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[December Newsletter](#)

Dear Piping Enthusiast,

As the Autumnal hue gives way to Winter, we are now at the close of the northern hemisphere 2016 piping season and it has come and gone so quickly. We can all look back with pride and pleasure at the quality and standard of playing as well as the organisation and execution of multiple events. Piping events and functions don't just happen by themselves and for the organisers it is quite often a thankless task which can even attract criticism and derision. Appreciation of the tasks involved can often be in short supply and successful outcomes are only achieved by the dedication and efforts of large numbers of volunteers - to them, we offer a huge thank you and we would really appreciate more of the same for 2017!

As mentioned in our last newsletter, I travelled up to Inverness for the annual [Northern Meeting](#) solo piping competition. It was a well run occasion yet again but I must say a £50 competitor entry payment is a bit scrooge-like. An event of this quality should be able to finance itself without charging the player like this - maybe it should be the other way round with £50 being given to each player as appearance money. It is even more astonishing to find that Juniors are charged £15 entry money for the Junior competition. It costs a lot to travel to and stay in Inverness. It's not a cheap city and difficult to get to for many. I am reluctant to add up what the 2 day trip cost me (and the £12.50 glass of wine in my hotel didn't help matters - how do they dream up these charges in a place like Inverness?). A rethink of how the Event's finances work may be in order and perhaps the financials are somewhat stuck in a past philosophy when in 1788, thirteen Highland gentlemen, presumably of some substance, created the Northern Meeting. The initial membership was largely made up of landowners in the local area, but also included the Provost and Baillies and a number of lawyers, doctors, bankers and merchants from Inverness.



On a personal note, I have sadly been in the wars from a health perspective with a double stay in Glasgow's Victorian bastion of the NHS - The Royal Infirmary. Despite the age of the building itself, full marks go to the NHS staff for a wonderful service- don't listen to the doom mongers - it's a world beater and I certainly got my money's worth from my National Insurance contributions. Please accept my apologies if you were not able to get an immediate response from us during my absence. We hopefully kept things ticking over but fortunately I'm now recovering and reducing the backlog.

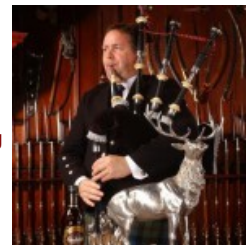
Yours aye,
James Begg

Piping Perfection

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News.

It was with pleasure that I heard and saw my great friend Roddy MacLeod winning the Glenfiddich Piping Championship for the 5th time, playing a Begg sheepskin bag of course. It was a live stream from Blair Castle and a brilliant way to beam such an important event round the world. It was a close run contest this year with Roddy being declared the winner on the strength of his piobaireachd. It is amazing that he continues to deliver outstanding results when he has so many other things to look after - Principal of the NPC, Piping Live!, Spirit of Scotland PB to name but a few.



Gordon Rowan, the new Director of Army piping and drumming, popped into the shop with news of an exciting new book due to be launched at Piping Live! next August. It will consist of tunes by former pipers of the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders. It has been three years+ in the making and we look forward with interest to the launch.

Talking of the Army, I watched the ex servicemen and women's march past at the Cenotaph in London on Remembrance Sunday via the BBC. It struck me how awful war was and is, and how many young lives were mowed down so brutally. I look at my own son of 20 and realise how fortunate most but not all of us are to live in peace and what debt indeed is owed. W Lawrie's classic tune [The Battle of the Somme](#) captures the mood and is so poignant. Willie fought in this battle as P/M of the 8th Argylls and died shortly thereafter from injuries and illness sustained in the trenches. It is believed he composed about twenty tunes but only twelve of his compositions seem to have survived including two other excellent tunes -The Pap of Glencoe and Inveraray Castle.



