

Bagpipes that come with the mail

THE COLLECTORS' IMPULSE

SEAN Stewart in East Yorkshire, England, and Oliver Seeler on northern California's Pacific Coast have never met but they have become close friends through common interests that range from fire fighting and piping to stamp collecting — and the stamps they collect and display on their websites all having something to do with bagpipes.

Sean Stewart is the more seriously committed philatelist of the two and his collection of bagpipe-related stamps is about as complete as it could be: "We've scoured the sources pretty thoroughly and I don't think there's an officially issued bagpiping stamp out there we don't know about," he said.

The handyman and former fire fighter has been a member of the grade 4 Beverley and District Pipe Band in the northeast of England for about 11 years: "My sister was engaged to a Scot and my then-wife thought it'd be a good idea for me to learn the pipes so I could play for the wedding," he said. "I began learning the pipes but it was four and a half years before they married by which time I was hooked and had to carry on, and the irony was that I never played at their wedding after all."

When, about five years ago, on a letter from New Zealand, he found a rather odd stamp displaying a picture of a letterbox dressed as a piper, Sean Stewart began wondering how many more stamps like that there could be. He began looking.

"My father used to collect stamps and I took down about eight shoeboxes full of his stamps. One of the boxes was broken and the whole lot fell on the floor. Every single stamp fell face down but one, and it had a bagpiper on it. I'm not spooked by creepy things but that was weird.

"After searching through the rest of the shoe boxes I found five more bagpipe



SEAN STEWART with the image of a piping pig he discovered this past Christmas Eve on a pew end at the Church of St Peter and St Paul at Drax near Goole in East Yorkshire ... "it's not just about looking for bagpipers; it's about opening your eyes and noticing things you otherwise wouldn't have seen."



stamps. Then I went to the internet and found Oliver Seeler and wrote to him about this stamp from New Zealand... we've been writing back and forth and collecting ever since. We've become good friends.

"Meanwhile, our band was down on numbers and our pipe major, Paul Wright, was doing an Open University information technology degree course while he was working full time. As a part of his course, he had to set up a website and, to have a website that worked for him, it had to be used. So he got a website up for the band and I put as much stuff as I could onto it — at: www.bevpipeband.com/index53.htm — to add something that was interesting and a bit different.

"I keep adding stamps but we don't get many these days. I got up to 40 or 50 stamps in my collection and then it got silly: I started collecting things like stamps with a picture of an old master's painting that has a piper tucked away somewhere, and it's grown from there. More recently, I've also come across what they call 'poster stamps' — things a bit like modern

'Christmas seals' (also known as "vignettes" or "labels") that were particularly popular in the early 1900s, and have become quite collectible. So, when we ran out of stamps, we started getting into some of these."

Sean Stewart now has a bagpiping friend in Holland who also collects stamps, and contacts in France, Canada and Ireland, so there are now six bagpiping stamp enthusiasts who keep in touch with each other: "and we let each other know when we find things," he said.

"I've spent many happy hours with a magnifying glass at the local library searching through Stanley Gibbons stamp catalogues and magazines. And the internet is brilliant."

"I've now got the world's largest collection and Oliver's not far behind but he just collects the individual stamps; I collect the full sets of everything. There's a recently released Irish set of four stamps featuring traditional music, for example: the Chieftains, the Dubliners, Altan and Tommy Makem. On the



THIS 1935 stamp from Sudan, commemorating the death of General Gordon in Khartoum 50 years previously, includes several pipers, but several stamp dealers were unable to locate any. One piper is reasonably clear when the stamp is magnified: just below and to the left of the portrait of General Gordon.



This detail of the painting shows two pipers' heads and the top of the bass drone of one more... minor details in the overall painting.



This painting, in the British Royal Family's collection, was the image from which the engraving for the Sudanese stamp was made by Richard Caton Woodville, a famous engraver of his day.

Chieftains' stamp, founding member Paddy Maloney is playing a whistle but he has his uilleann pipes over his knee and there's a small line drawing of an uilleann pipe chanter and bellows down on one side of the stamp. So, while Oliver has that one stamp, I have the set. The largest set I have is a 50-stamp set from Liberia but only one of the stamps has a bagpiper on it.

