

Youngstars

The National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland
Newsletter No.13

A new show for Piping Live

By PAUL WARREN

WE'VE had our Band Camp, selected new members and laid down a whole new show. We are now building up for our Piping Live Festival show on 9 August at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall. And it's going to be a night to remember.

The team working on the show is doing a sensational job and I am mightily impressed. Come 9 August, and Glasgow is in for something totally electrifying.

The new show is called *Making the Change*... because the NYPBoS members feel that's what they're doing: making the change: respecting the past but looking to the future. And the NYPBoS's young stars are the future. This show sees them putting their fresh ideas on stage. It will be co-produced by Calum MacCrimmon, and he will be supported by Neil Cameron on bass, Andrew MacPherson on percussion and Innes Watson on guitar.

The opening number was especially composed for the concert by Kyle Warren. Called *Making the Change*, it introduces all of the various elements of the band, bit by bit, until everyone has been introduced and the whole cast kicks in.

The show is about members telling their story. So there will be traditional tunes as well, arranged by the members of the band. Some of these tunes are ones made famous by top bands we all greatly admire. There is a romantic item, an interpretation of members' dreams, aspirations and inspirations, and we have a new dance group involved; there's a suite composed by Ben Duncan — a contrasting piece about youthful frustration; there's a drumming piece and a set of jigs that underline a range of emotions and a blending of old and new.

And the NYPBoS will be joined on stage by Stuart Liddell, the Czech group Sumava and the Real Banda de la Escola Provincial de Gaitas from Ourense in Galicia.

Tickets are now on sale at the box office, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

We are looking towards holding a big rehearsal at the end of the month and then pull the full band together for a few days in August before the concert.

But the show we will present in August is in fact only the first half of a much bigger show that we will debut in Glasgow as a part of the Partick Folk Festival in November. We plan to run it two nights, and are hoping that it will be televised.

WE welcome and are very grateful for the invaluable help we've had from several quarters lately.

McCallum Bagpipes has given us a set of specially designed and manufactured B-flat chanters, which will get their first official airing at the 9 August concert.



PAUL McCOMISH, director of The Band Room, presents the director of the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland, Paul Warren, with a set of Premier drums: one bass, four tenor drums and six side drums. "It is a fantastic gesture of support," said Paul Warren, "these are splendid, valuable instruments and wonderful encouragement, not only to our drum corps, but also to the band as a whole." The drums will premier at the NYPBoS new show, 9 August, at the Glasgow Royal Concert Hall.

Calum MacCrimmon did a huge amount of work with Stuart McCallum in the initial research and production phase, and we are all delighted to be working with those chanters now.

Chris Apps has been generously supplying us with reeds.

The Band Room has not only loaned us instructor support, but also has given us a valuable set of Premier drums: six side drums, four tenor drums

and a bass. These drums too will make their stage debut on 9 August.

It is especially helpful that we have receipt of them in good time to set up and have for rehearsal in advance of the show. Until now, we've had to borrow drums. It's always been a problem.

The Band Room's stepping in and sponsoring us for a set of drums is generosity we very greatly appreciate. It allows us to really move forward with

what we provide now.

Davie Ross, our lead tip, has been getting support from Charlene Donaldson from the House of Edgar Shotts and Dykehead Pipe Band, Jim Collins and Brian McComish, also of The Band Room, and is completing the percussion line material for *Making the Change..*

And I'd like to thank Max Muirhead for taking photos during during one of our Celtic Connections concerts. Max is the son of Fergus Muirhead who'll again comper the show at Piping Live.

The Band Room too was looking to employ some young, with-it part-time staff and the first place Paul McComish thought to call was the National Youth Pipe Band, knowing that there may be young people looking for work but also that they are probably the kind of characters he was looking for. From the list of names I gave him, he has employed Davie Ross, our leading tip, and Kyle Warren. People see the spirit of the National Youth Pipe Band and, in this case, it's led to two people being in properly paid, interest-related employment.

Each year, the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama gets more applicants for the Scottish Music degree course and I know that the head of Scottish Music, Brian McNeill, sees membership of the NYPBoS as a major asset for those seeking a place because he knows the band's members have been through the disciplines of performance.

