other music degrees wouldn't have suited me really, because they'd be looking for a standard in the piano, and I didn't play piano at all at that time. The piping degree opened the doors for me, going to a higher education which if I didn't have the pipes, I probably would have been a painter and decorator (laughter).

Yes I suppose you would have found another life, but this worked out and the pipes have been really something. So you came out with your degree, were you carrying on playing in pipe bands at all while you were a student?

While I was a student I didn't. I was too busy, I was quite happy to play my pipes during the day and as part of my degree, but I didn't want my social life being about piping at that time. To be honest, I think I had a bit of missed opportunity, because I refused to play with a Grade One band, I refused to compete in the solos. At the time I was getting lessons off the tutors that were at the Piping Centre, and I was just being a bit stubborn, refusing to compete in the solos. I had four years of learning off the best, and although I use it to my benefit, looking at it at the time, I could have used that to give myself a start in solo piping at the time.

Challenge yourself a bit.

But, I didn't. I was doing my degree and my music as part of my studies, but when it came to outwith university, I was just too busy playing rugby at the time. That's what I wanted to do. I suppose in a way, it was a balance that I needed.

When you're a student, you're supposed to give yourself other interests and not become total tunnel vision.

So I think that the sport gave me that balance, but sometimes I don't regret doing rugby. I just regret not going out and getting involved in the competing, playing in my grade one band a bit more. During my first year, first and second year, I didn't play with a pipe band at all.

Did you miss it, or was it just life as it's always been?

No, I didn't I didn't miss it at all. The most I'd played with before I came to university, was grade two bands and when I started at RSAMD. I didn't miss the bands. I was still getting my piping. When I was in third year, my Dad's pal, who was in the prison service with him at the time, he left and had joined the police force quite a few years earlier, and he got to the stage where he started Central Scotland Police pipe band and he phoned me up. Although I was down here, he said "look, I'm needing pipers to come and help me get this off the ground, will you come up?" I couldn't really say no, I didn't have any excuses to say no and I thought it'd be quite happy getting involved with Robert Russell, the Pipe Major of Central Scotland. So I decided to go and I started playing with Central Scotland Police. Chris Armstrong was teaching me at the time and Finlay being teaching on the course, Finlay was playing with Scottish Power at the time, along with Chris. Chris, I think took over as pipe major, I think when I was in first year or second year and Chris was asking me if I wanted to come to the band and Finlay was pestering me as well. I just wasn't interested. I couldn't be bothered with the two nights a week practice that was expected of Grade 1. I thought I had enough to do with my university. I had all that during the day, and then extra studies we do at night and my practising. I wasn't interested. At the end of my third year, I applied for the police. That was another career path that was something to do after university, was join the police force. When I applied for the police, I found myself, during the recruitment process, I found myself at Pitt Street with the police pipe band. Because, there was pipe band mentioned on the phone, the pipe sergeant of the band got on recruitment, and he was like "will you come up to the pipe band?"

No doubt that came to his attention. (laughter)

He asked me if I'd be interested in playing with the pipe band and I said, I held myself back. I was just like, I was more interested in getting the job, because that was the reason for applying for the police at the time so. Then he said he'd pass my details on to Donald MacKay, who was the pipe major at the time, and he phoned me and asked me to come up for an audition. So I went up and I played for Donald, I found myself being told to come back next week and the following week, I got asked to go to Australia with the band. Then, all of a sudden, I found myself involved in a Grade One, and at the time it was somewhere I didn't want to be. But when I start it I enjoyed it, and I joined the police force the following year. I took a year out because there's a lot to learn the first year of joining the police, so I didn't want to be committing to a pipe band so I took a year out. I found that year I really missed the band, that I couldn't get along to watch the World Championships because I was working, and couldn't get a day off. So, I was determined that once that year passed, I was definitely going back to the band. There was a few changes happening to the band that were a bit political, like certain people trying to close the band down and different things. Donald had been my pipe major with the band and he was no longer the pipe major, and he said to me he was going to Scottish Power as Pipe Sergeant just round about the time I'd been talking to Chris. He said if it didn't work out with the police, I'd be welcome to come to Scottish Power. It wasn't working out, with Donald saying he was going there I thought it may be a better place to go. So I decided to go to Scottish Power. I went to the band and it was still in the back of my head do I really have time for this, working shifts and expected to make as many practices as I can. But, I'm really pleased I just went for it. I can't imagine me now not playing with a band.