"The most rare and expensive set I have is probably the 1935 Sudanese Gordon memorial set, around £200-worth. Identifying the piper was as much a problem as obtaining the stamp.

"There were three main dealers and specifically I asked each dealer whether there was a

bagpiper on the stamp, and they all said 'no'. Due to persistent rumours that there was a piper somewhere on the stamp I finally wrote to the chairman of the Sudan Stamps Society who wrote back to say that, indeed, he had found two.

"Then I was in a library looking through a book about the British Royal art collection and by chance found the original picture from which the engraving had been taken and there are in fact three pipers in it. The engraver, Richard Caton Woodville, was a person who revolutionised the art of engraving for things like newspapers and magazines. So it's not just about bagpipes really.

"Some countries have produced very good

bagpipe images on their stamps. It's been a way to draw some attention to pipes other than the great Highland bagpipe. There are so many different types of bagpipes and the more that you can create a discussion that brings bagpipes to the fore, the more bagpipers come to the fore. And hopefully people learn more.

"There are things to be learned from stamps and researching the instruments they depict. The research side is one of the most interesting aspects of it all." He posts his research as annotations to the stamp images on his band's website.

"Half the time, the presence of bagpipes on a stamp is purely incidental," he said.

“Not many are about presenting an image of a bagpipe or bagpiper, but there are some good ones. Britain has some; Netherlands, and the Antilles have recently produced a stamp that focuses on a bagpipe. Generally, though, the bagpipe is just part of some other scene.”

And the market can be complicated by fake stamps and forgeries. “A problem is that certain people fabricate stamps and sell them, and they are not real stamps,” said Sean Stewart. “When they are sold as purely collectible items, the sets they were produced in get broken up and, because they have perforated edges, most people then don’t know whether they’re real stamps or not.

“Not every stamp we have on our sites is actually a genuine stamp. Ones from the little countries like Kyrgyzstan and the Tuva Republic often turn out to be fraudulent. And we have ‘stamps’ from places like Gairsay and Staffa in Scotland, unoccupied islands, but someone has bought a licence to manufacture the stamps as tourist collectibles and they become part and parcel of the fun of collecting. And they’re fun to research.

“A lot of Christmas stamps use old masters’ Nativity scenes, for example, many of which include a shepherd with bagpipes. I enjoy going down to the museums and galleries to find the paintings that have been used on stamps,” he said. “It gives me a focus for a visit when I’m going specifically to see a particular painting... something to look for. You either find the stamp, or you look for an old master’s painting that includes pipers and then you look for stamps with that picture on them. Sometimes the images are very small.”

To Sean Stewart, all of this is an interest that spurs on or complements other interests.

“I fervently search for bagpiping iconography,” he said. “And, when I go to churches and so on, I always look to see whether there’s a bagpiper hidden somewhere and, in looking for that, I always find other interesting things, so it’s not just about looking for bagpipers; it’s about opening your eyes and noticing things you otherwise wouldn’t have seen.”

On Christmas Eve morning, Sean Stewart went to the parish Church of St Peter and St Paul at Drax near Goole in East Yorkshire and was delighted to discover the image of a piping pig on a pew end that none of the regular congregation had noticed. “As a result of taking photos of the carving, I was invited to play my pipes at their evening Christmas carol service

later on that day and was filled up with coffee and mince pies,” he said. “I was surprised that none of the congregation knew the carving existed.”

The previous year, Sean Stewart found the carving of a piper playing a double-chantered bagpipe among sheep on a misericord at his local church in Beverley Minster, a figure carved in 1520, probably by the Ripon School of carvers from North Yorkshire. There are several other representations of pipers in the church and, while this carving was known of, the figure had not been identified as a piper.

In this case, the wood is chipped between the bag and the piper’s mouth, so the blowpipe is missing, and the carving had been described as a woman applying medication to a sheep’s hoof. Sean Stewart had also previously found an undocumented relief image of a monkey playing a double-chantered bagpipe at Burton Constable Hall, near Hull.

