

# The Wind in the Bellows

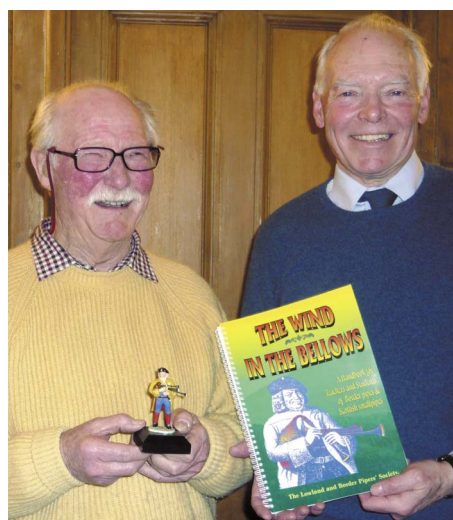
The Lowland and Border Pipers' Society

**F**EW pipers can be unaware of the Lowland and Border Pipers' Society (LBPS) and the work their members have done since the early 1980s in re-establishing and popularising Scottish bellows-blown pipes: smallpipes and Border pipes. Since the early 1980s there has been a growing number of craftsmen creating bellows pipes, and the work of the LBPS has been so successful that several of the major Highland pipe makers have added Scottish smallpipes and Border pipes to their product range.

As part of their continual promotion and development of Scottish bellows-blown pipe playing, the LBPS published its manual, *More Power To Your Elbow*, written by Jock Agnew in 2003 (and featured in issue seven of *Piping Today*). This was intended to be a standalone book until four years ago when Richard Evans and the LBPS Committee suggested a need for resources to support teachers of bellows pipes, as at that time people were essentially teaching in a vacuum without anything to assist them.

Martin Lowe, current Chairman of the LBPS, explained: "When Richard made his suggestion we didn't really know what should be done but I suppose due to my background in higher education, I suggested a seminar to help address the whole question of teaching methodology. So I organised it in the rooms of the Royal Scottish Pipers' Society, of which I happen to be Secretary, and had about 23 people attending by invitation, all of whom had a particular area of expertise in bellows piping or as teachers of Highland pipes. We had a few papers prepared by some invited experts which were presented to the seminar, one of which was from Kath Campbell, who teaches at the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh University, and who did her Ph.D on Learning Methods in Traditional Music. We then split up into discussion groups for a while, and came together at the end of the day to try to pull some conclusions together.

"One of the conclusions which we all agreed on was to produce a 'leaflet with bullet points', and I quickly realised that someone had better take the lead on this so I then decided to offer



Jock Agnew and Martin Lowe

to take the project forward. The obvious choice to write it was Jock Agnew as he had written *More Power To Your Elbow* and had for many years been editor of the LBPS journal, *Common Stock*, and so knew the kind of issues that needed to be addressed in terms of teaching and learning. In fact that was the paper he gave at the seminar: a summation of 20 years of topics from *Common Stock*, and at the top of his list of topics was bellows technique and the problems people have in getting it right.

"One of the first things Jock and I decided was that we needed a couple of big names from the piping world onboard, and through my involvement with The National Piping Centre, I was well acquainted with Dougie Pincock and Simon McKerrell. After a bit of persuasion they agreed to act as our consultants, and we had a meeting with a big agenda and drew up a potential list of topics to go into the book."

So after four years of work *The Wind in the Bellows — A Handbook for Teachers and Students of Border pipes and Scottish smallpipes*, was published in February of this year.

At 109 pages it was much more than the 'leaflet with bullet points' which was initially proposed by the seminar. As mentioned earlier, the book is mainly aimed at tutors so many of the topics are perhaps a little beyond what the beginner piper would be initially looking for, but that is where the first book, *More Power To*

*Your Elbow*, comes into its own, and when the two books are taken as one resource then the importance of the publications is realised.

"The Wind in the Bellows was primarily written as a resource for teachers," said Martin. "However, given that many learners of smallpipes and Border pipes are adults who have a musical background in Highland piping, or, interestingly as is happening more and more, have come from another traditional instrument, they are not necessarily interested in learning all the intricacies of Highland pipe fingering. So as the book developed we realised that it would be useful to mature learners, even if they didn't have a teacher. For those learners that do have a teacher this would still be a useful back-up and reinforcement as there is much valuable material in it."

There is indeed a lot of interesting information and it strikes me as providing the answers you might be looking for after learning the basics of the instrument. It deals with questions such as: 'So what is the difference between Scottish smallpipes and Border pipes?'; 'What's this Border tune repertoire I've heard about?'; and getting into the esoteric regions of music theory, 'What on earth are Modes all about?'. You will find the answers to these and much more in the book.