How many years have you been with them?

I've done three seasons with Scottish Power, so this will be my fourth year with them. It's great playing, there's a really good bunch of guys in the band, and there was always two bands that I looked up to playing with. One was Strathclyde Police, and the other was Scottish Power. Strathclyde Police, I wanted to play with them just in the fact that I had an intention in going to the police and they had this reputation and I just wanted to play for them. I was following solo piping quite a bit when I was younger and used to watch Scottish Power, and the amount of top quality solo players

they had amongst their ranks, I was like, I'd love to play with that band. Me being from Ayrshire, I was a bit of a fan of Gordon Walker when I was younger. I still am a fan of his playing and Roddy MacLeod and stuff, that's the band, if I wasn't in Strathclyde Police, if I had the choice, I wouldn't know which to pick. I used to watch Scottish Power and think that was the band I want to play for, because of the total quality players they had amongst the ranks. Although there's none of the big names like Gordon Walker or Roddy MacLeod but Chris Armstrong is pipe major, and he's one of these guys that I've always looked up to when he's playing. You stand in a circle and you've got young guys like David Wilton, Craig Muirhead, Gavin Ferguson, all these players who you know in the future are going to be the next Gordon Walker. So, you can see that forming. The band has still got the quality solo players in, and just at a different stage in their career. It's really good to be part of that, because the band is going places and there's a good team attitude. I just couldn't right now, imagine not playing with the band. I would miss it too much. When I think back to those years ago, when Chris first asked me to go the band, and I was like, not interested. I just think sometimes, I'd been missing out on that for a few years.

And you've got there (laughter)

Well that's it. I'm happy with where I am now.

I noticed that, I looked up the biographies that there are players from lots of different countries. Is that quite interesting to play with people from different backgrounds?

Well, the thing with the different backgrounds, the most different background has been the French players. We've got a standard repertoire, where the tunes you learn and you're first playing them and you're playing with a lower grade band and you're out doing street parades, you know your Scotland the Brave, Black Bear, Highland Laddie, all these kind of tunes. The Scottish guys just know them, and I've seen us playing at a function and you know, we have to play this and we have to play that, and the French piper in the band just looks puzzled. He does not know these tunes at all, he hasn't heard them. The likes of his repertoire, we don't know what their basic tunes are to a certain extent so. It's quite interesting when you see a basic tune, we had a bit of a laugh at band this year and

whenever Chris would tell us just to blow up and give the pipes a bit of heat, behind Chris's back we all whisper a tune we're going to play and blow up and play the Skye Boat Song and see the puzzled look in this guy's face, like what are these guys doing? No, it's just he thinks that we all know. You get pipers who would just do it like that.

So it was a bit of a challenge for him (laughter).

Aye. The other ones from the different countries... As far as background, the people in there are kind of similar.

Working in the same tradition.

Aye. What I do find interesting about having pipers playing from other countries, is people's reaction on who are maybe not involved in pipe bands and stuff. People's reaction when they find out that we've got a guy who lives in New York, who travels back and forward for practices during the winter, and for competitions during the summer. We've got a guy from New Zealand who comes over for six weeks every year, to play at three major championships. He's doing all the practising back home. We've got David Caldwell as well who travels back and forth from Northern Ireland. People don't understand why people would do that. They think it's strange. Why would you fly all the way from New York to play with this band in Glasgow, and I suppose that's a sign that the guys in the band are enjoying the playing. They're enjoying the camaraderie and they're expecting big things now. Chris has got good leadership skills there, and I would say some of the things that he might have lacked in, I mean Chris's musical ability and leadership skills are really good, but I think some of the things that he's lacked in, Donald MacKay has had the experience in being the pipe Major of a championship winning Grade One band. Donald's also had the experience of being of being in the army, so you're putting these two together. It's a good balance.