IT is largely out of his long-standing desire to widen people’s appreciation of the bagpipe as a diverse class of instruments that Oliver Seeler, chief of the Albion-Little River Volunteer Fire Department, California, and the proprietor of the online Universe of Bagpipes piping business, displays 164 piping stamps on his on his www.hotpipes.com website.

He began piping in his mid-20s on a Portuguese gaita he had been given in exchange for some home renovation work for a friend.

The pipes had come from a band called The Golden Toad, an alternative music group on the American West Coast in the early 1970s. “It was led by a brilliant musician and historian, the late Robert (Bob) Thomas,” said Oliver Seeler. “It was a group of up to 30 people and they performed a lot of ethnic mu-

OLIVER SEELER

Pictured below playing his first set of bagpipes, back in 1973 ... “One of the aspects I like about bagpipes is their mystery. We do not have any hard answers about their origins or history and that is something that has always kept me from getting bored; you keep encountering some new form of bagpipe and it embodies all the questions yet again.”





THIS fine copperplate engraving, in Oliver Seeler's collection, is from a German geography book of 1674: a rare, highly detailed depiction by engraver Matthäus Merian the Elder of instrument making (including bagpipes). Aspects shown include sawing the wood, boring, a treadle lathe (far right), sewing bags (right bottom corner) curing hides (on the roof), etc. — and in the background people are dancing to the music made on the instruments (the bagpiper is seated at the left of the picture). The original image is not much more than five inches wide.

sic from all over the world, music that people weren't hearing at all at that time. Bob had a big zampogna, Spanish pipes and pipes he had made, including reproduction of pipes pictured by Breughel.

"They staged magical concerts and that's where I contracted the bagpipe disease. Hearing Golden Toad, our mouths were hanging open and I got totally hooked on the pipes. I was playing the fiddle at that time, and I worked on stringed instruments.

"When I got this gaita, I realised I could make a better one and began making some gaitas, then smallpipes and things went from there. I gave up the fiddle — I'm more a technician than a musician — and got seriously into working with pipes and my business is based around that."

He took his gaita into an Irish pub in San

Francisco one day in the early 1970s and saw a piper playing uilleann pipes. "We looked at each other's bagpipes and simultaneously said, 'what's that?'," he said. He had just met Sean Folsom and the two have since become firm friends.

"Neither of us had previously seen the instrument the other was playing," said Oliver Seeler. "The information was just not to be had, and the big deal was to get a copy of Anthony Baines' book, and that was about it. I sympathise with Baines, working from museum artefacts, and his book suffers from the centuries of scholarly neglect that preceded him.

"People are much more likely to have some idea of what a different pipe is nowadays. And the misconception that the Highland bagpipe is the world's only bagpipe... that's shifting. Sean Folsom has been playing a lot of different pipes

for a long time now. Thirty years ago, when he took different bagpipes to Highland games and things, he was not at all well received. Now they ask him to come, so the respect and awareness have changed.

"It's been one of my objectives for a long time to try to foster that awareness and interest. It's important from a musical standpoint because a number of instruments and traditions died out and others came very, very close... and there's an obvious loss to us all when that happens.

"Now, thank heavens, that's reversing in most parts of Europe and it enriches us all."

A part of his campaign on behalf of bagpipes' diversity was to produce and edit a CD of Sean Folsom — *Bagpipes of the World* — and to launch it by way of a website. On the album, Sean Folsom demonstrates different bagpipes from his collection.

This was the start of Oliver Seeler's online business. "In a very small pond, Sean's CD made quite a splash when it was done," he said. "That was only six or seven years ago but it seems like prehistory now.

"People started buying the CD, the site got some publicity from Yahoo and the BBC and other places, things got busier and people started asking me how to begin playing the pipes. So I contacted the Canadian pipe-making firm of J. Dunbar Ltd and got six practice chanters to hold in stock. I finally sold one. Now... well, I went through 40 chanters last week, I have orders backed up for more. And I have about 1,000 people a day going to the site. It's going well.

"My main personal interest is educational. A lot of my customers are relatively isolated, and I get people constantly calling and keen to develop their piping. One of the big successes for me has been John Cairns' tutorials.