"Top of our list of topics to be included was the question of bellows technique," explained Martin. "We were very fortunate in that respect as Colin Ross, who attended the initial seminar, had already written an instructional booklet on the subject, and we have used it virtually as it stood. Pipe maintenance was also high on our list as was choice of repertoire, and there is a lot in the book on Border repertoire as being distinct from Highland repertoire."

One section which stands out in particular, not least as it is printed on yellow paper, is the progressive schedules. It consists of 18 pages of individual objectives from 'Strapping on and checking the bellows' to 'Making, repairing, maintaining reeds' and finishing with 'Elementary harmony' and 'Composing a melody'. The section is written and structured for tutors and provides a framework for teaching the skills

needed to play the smallpipes, but it could also be very useful for a learner to read and gauge what stage they are at and what they still need to learn. It provides objectives in clear concise steps and gives order to how the techniques should be learned but it doesn't give the answers to the problems a learner might face, as those would be given orally by a tutor, or found elsewhere in the book or within the pages of *More Power To Your Elbow*.

"The series of progressive schedules was Jock's idea and it is a very good one. We are not saying that 'this is how you must do it', as teachers will have their own techniques, but if you want something on which to base a progressive schedule, this is a good resource," said Martin. "It also raises a very interesting question, which is 'should you start a bellows pipes learner on a practice chanter?' I don't find the practice chanter is mentioned very much in bellows pipes circles, and many people who haven't learned on the Highland pipes are quite happy just to learn their fingering while they are learning the bellows technique. Personally, I would find it distracting if I wasn't comfortable with the bellows to try to think of the fingering as well. If I was encouraging someone to start from scratch, I would advise them to work on the bellows technique and get a practice chanter to develop their finger technique separately.

"The LBPS is keen to promote the teaching of clean fingering, and the use of embellishments that are appropriate, but we don't think necessarily that Highland pipe embellishments must always be used. As it happens *The Wind in the Bellows* does not give substantial attention to grace notes because this book does not stand on its own, but is designed to be read in conjunction with *More Power to your Elbow*, which provides full coverage of grace notes from the bellows pipes perspective."

So with these two books now available I was interested to know if the LBPS thought that they had covered all the topics of learning to play bellows pipes or whether there was still more to be written on the subject. "I think time will tell, and we have in mind that *The Wind In The Bellows* may change in time," said Martin. "For example, Simon McKerrill's appendix on Modes is somewhat controversial. Some people don't fully understand it and others don't accept it but Simon assures us this is the latest in academic thinking — and he got his Ph.D on it. It might arguably need to be rewritten in the light of future research, and that could

## Cuckold Come Out of the Amrey

(source — Peacock's Tunes)



This is a sample of a pipe tune from the Borders repertoire. Both 'Cuckold' and the Highland pipe tune *Struan Robertson's Rant* are developed from an older fiddle tune, in E minor and with a greater compass, also called *Struan Robertson's Rant*. Note how stylistically different the Northumbrian/ Border rendition is above, with its runs, arpeggios, additional strains and lack of pointing, from the Highland settings which are strathspeys with either 2 or 4 parts. Strain five added by Matt Seattle to complete the pattern of alternate B minor and D major strain openings.

possibly apply to other topics in the book as well. We would like to think that we have covered the main issues but we can't know everything, so there will be other things that arise and if anyone reads the book and feels they can improve on it we would be delighted to hear from them. We tried to engage the Scottish bellows pipe community very fully when bringing the book together and if you look at the list of acknowledgements — talented people who have given their time freely — it is an impressive and distinguished list of names. Even then with all our collective brain cells we may not have covered everything.

"With all due modesty we think it is an important publication, as in the course of preparation we had to address issues which had not been fully discussed before. We are dealing here with a discontinuous tradition which has had to re-invent teaching methods for Scottish bellows pipes, and so arguably there is nothing quite like it in the Highland piping world — a resource book for tutors." ●

To give a further taste of the book, Martin Lowe and Jock Agnew have kindly granted permission for *Piping Today* to print an extract from *The Wind in the Bellows*, and so follows an interesting chapter on fingering techniques and ornamentation appropriate to Scottish smallpipe and Border pipe playing.

## The Wind in the Bellows INTERPRETATION Technique and Ornamentation

**Whether to teach technique and if so, how to teach it, is often a source of debate. Historical accounts indicate that fiddlers in Scotland often learned simply by watching and imitating others in their families and communities, and by a process of trial and error. There are examples of learners devising their own methods to develop technique.**

Should the teacher attempt to teach technique, or should the learner simply play in the way that comes most naturally? Does teaching technique standardise the way in which the instrument is played, and is this desirable? Is there only one correct method of playing a traditional musical instrument? These issues seem especially pertinent in the Lowland piping tradition where there tends to be debate about styles of playing, such as bellows technique. Such debates are often a typical feature of revival traditions, where there is little evidence of past performance practices.