Yes. How do you feel about being a member of a prize winner (laughter). Or is it just all about playing? (laughter)

Well, it's a bit of both. One of the things is, I've yet to win a major championship with the pipe band. The best we've had is far is second, and some of the results that might have not went our way, we came off and

everybody is just delighted with the way we've played. Every year I've played with a band. The first year I played with a band, we got sixth in the world championships that year, and I remember coming off from the medley performance and coming off with a high, thinking that was the best piping performance of a band that I've been a part of. I know I hadn't had a lot, only two seasons at grade one, because I played with the police but I started playing with Scottish Power that was the best performance. Then the following year, we got third, and I remember coming off that medley thinking that was even better. That was top of the performance again. And again this year we got second and again, it blew away last year's performance. In my opinion, I felt, I just remember, what I really like about the piping in the band is, when you get to the major championship days, and particularly the Worlds, and we're tuning up and we've quite a relaxed style in the band. A lot of the guys are laughing and joking when they tune up, but we still go out as serious and focused. Chris, on the outside look, he's trying to remain calm. Knowing the type of character he is, he's not really that calm but he's trying to keep a calm front. What I really enjoy is when we're there and we're just enjoying the tune up and the sounds going well. There's crowds right around the pipe corps, with people trying to stand right at your back so they can listen as close as they can. Just being part of where you are standing playing, group of pipers, group of musicians part of the band and you're one of the main attractions of that day. In particular for us, we're one of the biggest hopes, I would say the biggest hope for a Scottish band to win the world championships which hasn't happened since 2005. So, being part of that band where people want you to go on and play well so you can win, it's great. The atmosphere that is built up when you're starting to tune up, and there's guys trying to get as close as possible to you to hear the band playing. Then when you're marching, and those people are lining the route where you're going to march, and watch you doing the final tuning and then you go on, and everywhere you look there's crowds when you're competing. You're trying to just focus on what you're playing and there's cameras everywhere, it's a good buzz. Particularly when the band plays well. Then when you come off, you're still on that high. What's really good is at the Worlds this year, as soon as we cut, as soon as we stopped their pipes, everybody stopped their pipes and we looked round the band and we were all smiling. I think we were smiling out of relief, but also because we were really pleased with the way we played as well. It's a good feeling. The playing side is the main part, because if I didn't enjoy playing, if I was

going in the championships and I didn't enjoy the playing, I don't think I would be, I wouldn't last. I'm also desperate to win a World Championships with the band as well.

It must be nice, to get that level of acknowledgement.

Definitely. The playing side is great. If we keep that going there's going to be championships coming our way. I'm not willing to give up before that.

So you hope for playing with the Scottish Power band, or some other good band to carry on a few years?

I'm hoping that the same team we've got now at Scottish Power will last for quite a few years, because it's quite a young band. The majority of the guys are early mid twenties with a few older ones, which we need as well to have the experience. Chris is quite a young pipe Major so I'm hoping that that, the drum corps as well, they have a lot of young guys as well so I'm hoping that the same team of guys stay about for a good few years. I think if that happens, we'd have the potential there. There's quite a bit of history in the band.

Yes, make a few waves.

I think our determination to get to the top, if and when we get there we'll be determined to stay there as well. (laughter)

(laughter) A fight to keep yourselves at the top.

I think that's one of the things about the attitudes of the players that are there. We're all good pipers, we all enjoy our playing but we also want to win as well.

All I can say for that, is best of luck and keep at it (laughter). Apart from the band playing, which I think you obviously enjoy very much, are there any other piping developments that you're moving on to, or if you still do solo work?

I've not done solo work for quite a few years. But I'm looking, I mean I refused to do it when I was at uni, and then when I joined the police I'd

been too busy with stuff. After I finished my training period, I also took on the police diploma which is full of learning, which I've just finished. Now that I've finished that, I'm looking to get back into the solos, because I'm doing more and more playing because of the band. I'm thinking that I should try and throw my heart into the solo arena as well. It's not something that I'm not familiar with, it's just I've been away from it for quite a bit, and I think it will take a year or two to get back into the swing of it.

Obviously the techniques, the listening to your own music will be different from the band.

Definitely. That's where I'm planning to get back into solo piping again. Start taking lessons again as well, because I think whatever level you're playing at, you still need lessons for solos, because you don't hear yourself. I think sometimes, particularly if you've been playing something and you record it, the things you have thought were your strong points in the tune, maybe aren't. And then the weaknesses that you think you'd been working on are fine. So I think just having that critical ear on you when you're practising the solos, I think you need that as well.

