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Piping Perfection - established 1980
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[July Newsletter](#)

Dear Piping Enthusiast,

We are now firmly ensconced in the new abode of Piping Perfection. The move went well and business has continued uninterrupted even although it was a lot of extra work at my end. As previously mentioned, we are in Kirkintilloch and have the splendid Campsie Hills as a backdrop with plenty of fresh air and the famous Forth and Clyde canal for company - each morning, I walk to work along the canal-side from my nearby house, which takes me about 25 minutes. It's lovely at this time of year but ask me again in December and it may be a completely different story! I am just back from a much needed and most enjoyable holiday in Croatia. If you have never visited, you should try their lovely food, scenery, weather and most hospitable people - it's hard to believe there was terrible conflict in that region not so many years ago. Anyway, on my return to our new premises, I had a most welcome surprise. Dave Harper has composed a 6/8 march entitled " James Begg's Welcome to Kirkintilloch" - how fantastic is that?? I still can't believe it and with Dave's permission, it is reproduced below. Dave is a full time player based in Norfolk and is available for various functions. Should you require Dave's piping services please advise. Enjoy.

Yours aye,
James C. Begg
Piping Perfection

A musical score for a 6/8 march. The title is 'James Begg's Welcome to Kirkintilloch' and it is a 'March' by 'D Harper (19 June 2017)'. The score is written on four staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 6/8 time signature. The music consists of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some rests and dynamic markings.

News - Piping Live.

Piping Trade Show - **STOP PRESS** - James Begg will be in attendance.

Come along and meet bag, reed and pipe makers at this Trade Show at The College of Piping on Thursday 10th August.

There will be the opportunity to discuss your own needs, band set up and more with some of the top names including Begg Bagpipes, Wallace Bagpipes, Chris Armstrong Pipes/ X-treme Reeds and G1 Reed Makers.

This event is free to attend.

Date & Time: Thursday 10th August 2017 at 10:30

Venue: [College of Piping](#)

Tickets: Free



Focus on Bags - Part 1

I thought this month you might be interested in some of the ins and outs of what is our most famous product in the world of piping - the Piping Perfection Begg Bag and so we now have Part 1 of a 2 Part Series

As someone who has spent getting on for 40 years making and selling pipe bags to the world's top solo pipers and pipe bands, I am often asked my opinion on piping products in general and in particular pipe bags. So as there seems to be a lot of mystery about it I thought I would try to explain a little bit about pipe bags firstly. As time goes on other subjects of piping interest can be tackled. In many bagpipes through out the world the bag used is traditionally the leather bag –

perhaps sheepskin, cow hide, goat, possibly elk, or dog. The bag is made using the whole skin of the sheep or goat or part of the cow skin as it is a lot bigger with the head forefeet and hind quarters removed. In the Mediterranean area the skins are tied to create the bag but the highland bagpipe is cut from a pattern and sown by hand. We have today synthetic materials being used as pipe bags – Gortex, woven nylon with zippers or clamps and various other combinations but essentially all similar. Most of the synthetic bags seem to do the job of holding the air and dispersing moisture from the breath but only to a moderate degree. Some pipers will find these bags to their satisfaction. I would suggest that greater success would be achieved with the leather bag either sheepskin or hide. The main advantage that attracts pipers is the apparent lack of maintenance, which the synthetic bags proclaim. This is certainly true for gortex and suits the very occasional player but it has other problems such as being floppy and also moisture retentive. We should consider that a pipe bag also acts as your sound box and it is crucial to the final tone that you will get from your bagpipe. It is fundamental to have the correct bag on as the wrong one will not give the comfort or tonal platform to work from i.e. if it's not right your bagpipe will be very erratic and unstable.

The Benefits of a Leather Bag are as follows:

1. Improves posture - you can adjust and fit it to suit personal taste
2. and in particular have the blowpipe directed nicely towards the mouth.
3. The pipes won't fall of the shoulder when you stop playing.
4. Smooth clean finish as you are in complete control of the bagpipe i.e. no trailing drone sound.
5. Solid feel under the arm and stops drones moving either up or down or backwards and forwards.
6. Naturally dries out overnight removing the moisture from the previous days practice.
7. Keeps stable moisture content in the bag and therefore stops the pitch of your chanter reed from sharpening too much. This is particularly true in warm days.
8. Moulds to your shape and gives more comfort.



Photo is of skins prior to cutting and stitching.

What Should a Good Bag look like?

1. It should have good all round thickness with no extremes of thickness.
2. Stitching approximately 4 to the inch in sheepskin and 4 to 5 in cowhide. Each bag will not be exactly the same and it is up to the bag maker's judgment and feel as to what is best. The stitching must be straight.
3. Avoid skins which are very poorly marked on the out side although some natural flesh marks are possible.
4. The important part is the inside of the skin (hair side) and this is where you have to trust that the bag maker has done a good job and checked it for damage i.e. pinholes scaring.