BRUCE Gandy's young son, Alex, will be coming across from Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, to join us as a guest member this summer. Bruce is an admirer of the NYPBoS and very keen for son, a rising young piper in Nova Scotia, to be involved.

Last year, we welcomed a couple of Jim MacGillivray's students from St Andrew's College in Aurora, Ontario, Canada, as guest members for the summer and they performed in our festival concert — and it looks as though this may again be the case. We have two pipers and one drummer at St Andrew's who are hoping to join us as guest members this year.

PEOPLE sometimes call me to see if we can perform for them at short notice, a week or two ahead of the booking. The kind of organisation we are makes it impossible to respond quite this quickly. We need lead-time to be able to bring members together from all over Scotland and there are cost implications that we cannot ignore in the hope that it will all come together.

So — if you would like to book the band, please try to be in touch far enough ahead to allow time for us to respond as we'd hope.

I WISH all of our members the best for their piping and drumming this summer — and look forward to seeing you all in the lead-up to our August show.

15 new members named

THE NYPBoS welcomes the new members:

Drummers: Cameron Sharpe of Westhill, Aberdeenshire (Culter & District PB); Craig Tremble of Hamilton (Lanarkshire PB); Layla Watt of Cleland (Lanarkshire PB); Kenneth Wilson of New Cumnock (Ayr Society PB).

Pipers: Cameron Barnes of Fife; Alison Buchanan of Glasgow (Glasgow Schools PB); James Craig of Slamannan (Lomond & Clyde PB); Scott Giffin of Renfrew (Milngavie PB); Jonathan Graham of Bishopbriggs (Strathclyde Fire Brigade PB); Callum Jardine of Bishopopton (Johnstone PB); Callum McCaig of Kilmalcolm (Milngavie Juvenile PB); Kirsty MacLeod of Edinburgh (Drambuie Kirkliston PB); Craig McNicol of Windygates, Fife (Methil & District PB); Craig Muirhead of Stirling (Royal Burgh of Stirling PB); Chris Waite of Chirnside, Duns (Duns PB).

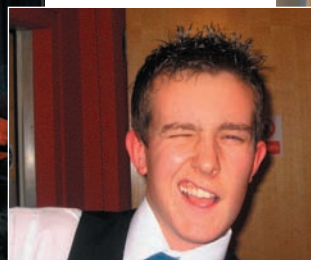
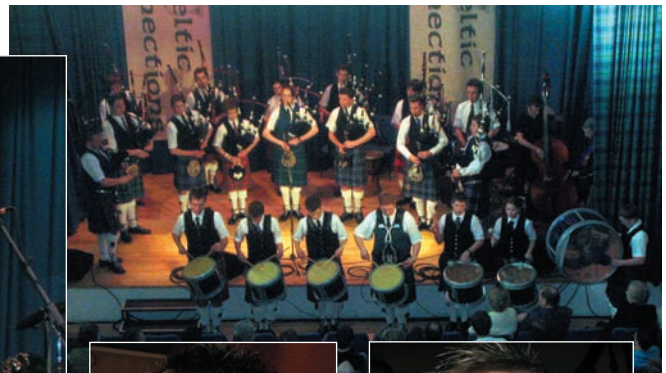
"Congratulations to you all," said Paul Warren, director of the NYPBoS. "Credit is also due to your teachers and bands, and your families.

"I do hope that you will all be able to participate fully in the opportunities the NYPBoS is able to offer you, and that it is a positive experience that benefits you for the rest of your life," he said.

"Be proud of your membership: it means you're one of the best." ●



THE 2005 Celtic Connections Festival concert by the National Youth Pipe Band of Scotland (above) won tremendous acclaim. Now, for the Piping Live Festival, the band has put together a brand new show: *Making the Change...* and it promises to be every bit as rich and electrifying as last year's Glasgow International Piping Festival opening presentation.



Photos: Max Muirhead



In pursuit of the ‘right’ reed

CHRIS APPS, REED MAKER

THE NATIONAL Youth Pipe Band of Scotland’s chanter reeds are supplied by Chris Apps, an Essex-based, traditional-style maker who also is pipe major of the Scottish Piping Society of London.