Tutoring is generally invaluable, for keeping you going and building up and improving all the time. Well let's see how it goes. The other thing is, are there any other directions that you feel are a longer term future do you see yourself. Obviously you're going to stay as a piper, irrespective of whatever. Do you for example, see yourself becoming a teacher or tutor yourself?

Well I teach a couple of boys back home locally. Whether that expands a bit more, I don't know. It's hard to fit it in sometimes when you're working full time, and you've got the pipe band as well. I would like a job as a piping tutor. Having the opportunity of being more involved in piping again. If I was offered the chance, I would probably take it, but from a personal side it would be hard to try and make that move. With working in the police I've got different avenues, ambitions, workwise. If I move too much towards the piping, I'd be throwing them away as well.

Yes, that's a case of where you must focus for the best opportunities.

One of the things is sometimes,, I think I've been getting more enjoyment from my piping now when it has been. Although it's more than just a hobby with the amount of effort you put in and the level that I'm doing it at with the band, but having the piping as a hobby I've been getting more enjoyment out of it than what I was when I was studying it all the time, although I enjoyed it at the time. It's different now. I'm doing now because I want to, not because I have to go and play there because it's part of my course, I have to go and put in a performance, I have to play because that's what's my course guidelines. I'm playing because I want to play.

Yes. You've got the intensity of the enjoyment of doing it and working at it, as that is your choice. Whereas if you're studying, there's an intensity, the intense of (59:16) which comes from outside of you.

One of the things when I was at uni not that was a bad thing the Director of the Piping Course for the majority of my time there was Simon McKerrell. One of the things Simon had to say, as a kind of guidelines on how many piobaireachds we should be learning in a year and that used to really annoy me. Because I was like, I'll learn the piobaireachd if I like learning the piobaireachd you know, not just learning it for the sake of marking it off that I've learnt the three or four piobaireachds this term, or my three or four piobaireachds next term, if I didn't want to learn a piobaireachd then that was it, I wouldn't have put any effort into memorising it or, maybe a bit stubborn. If I wanted to learn the tune I did it because I enjoyed the music, not because I had to. One of the things I suppose with the band, it's the likes of the music we play is ultimately decided on by Chris. One of things of being part of the band, is that I want to learn the tunes to play them in the band.

In other words, it's being part of the band membership that makes a difference to you.

Yes. Certainly what I found the year I had out of the band when I was working. Because I wasn't doing solos or anything, and I wasn't playing in a band. I found the time that I was playing the pipes was minimal. It was getting harder and harder to turn round. I wouldn't just take the notion, oh, I'll take my pipes out and have a tune tonight, because the pipes are not an instrument that you can do this with. If they sit in a box for a couple of weeks, the first night you are just going to be footering away....

It's not like the piano where somebody else does the tuning.

Aye. One of the things is my wife doesn't understand, coming up to a major championship with a band, usually for two weeks, I play my band chanter and my pipes regular anyway during the season but usually in the two weeks leading up to it, I will probably make sure I play them every day. She doesn't understand that I need to play my pipes. She's like "what do you mean you need to play your pipes" and you're like well "I just do". I need to go there and play them. It's a kind of pride thing. You don't want to turn up with your pipes needing work at the band practice, you want to be one of the ones that just turn up there and your pipes are going. I don't imagine ever giving the pipes up. I can see myself playing in the band for many years to come. Hopefully in the near future, take the step and get back out to doing a few solo competitions. I'm not looking to do a lot because I'm not saying I'm not capable, but I'm not willing to put in all the work to get the very top. I'm looking to put in a reasonable amount of work, and go out and play at some competitions and play well, and get a prize here and there. At the moment I'm not looking to.

You're not looking to make a career out of winning competitions.

No. I just don't have the desire to do it. If you don't have that desire I think the one who does is always going to beat you. I would like to do well, but I'm not willing to give the time to be at the top.

It's a dedication, which really takes you almost out of everything else. So you find that being in the police service and the piping don't clash with each other?