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Field Report - Glenfiddich Fiddle Concert

The annual [Glenfiddich Fiddle Competition](#) takes place the day after the Glenfiddich Piping Competition at [Blair Castle](#), except this year was the last under the Glenfiddich banner. To mark the end of this sponsorship, the event was a concert rather than a competition and featured previous winners. Apart from the venue itself, there was another link to the Piping in that the well known writer, broadcaster and piper, Fergus Muirhead, was the compère and he had compèred the Piping on the previous day. The event, like the Piping, was also streamed online albeit a week in arrears. Unlike the excessive length of time the pipers took to tune up, the fiddlers literally took less than a minute and in some cases only a few seconds. Fergus commented on this and suggested that it would have been good if the pipers had been in the room to witness the fiddlers tuning up - I couldn't agree more. A reasonable but short as possible tuning-up time results in a better all-round musical experience for those present in the venue and for online aficionados around the world. The concert itself was excellent and well presented, and it seems the Fiddlers will return to Blair Castle next year in a competitive format.



Bill Begg
Fiddler and Piper

Field Report - some more on Inverness

The Northern Meeting was a great experience and one that you should try and get to. It's a bit tricky with it being held on a Thursday and Friday for those people who work and maybe a weekend event would attract more of an audience - I guess however that the timing is all part of its great tradition. The piping itself was outstanding, but to complement that, it was a real highlight to meet so many friends, old and new - Terry Lee, Roddy MacDonald, John Wilson, Jack Taylor and Stuart Samson to name but a few. We had a laugh and a few slurps so many thanks to all the guys. I had a nice invitation from Alan Forbes to attend a Civic Reception - in addition to being a very good piper, Alan is into organising lots of events during the year and does a great job. If you do go next year, watch out for the opportunistic pricing of some hotels and bars. My summary of the trip? Enjoyable few days with good company, good music and a thin wallet at the end of it.

A Couple of Passing Thoughts

Is the old chestnut of nepotism and bias judging rife in solo competition? It would appear that the "powers that be" of all things piping have produced a directive that at the elite Inverness, Oban and London contests, judges should not judge someone who is a relative, friend, associate etc. I am not sure why this applies to three events only - perhaps it would be difficult to monitor if it applied to a broader area. This issue has of course been around for years. Piping has a particular difficulty in that a lot of people learn from their fathers, uncles, family friends and so on and it also has a very small population that is close knit where virtually everyone knows everyone else. I suspect a can of worms may have been opened and whilst in theory it may be of great merit, it will be almost impossible in reality to get a judging bench where no-one has a connection somewhere along the line with a competitor - pals, friend of a friend, distant cousin, pupil and so on - where would you stop? - you can't since virtually everyone has some sort of connection. It must surely be a bit of a slur on a judge's integrity and moral standing if you start to question his or her impartiality. Perhaps hiding judges from the competitors would be possible but I'm sure visual contact is part of the performance and judgment too, not to mention the fact that judges of course can tell who is playing by their style and intonation. My overall problem is not the intent itself but how you could implement it in a sensible and constructive manner and I await the outcome with interest. I am sure however that there must be other more crucial areas than this to sort out for the judging and competition organisers.

During my sojourn in the Royal Infirmary, I was reading a review of Charlie Hunter's gig at Ronnie Scott's jazz club in London. His new album has an amazing title - "Everybody has a plan until they get punched in the mouth" which apparently is a quote attributed to Ironman Mike Tyson. The bit in the review of this American guitar virtuoso that I particularly liked was that he does not feel obliged to fill every crack and crevice with a flood of notes. Perhaps this is as applicable to piping as it is to jazz and personally I feel that the old saying "less is more" has merit - how many times do you hear and see players flashing fingers to such an extent that they may be impressing their audience with their technical skills but have lost the plot with the actual music? As the legendary Dr. John MacAskill once said -"I'm going to crush these walls with gracenotes". He certainly could but the comment was said in jest in the early hours of a Royal National Mod ceilidh in Fort William in the late 70s/early 80s.

James C. Begg

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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