As part of my final year studies for a BA Scottish Studies (Piping), at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, I had to write a dissertation on a topic of my choice. Having studied the history and repertoire of my main instrument, the Highland bagpipe, extensively throughout my degree, I felt a study of Border pipes would be of great interest as I had little knowledge of their history, despite having played them for around seven years.

The main aim of my study was to look at the recent revival of Border pipes and, in particular, the influence of the pipe manufacturer in this.

I began by looking at the concept and meaning of “revivalism” and “tradition” generally; before carrying out more specific research into revival in Scotland, piping and ultimately Border piping, as well as studying the characteristics of other revivals worldwide.

I interviewed leading Border pipe manufacturers – Hamish Moore, Nigel Richards, Stuart McCallum and Colin Ross. I am indebted to these guys for their patience in sharing their knowledge and insights with me. Without their input, I doubt I would have been able to complete my dissertation – and, I certainly doubt if we would be in the position we are today with the great resurgence in the playing and popularity of the Border pipe!

Having prepared my background I used a model devised by American ethnomusicologist Tamara E. Livingston to compare and analyse this particular revival with the characteristics she found common to all revivals. The “basic ingredients” usually necessary for a successful revival are:

1. an individual or small group of ‘core revivalists’
2. revival informants and/or original sources (e.g. historical sound recordings)
3. a revivalist ideology and discourse
4. a group of followers which form the basis of a revivalist community
5. revivalist activities (organisations, festivals, competitions)
6. non-profit and/or commercial enterprises catering to the revivalist market.
GILLIAN CHALMERS’ love of piping began at the tender age of seven. She heard a pipe band playing at the harbour in her home town of Fraserburgh and decided she wanted to take up the Highland pipes.

She started with the town’s British Legion pipe band before moving on to be tutored by Pamela Smith (now Pamela Whyte) who introduced her to Buchan pipe band under pipe major Malcolm Whyte.

After playing in junior competitions, she joined Ellon British Legion band and then moved to the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music at Plockton High School aged just 12.

She then gave up the pipe band scene and studied piping under Dougie Pincock and Ian McFadyen at Plockton, where she also played the fiddle.

It was there she met the other young musicians who she plays with in Bodega, the Radio 2 Young Folk Award-winning band.

Gillian plays Highland and Border pipes, whistle and fiddle, with Ross Couper on main fiddle, Tia Fales on acoustic and bass guitar and occasionally on the pipes; Norrie MacIver on accordion, guitar, djembe and vocals with June Naylor on clarsach and piano.

They’ve toured extensively in the US and Canada and are now concentrating on the UK and Europe. Their performances have been limited with the demands of studies this year but they played at Celtic Live! in Glasgow, they are also playing at a Highland Games in Bressuire, France, during June with dates at Tønder Folk Festival in Denmark as well as gigs at Speyfest and the City of London festival.

They’re signed to the Green Trax label with two albums, Bodega and Under the Counter already under their belt.

After leaving Plockton in 2005, Gillian moved on to the RSAMD for the BA in Scottish Studies (Piping) course. She was tutored by Gavin Stoddart and Allan Macdonald for the first years of her course and later by Stuart Samson and Finlay Macdonald.

Her Border pipes are the Fred Morrison Reel pipes made by McCallum Bagpipes, but she has a Nigel Richards Garvie chanter so, as she says, “it’s a bit of mix and match”. She also has a set of Ian Kin near smallpipes.

For her dissertation at the RSAMD she decided to investigate the revival of the Border pipes.

As she explains: “Despite common perception that Lowland/ Border piping refers specifically to that geographical area, bellows piping was equally common in the Northeast and the Highlands. Coming from the North-East of Scotland, I was intrigued to find that one of the last notable Border pipers, Frances Jameson, came from New Byth in Aberdeenshire, just a few miles from my home town. Despite this I had never heard of him which rather sums up my ignorance and, I think, the general state of the Border pipe world, generally until very recently, showing the desperate need for not only a revival in terms of playing but also for the history element.”

The following is an extract from my dissertation, which aims to summarise the main aspects of the Border pipe revival and in particular, ‘the role of the manufacturer in the recent revival of Border pipes’.

THE REASONS for the original decline in popularity of the Border pipes are rather unclear but it is likely that it involved a number of factors: limitation due to keys available, a lack of quality instruments, and even, something as mundane as the introduction of mechanised town clocks outdating its use to “strike the hour”.

Although there have been many revivals worldwide, the 1950s Folk song revival seems to have been pivotal in awakening Scotland’s traditional musicians to many other possibilities, both in terms of an increased awareness of the need to preserve our musical heritage and tradition and in the number of folk groups and the greater experimentation they have shown, such as the present common inclusion of the Border pipe.