Sometimes. Working shifts you end up working shifts in the police. It can mean you end up missing band practice, or maybe you're missing a couple of band jobs that are not ones that you feel you should be there but are good to go and play at. There is that clash of if there's a major operation thing happening or a big event, happening on the same day as the World Pipe Band Championships, there's always that fear that I am going to be working somewhere. I try to plan my time off for the band. I prioritise it and always make sure that the first day that I take off in the year, is the World Pipe Band Championships and bring it back to the major

championships. I've always got that fear that I'm going to miss out. A good day with the band when I've been stuck at work, that can happen to anybody.

You don't have to be in that type of work.

There is a greater risk working shifts and not being off every weekend, and the expectation that you need to work the weekend. There's always that opportunity to miss an important competition.

It hasn't affected you too much?

No. I think having a work life balance, I'm not one of these people who comes home and only thinks about their work. I'll come home from work, get my pipes, and go to band practice as well so. I'm usually at work thinking about the band thinking "this competitions coming up". It's a good balance. Hopefully I can keep it.

Because they're two both good things, between the two. Well I have run through the questions I had in my head, but it's your story. If you've got anything else that you'd like to raise about piping.

I'm trying to think of other things and what I have been involved in piping, the folk club down at Irvine.

That's how I got in touch with you through Jess.

When I think it's given me a different kind of outlook on music as well, because I've been introduced to a lot of different music that we've been and again, it's piping that got me involved in that because there was an open stage and I went along and played at that and from then on in...

Blew them away didn't you? (laughter)

I've got involved in that. Every year at the Marymass Folk Festival if I turn up at something without my pipes, they'll go mad. It's one of these things where everyone is sat singing songs and playing different instruments. You've got to watch your time and choose carefully when you're going to play the pipes, because you don't want to stand on

anybody's toes and blast the pipes off when somebody was just about to do a solo.

Yes, there's one of the local women who always sings at an evening and you don't dare even speak. (laughter).

One of the things is, that it's funny because when I go along to these folk nights, I've took a real liking to a lot of the folk songs. To me I want to hear songs. I like hearing new songs, I like hearing the older songs that I know well. Some people think that because I'm an instrumentalist I'll get bored, or I'm looking for the band to come on with fiddles and the whistles and smallpipes, whatever. But to be honest I've heard all of that, it's nothing new to me. It's the fact that because I get to do instrumental stuff I am not so big on sitting watching and listening to it, I'd rather get involved in songs. One of the things I do is, if I'm going to be playing at one of these things where it's an informal gathering where we're playing at one of the pubs down in Irvine at the festival, I kind of look at folk songs that are able to be compatible with the pipes and try learning a wee bit of the music that way. I find myself every year at the Festival, learning a new song that can go on to pipes, because you'll be sitting listening to a song and you think, I need to go and play that. Then you go away thinking about it, and the next day you go in and you go, try this, and you put it on and they start singing. I quite like that side as well. The pipes again got me involved in music that isn't piping, it's linked in a way because it's the folk music. It's got me involved in the folk club, when I can, when it doesn't clash with band practice. I usually go to any of the concerts and stuff, I always make sure I go to as much of the folk festival as I can. It's been great because they've welcomed the pipes, it's something that they didn't really have, so when a piper has come in, they've welcomed it, because they have always tried to do a bit of folk music, but the fast stuff as well they like that so...It's been good as well, but I can't think of anything else.

It's very interesting actually. Because, after all, the pipes were musical instrument played in this country, not at a very early stage once the Scottish regiments were established, but was a military music tradition from the Highland society but pipes were played across Scotland and probably parts of England, certainly as part of local music. You'd have sometimes I think, had a piper who was part of the bell man and the announcer, and the town piper. But you also have

just simply song and dance and weddings. It's also rather nice. You hear a good tune, and then you think about playing it.

It's something that I just, this might sound a bit daft, but so that the pipes are that bit more accepted in those circles. It's to show people that pipes can do more than Scotland the Brave, the Rowan Tree and stuff like that. If I can take something from their musical background and play it, it's showing them that they are quite a versatile instrument and there not as restrictive as people may think. When I play songs, songs from the McCalmans that I like I've put on to the pipes and I've gone in and played them. Folk have thought that's great.

That's making the audience re-think. Anything else?

Nothing

We've done very well. We've actually got an hour and a quarter. Well thank you very much, let's hope nothing's gone wrong with this. Thank you Thomas.