An entry in the Encyclopaedia Perthensis c.1800 states that George Mackie, who played the Lowland bagpipe and was "...the best performer on that instrument", after attending the

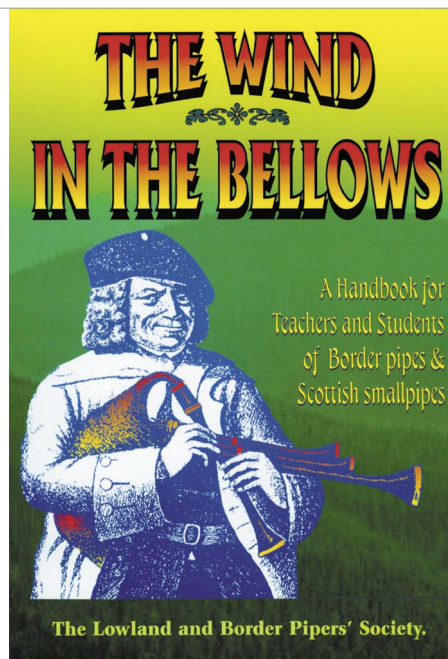
Piping College in Skye “adapted the graces of the Highland Music to the Lowland pipe. Upon his return he was heard with astonishment and admiration.” It seems certain, therefore, that Border music was traditionally played without the highly stylised gracings developed on the Highland bagpipe, also with few (if any) of the dotted quavers and semi-quavers (dots and cuts) which form such a distinctive part of much Highland music.

Border tunes (and this tradition has been in the keeping of Northumbrian pipers for many generations) often develop into a series of variations with runs and arpeggios. It is possible that traditionally many of these variations were introduced by the piper without any formal preparation, and a good piper could develop such variations on the hoof, so to speak. Many are written down; those that have been handed down from the past, either aurally or in published material, show little sign of stylisation. The different strains of variation come in no set order. It is not possible, for instance, to say that a piece of music is coming to its close when a series of arpeggios are played – though often they do come at or near the end of a piece.

The way the ornamentation of the tune is treated can give either a Highland piping flavour or Border/Lowland slant. Highland piping tends to use a standard variety of stylised grace notes, doublings, etc. that are repeated, note for note, each time that particular setting of the tune is played. Sometimes these gracings are so plentiful that, to an untrained ear, they can mask the flow of the tune, especially if they are not well executed. Ornamentation (such as grace notes, mordents, trills) which might be used in Lowland and Border music, is likely to be less prolific, and might change at the whim of the piper – even between repeats.

After some 20 years of annual LBPS competitions it is possible to detect that generally there is now less adherence to the accepted cuts and dots of the Highland piping style. Ornamentation is becoming more suited to the softer reeds of the bellows blown pipes, and runs and arpeggios are more frequently appearing in the variations.

As ever, much will depend on the pupil. Some people have the kind of hands and mind which can grasp complex techniques quickly and perform them well. Some do not. Some tunes, and styles of tune, require complex fingerwork to render them satisfactorily, while others do not. Depending on the music being



taught, and the ability and taste of the pupil, it should be possible to teach an appropriate level and style of technique to enable them to play what they want to play, the way they want to play it.

Two things are of overriding importance. One is that the tutor should be aware that there are different styles and approaches. A good tutor should be able to offer pupils a menu of ornaments and techniques from which they can choose, to show people different ways of doing things, and let them choose their own way from there. In that way, it should be possible to teach technique without being prescriptive.

The second is that whatever a tutor decides to teach in the way of finger technique, it should be taught and played well. Arguments about what is the correct way to play are subservient to the creation of a pleasant sound. The Highland piping approach of adhering slavishly to the printed music will rarely be appropriate for bellows piping, but there is much to be learned from the rigour which Highland pipers apply to the learning and execution of finger movements.

Even changes between plain notes can prove problematic at high speeds, and the fast runs in variations will be spoiled if the note changes are not executed cleanly. Finger technique cannot be considered in isolation, as the piper's ability to make the notes and gracenotes will directly influence the speed he or she can play it and the rhythmic qualities of the music.

There are certain grace notes and decorations (doublings, shakes, trills, vibrato, elaborate runs, etc.) that are postulated as being associated

with early Border and Lowland music. There is a large selection of grace notes, doublings, etc. available to the piper from the Highland piping tradition. Some experienced pipers instinctively use ornamentation of their own that seems appropriate for the tune and for the moment.