Through the great work of collectors such as Hamish Henderson, a great deal of our oral tradition was collected and recorded before the tradition had been allowed to decline to the point that much was lost forever. The work of Hamish is so well regarded by the Travellers themselves that many of them are now aware of their own decline and are making concerted efforts to collect, publish and record before it is too late.

Unfortunately, it seems that there were few original sound recordings of the Border pipe, or records of their fingering and repertoire and few, if any, old players surviving by the time curiosity was once again aroused in pipers “looking for more”, as Hamish Moore puts it. As discussed at length by each of the manufacturers interviewed, initial attempts to “revive” the Border pipe were hampered by the inability to find an instrument of acceptable quality, yet the interest grew as the possibilities of this instrument were realised, and the desire to move away from the narrowness of the pipes as a solitary and separate instrument, used only in competition or pipe bands, increased.

Although, retrieving the “old style” is vital as part of our history and heritage, it has been seen, to some extent, to cause stagnation and “fossilisation”. There must be continuation and selection; an old tune isn’t necessarily a good tune. I personally prefer the now commonly quoted definition of tradition, as being “living and breathing”, feeling it holds true as there can be no specific date or point in time marking a definitive break between “old” and “new”, thus allowing for “continuation”.

The human mind is curious and enquiring, why else would we feel drawn to learn about the past? Equally, it is only natural that we will explore and experiment with new tunes and elements from other genres and cultures. In the past, we had little access to outside influence such as foreign music and, indeed, little access to anything outside our own immediate circle and neighbourhood. Modern communication, travel and technology are constantly widening the possibilities and it will be very interesting to see, in the next few years, just how much instrument manufacture will be affected by technology, as being trialed by the likes of Stuart McCallum, and how much traditional craftsmanship will still be needed.

In terms of Livingston’s framework (item 1), the Border pipe certainly satisfies the requirement to have a “core group of revivalists”, with a combination of players, collectors and historians leading the way. It is interesting, but not unique, that several of this core group went on to become manufacturers; their motivation, however, ran a lot deeper than simply realising the commercial potential (Livingston item 6). Their love, enthusiasm and appreciation for the instrument together with growing frustration at the lack of quality pipes led them to experiment for their own benefit before eventually becoming full time manufacturers.

Although, we again satisfy Livingston’s requirement for “enterprise” in that we now have a number of manufacturers to fulfil our need for good instruments, the enterprise only occurred after an individual developed such a love and interest that they were drawn into manufacture. There is not a huge amount of commercial activity in other areas such as trying to make money from running Border pipe festivals, classes, books or the like; most people just want to play, although some will make money playing in a band. Often an entrepreneur sets out to look for a product/business idea, or to “fill a gap in the market”, with the sole goal being to “make money”. This was not the case for any of my
case studies, who all became makers almost by accident in order to satisfy, primarily, their own need for a better instrument.

Ideology, discourse, activities and followers (to satisfy the remaining elements of Livingstone's framework) are certainly not lacking and continue to grow with a number of Border pipe publications and events now underway. As to followers, I personally sit in the middle of this group, and am a typical example of what Moore wanted to change.

As one of the first pupils at the National Centre of Excellence in Traditional Music, I was introduced to bellows pipes by its Director, Dougie Pincock. Prior to this, I was very much the stereotypical solo and pipe band player with very little knowledge or experience in anything outside this circle. Playing bellows pipes opened whole new avenues I had not previously explored and is now my main interest allowing me to enjoy a far greater range of possibilities.

I THINK this Border pipe revival seems to have "sparked the imagination" of many pipe players and seems to have filled the "gap", giving us back the option of a much wider opportunity to play as part of the folk community; rather than just being pipers — a separate, isolated group for ceremonial purposes and competitions only.

Having seemingly satisfied all the elements required for a "revival," have we reached the point where the Border pipe revival has been successful, and can we say it is complete?

I believe it has been very successful given the amount of players we now have with several very successful manufacturers around the country struggling to meet demand. In terms of the level of raised awareness, it would also seem fair to say that this "revival" could now be considered complete. However, if we adhere to the principle that we should have exploration, continuation and development then this, and all revivals, should never be complete. Only time will tell if this is the case, and only then can the revival be truly defined as successful.

And the role of the manufacturer in the Border pipe revival? I believe the manufacturer is crucial, as a good quality instrument is extremely important to its popularity and the desire to play it.

However the availability of a good instrument is not enough in itself to prompt a revival. Just because the instrument is there is not enough to make someone want to go and buy it and play it. The other elements are required, too.

It is unlikely that a revival could succeed if the only motivation was "commercial". Again, people won't buy the instrument just because it's there. The enthusiasm and devotion of all the manufacturers I interviewed was as important to the success of this revival, as their instrument.

Finally, referring to the idea that a revival consists of a kernel group including an activist, a researcher, and a pragmatic practitioner; could it be said that some manufacturers, such as Moore, served all three categories? It could be argued that without pragmatic practitioners such as these, a revival would have been unlikely to succeed.