He is a great admirer of the NYPBoS.

“I met Paul Warren a year or so ago and saw what he was doing with the young people... and what he does is amazing,” he said. “There’s such talent there. I went to the concert last year and it was absolutely brilliant.

“To get that sound — it’s fantastic.”

Impressed, he wanted to help, and began supplying the band with its chanter reeds.

“We started out with some quite easy ones, worked up to mediums and now we’re working with medium-strong reeds. It’s something that these young people can play such big reeds so confidently.”

Chris Apps’ own piping career began when he was a 10 year-old with his local Boy Scouts troop in Stanford-le-Hope, Essex.

“To start with, we were taught by two Dagenham girl pipers,” he said. “When I found there was more to life than *Mairie’s Wedding* and *Nut Brown Maiden*, I moved on and went to Archie Templeton, originally from Lesmahagow in Lanarkshire, who taught me for many years.

“In Lesmahagow, he’d had the Vale of Nethan Pipe Band, an off-shoot of the local Boys’ Brigade band. It started in 1953 and they soon became juvenile world champions. And Archie Templeton had also been with the grade 1 Dalziel Highland Pipe Band which won prizes at Cowal and World Championships but disbanded in 1954.”

Chris Apps went on to compete as a soloist, becoming a serious contender on Scotland’s open solo circuit: “nothing really big,” he said... “I was just getting my face known but I enjoyed things like getting a second in the march at Strathpeffer once, ahead of Iain MacFadyen,” he said. “That was fantastic for me.”

And, from the time he was 14, Chris Apps had been involved with the Scottish Piping Society of London.

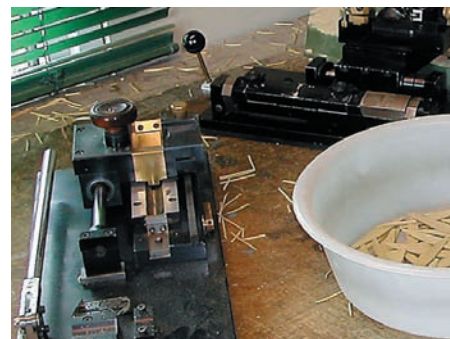
“In those days, they’d get some very good soloists down once a month. I used to go along and play before the soloist,” he said. “One time, John Burgess got snowed in at the airport at Inverness and couldn’t show up, and they asked me to play instead... that was quite an honour.”

It was on the solo circuit in 1985 that John Higgins of the American grade 1 Kansas City St Andrews Pipes and Drums heard Chris Apps play and invited him, along with a drummer, James King — to move to Missouri and join the band.

“So we went over to the United States to bolster the ranks and improve the band,” said Chris Apps. “I



CHRIS APPS uses small steel forms (of the sort shown here) to help hand-fashion Australian *Arundo donax* cane into top quality chanter reeds.



got into building work, laying drives and that sort of thing, with a drummer in the band. I was there for four years and married a Highland dancer, and then moved back here at the end of 1989.”

About a year after starting a job back in Britain as a cabinet-maker and antique furniture restorer, he was made redundant.

“The bottom had fallen out of the market — we had a big crash in Britain at about that time — and I found myself at a loose end,” he said.

“I decided to have a go at doing what gives me pleasure in life — the only thing that’s constantly been in my life,” he said.

“I was good with my hands so decided to make reeds.”

That was in 1991.

“I’d always fiddled with reeds. I never just put one in and played it; I always took one and hacked it to pieces and, when I was younger, I used to take all the discarded reeds from other pipers in the band and do things to them... you know, you find out what works and what doesn’t by doing that.

“From when I was quite young, I had a fascination with adjusting reeds but I’d never made them.”

Nor had he ever actually seen one being made.

“I used to go to John and Tom McAllister jr, to their place, for reeds,” he said, “but, as soon as you walked into the workshop, the blankets went over all the tools so I didn’t have a clue even what the tools looked like. They used to be quite secretive about the whole thing.”