At least some form of grace note has to be in the repertoire of every piper – to separate two or more notes of the same pitch that follow one immediately after the other. This has generally come to be accepted as the ubiquitous high G but, as mentioned earlier – (*On p. 2 of the book, "can become intrusive and is likened by some to a dripping tap. To overcome this problem some pipers use A, E or D as alternative gracings."*) – care is needed not to over-use this on the Scottish smallpipes. It has already been mentioned that the lower notes of the smallpipes are not strong, so some of the Highland gracings that use low G (Taorluath, throw on D etc) may not give the expected result. Indeed, the softer reeds of both Border and smallpipes mean that when using some of the Highland piping ornamentation the effect is not nearly so precise or satisfying as when performed on the big pipes.

Players of Border pipes and Scottish smallpipes ideally should have a large assortment of grace notes, doublings and other ornamentation available under their fingers. These may then be used when and if the piper thinks the interpretation of the melody might be improved by using them, and if the pipes being played will do them justice.

Whatever stylistic approach is taken by tutor and pupil to the question of ornamentation, the paramount factor is that finger technique is clean and precise at all times, in order that it can enhance, rather than obscure, the melody and rhythm of the music.

**Vibrato** If this is used clumsily or excessively, it can suggest there is a problem with the chanter reed. Used sparingly and with feeling it can enhance some melodies.

Vibrato may be produced in a number of ways –

- by moving the chanter up and down with some rapidity, thereby forcibly changing the length of the column of air in the chanter.

- by shaking one leg (and hence the pipes) inducing slight changes of pitch in both chanter and drones! (This technique might be used as a humorous demonstration rather than a serious suggestion. It also induces a sort of vibrato in the drones).


- by stubbing the base of the chanter on knee or thigh.

- by opening and closing one or more holes on the chanter below the hole producing the melody note. If the melody note is low A, tap the chanter immediately above the low G finger-hole with the pinkie.

The fingers used to achieve normal vibrato will probably vary from chanter to chanter, but for the Border pipes might typically be –

- the pinkie of the bottom hand when playing C#, D or E.
- the middle finger of the bottom hand when playing E, F# or high G
- the index or middle finger of the bottom hand when playing F# or high G
- the middle finger of the top hand when playing high G
- the middle or/and the ring finger of the top hand when playing high A

**Rest** With well-balanced reeds, and close control of bag and bellows, a rest (pause) may

be introduced into a tune with special effect. (The recognised symbol for a rest, equivalent to the time taken to play a crotchet, is ). One way to achieve this is by allowing the bag to become partly deflated just before the rest, then stopping the pipes neatly: and starting up again with an instantaneous boost, from both bellows and bag, to continue the music.

**Slide** A slide from one note to another (usually C to D or F to G) can sometimes be used in place of more abrupt ornamentation. Pushing the index finger forward while rolling it slightly can achieve this. This may be shown with a straight line above the notes.

**Fingering Conventions**

**Open fingering.** Where the fingers on a wind instrument e.g. a whistle, are progressively lifted off as the pitch goes up the scale.

**Closed fingering.** Where the end of the chanter is closed (e.g. Northumbrian smallpipes) and each finger is lifted then re-

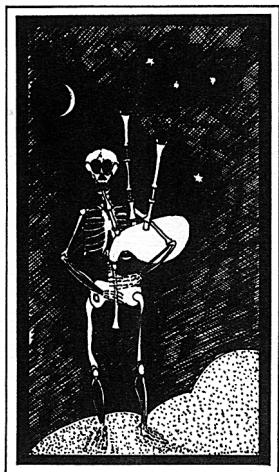
placed on the relevant hole of the note to be sounded. When all the fingers are down there is no sound from the chanter.

**Covered fingering.** Where an open ended chanter may be played lifting an individual finger for each note (as for Closed fingering), but with the tonic sounding when all but the pinkie are down (i.e. the six finger note). [This meaning of the term ‘covered fingering’ has been proposed in *Common Stock* Vol 20 No.2].

**Half covered fingering.** Where the bottom hand notes are played by progressively lifting the fingers of that hand, but the bottom hand is replaced (with the pinkie lifted) as the top hand notes are played by progressively lifting the fingers of that hand – sometimes called Highland pipe fingering. ●

The aims of the LBPS are to provide a focus for everyone interested in playing the Border pipes or Scottish smallpipes, their music and history, be they players, researchers or music lovers. For more information visit [www.lbps.net](http://www.lbps.net).

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