"It's become full time and I'm finding it hard to devote time to the other projects I enjoy working on too." Some of these other interests are also evident on the 700 or so pages of his website. Much of the material is essentially educational. Some of it is rather more for fun... like his collection of bagpipe spoons.

"The spoons are probably the largest collection of bagpipe spoons that you'll find," he said. "It started when I was in Wiesbaden in Germany and came across this very nice little piper spoon: I'm always looking for things that are a bit unusual.

"Spoons used to be worn in the hat as a badge of poverty that has been associated with itinerant musicians, but there's no obvious connection between that tradition and these collectible and souvenir spoons, most of which come from the late 1800s until about 1920, a period when collecting these things was especially popular in Europe and North America.

"But I don't collect ceramics," he said (although 80 pieces are pictured on his website): "most of them are ugly, they take up a lot of room and they're breakable — but I do collect antique graphics and that's something I haven't really released onto the site.

"I have about 170-180 originals from the 15th to the 19th century. It's a significant collection: engravings and woodcuts in particular, and some etchings.

"They're very interesting because there are so few good written descriptions of instruments from earlier times and a lot of what we know



THIS ETCHING of a Polish piper by Jean Pierre Norbin dates from the mid-1700s. It is one of the early art prints in Oliver Seeler's collection. "Norbin did a famous and wildly popular series of miniatures, of which this very charming etching is one," said Oliver Seeler. "This is a very small print, just 1.7 inches tall."

comes from the art. The engravings are largely copies of paintings and, in many cases; the paintings don't exist any more.

"While the detail of various pipes is visible in some cases, it is the contexts in which the instruments were played in the different cultures that I find especially interesting; they really come to life in these images: you see the ways people relate to the piper in ways that, to me, are very evocative and that aren't described in the literature.

"I'm planning on releasing a CD with very high resolution scans of about 50 of these at some point and people will be able to make themselves framing-quality copies. That's a project that's slowly wending its way onwards. And I do put scans up on the site from time to time."

His website also features illustrations and descriptions of 30 different bagpipes, the core of Sean Folsom's collection. "Something that's important to me," he said: "is finding commonalities between cultures, and the promotion of mutual understanding and respect that, especially in these times, is very worthwhile. Bagpipes are such dramatic and interesting instruments that they do this relatively well.

"One of the aspects I like about bagpipes is their mystery. We do not have any hard answers about their origins or history and that is something that has always kept me from getting

bored; you keep encountering some new form of bagpipe and it embodies all the questions yet again."

Stamps, for him, add to this interest.

"I collected stamps as a child. I'd thought that there were very few stamps that had a fire service orientation on them, despite it being a fairly big thing. I identified 40 or 50, and I thought of acquiring all of those in quantities and making up and marketing a fire services award presentation document that included the stamps.

"I eventually found a list of around 28 bag-piping stamps that someone had put together and it was a big chore to get them and start putting them on the site, just as a point of interest.

"Then Sean Stewart got in touch saying he had that stamp from New Zealand he could send to me and it went from there. I'm on about 20 acres about half a mile from a sealed road on the far north coast of California and there's no-one close at hand to bounce piping stuff off so I appreciate having a piping correspondent like Sean.

"And I think anything that helps raise people's awareness of bagpipes — stamp collectors and people receiving mail, not just pipers — is desirable.

"The interesting thing you find is the diversity, and that there's still some recognition of bagpipes in a lot of cultures. Some stamps raise questions that can be a lot of fun researching. And I get a kick out of it all.

"There are some very good, accurate bagpipe stamps, especially the North African ones. Then there are things like the East German stamp that illustrates a wrongly assembled Bohemian duda; it's a nice, colourful stamp but the pipes are wrongly put together. Illustrators often seem to have problems with bagpipes as you'll see in my online 'Weird Art' section."

Oliver Seeler and Sean Stewart, with their virtually exhaustive collections, would very much like to see more bagpipe-related stamps issued.

Said Sean Stewart: "We keep putting suggestions forward and think about which country we are we going to write to next and suggest they get some decent bagpiping stamps made.

"Anyone can do that and our next project may be trying to get the English pipes, the Leicester, Cornish, Welsh bagpipes and so on onto some British stamps.

"It's just another dimension to things." ●