So Chris Apps went to the Royal College of Music in London and sought advice from some of the academic staff — “bassoon or oboe players who, because they all know how to make double reeds and make their own, have the technical knowledge, and they gave me a lot of inspiration and guidance.

“As a result of that, I’ve gone down the track of making my reeds in a traditional oboe-bassoonist style, and the equipment I use is modified from or designed around their reed-making equipment.

“I’m a very hands-on reed-maker: my process is very labour intensive which is good in some respects — you know what’s right and what’s wrong, and you test every single reed and nothing goes out that you’re not happy with — but it can be a problem when it comes to getting the product out the door in a hurry. If I could automate it all without losing the standard, I’d be very tempted. I can’t produce as many reeds as I’d like to. But most people are prepared to be patient



most of the time," he said.

"When I started reed making, I wouldn't play anything but McAllister reeds. But, obviously, people had some problems with them: they were gut-busters and people didn't know how to adjust them and break them in..."

"Then the Warnock reed came out — a reed that people could use but I never liked what I felt was a kind of two-dimensional sound; the McAllister's had the depth

"The design brief I gave myself was to design a reed that was user-friendly like the Warnock but which had the sound characteristics of a McAllister"

... and, after 14 painstaking years, he believes he is getting close to it.

He was certainly encouraged when, in 1997, the grade 2 Clan Sutherland Pipe Band of which he was a member, which played his reeds and for whom he set the sound, won the grade and became Champion of Champions at the Cowal Games. Unfortunately, before it was promoted to grade 1, some key members left and the band fell apart.

But his reeds are highly and widely respected, and he exports them around the world.

"Because I went down the path of the oboe and bassoon reed makers, I make all my reeds in one

piece," he said. "So, if you imagine, it's like a diamond shape which is being made — then the two halves of the reed are brought together face to face, basically folded over, so both tongues are of exactly the same density using the same piece of cane.

"It gives you a better balance, and more vibrancy."

Finding reliable sources of good quality cane — *Arundo donax* — is one of the first problems a reed maker has to overcome, and it is an ongoing anxiety.

"Consistency of supply is always a problem," said Chris Apps. "You're always searching for good cane, you think you've found it and the next batch isn't quite as good and you find you're throwing more of the stuff away. It's not easy to pick a good piece of cane from a bad piece — you only really find out which is which when you start working on it — so a lot of my cane, 30-40 per cent of it, is going in the bin.

"I've just moved over to using Australian cane and it's made a big difference to my reeds. It's a bit more expensive but I'm not throwing nearly as much away as I used to and it's much, much better — dense but not brittle, and it's flexible, so it gives you that depth of sound."

Chris Apps also leaves a slight but distinctive ridge running up the middle of the reed between the shoulder and the tip. "I try to avoid cutting into that area too much because I feel you can make a reed quite free without losing stability by doing that," he said. "I tend to take cane off either side of that ridge — it's not a substantial ridge but it's not scooped out from the shoulder to the tip. The only reason I can do that is because I do all the finishing by hand.

"I'm not giving any secrets away... I'm happy to tell anybody where I get my machines — you do still have to come up with your own design before you can manufacture them.

"The industry isn't nearly as secretive as it used to be, and nor should it be. People should be allowed to see how reeds are made. Then they can get a better impression of what goes into it and what it takes to make a reed work.

"I give reed workshops, and take all my reed-making equipment with me and bits of cane. I'll let people cut the cane themselves and do some planing on it and, if they want to make a whole reed themselves and we have time, I'll let them do it, using my tools with my supervision — and people are generally amazed by how much work goes into making one reed.

"My process involves a dozen stages ending with tuning the reed."

Chris Apps currently has two people working with him to produce the slips, one wraps them and he personally attends to all of the final tuning.

They are in a niche industry that has become increasingly competitive since Chris Apps began production and there are many, many more makers.

The internet, e-mail and online piping forums have helped to make the market more international and more immediately responsive.

"The net means people can be very quick to give an opinion about something to an audience of thousands: it can have a huge effect on the way the market works," said Chris Apps.

"It keeps you on your toes; you have to be able to produce the goods and people are much more aware of their options." ●

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