The skins used go through a very rigorous selection process. The sheep in particular have to be finely graded as size skin and damage make many unusable. Many thousands are sorted to be left with only the best. The type of skin is also important with sheep from Norway, Iceland and Britain all being used. The tanning process is also crucial to the skin. We use alum as a tanning agent for sheep and chrome for the cows. There are many processes to go through until the skin is fully cured. It is in fact a bit like baking a cake. In both cases the end result is always slightly different. It is usually desirable to have a slightly greasy feel. The main thing is to let the skin breath. The tanning process is quite complex and takes quite a bit of explanation but James Begg keeps a close eye on it so that a high standard is maintained.

How long should a Skin last?

This will vary from piper to piper but on average 1 to 2 years for sheep and 3 to 4 for cow. Bags will be able to be used for a long time after this period but from a hygiene and tonal point of view it is advised to change them.

Do Leather Bags smell?! Of course they don't.

Leather is a beautiful material. Its soft, tough natural, pleasant to work with can not be copied and has been around since the beginning of time. It will only smell if kept too long or is badly looked after. If some one says their bag smells - you now know why. Leather is certainly more appealing than metal clamps o - rings and cat litter.

What type of Bag should I use?

Cow -for very hot climate where you want to retain moisture or when piper does not play on a regular basis. **Sheep** - for absorbing moisture sheepskin is unbeatable - needs a bit of maintenance but its very straight forward. Bag making is a craft and not an exact science. You need patience, knowledge of piping and plenty of practice to be good at it. Having made the bag it is also crucial to have it well fitted and this is where the success of the Begg bag has come from. Its not just being competent at one stage but putting all of them together to create the perfect bag; time and time again.

Looking after the Bag.

Looking after your bag should be no great hardship. The bag initially needs a small amount of seasoning. A little periodically is the way ahead not a huge amount all at once - let it get absorbed. A new bag after initial seasoning will need dressed in 1 week's time then 2 weeks later and 1 month after that - at this point, a little every 2/3 months thereafter is ideal. These are

guesstimates as each skin will vary. A bag that takes a lot of dressing may not necessarily be a bad thing. It's just taking more time to seal so don't panic if it appears not as rock solid as the old bag you've taken off. The bag reaches its peak about the 2 month mark and eventually loses its moisture controlling aspect after a good amount of playing. This will vary from player to player. When the bag has had its useful life, you will notice a black spread of moisture that can occur quickly and you may notice your pipes beginning to become less stable. The reason apart from the wetness coming through the skin and onto the cover and cloths is the potential for the skin to tear and completely leak. This is not something a pro would allow to occur.

Tying in the Bag.

The art of tying in a pipe bag was once described to me as a dark art. I suppose there is a degree of practice as well as brawn to achieve a good tie-in. The bottom line is to essentially make all the stocks tight and airtight with no creases around the stocks. Angling the stocks in the correct direction is vital and this is especially true of the blowpipe so to ensure a comfortable position in the mouth. The length of blowpipe is crucial too and I'm sure there are still players where this is not correct. The Big Blow blowpipe allows good air flow and comes in different lengths should you feel yours is either too long or short. Perhaps the hardest stock to achieve success with is the chanter stock. Patience is a virtue at this point. Ideally, it is tight first time but due to the variance in chanter stock sizes this often needs a second shot. Padding the stock with a wad of leather can assist should the stock not be a snug fit. Positioning of the stocks is of a personal opinion. I tend to use an average setting with the drones slightly forward to give a small slope to the drones. All stocks can vary position-wise so experience will help you find the ideal position. We are all slightly different so find what suites you e.g. chanter higher up or lower and blowpipe at a large angle or more erect. Size of bag is important too and too large is often the mistake. However, there are some large guys out there and a larger bag certainly can be beneficial if you can manage it. Bespoke bags are made on occasions and personally, I don't see too much difference from straight to swan neck. In the 80s, I did nothing but straight. As the influence of North American bands and others grew, we adopted a complete change and now virtually all bags are swan. I find this an interesting point and demonstrates just how international piping has become. The straight neck can give a more solid platform but unless well fitted can give the impression of cutting off the airflow. The swan is easier to fit and the shape can be more attractive to the eye. The importance of a good tie-in is self evident and we offer such a service should you prefer to avoid the dark art yourself!

And here is a nice way to end.

We continually aim to operate at the highest levels of quality and the effort involved is more than worth it when we get emails from customers like this one from Mitch McDowell in Ontario, Canada - received when I was over in Croatia. Thanks Mitch and you made my holiday for sure.

"This is just a brief message to let you know how impressed I am with the quality of your pipe bags. Approximately a year and half ago, I purchased one of your hide bags and it is without doubt one of the finest I have ever played in the past 40 years. I honestly don't think I've had to season this bag more than twice since I tied it in, and it remains just as tight as a drum, despite regular playing. Please keep up with your most excellent work, as I detest synthetic pipe bags and live in fear of the day when traditional hide or sheepskin bags are no longer being produced; may that day never come!"

To be continued - look out for Focus on Bags Part 2 in early August

YouReport

If you would like to report on any aspect of the Piping World from wherever you live, or if you would like to comment on any articles or issues, we'd be pleased to hear from you. Email to bill@beggbagpipes.com

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