

**The Isle of Skye Highland Games
The Isle of Skye Pipe Band
"Pipes and drums, by the right, quick march"**

By MARGARET M. MACKENZIE

Distinct and familiar orders resound throughout Somerled Square, Portree. It is 10.00am, Wednesday 5th August 1998 and the 121st Isle of Skye Highland Games begin. The first set, 'My Land', 'Shoals of Herring', 'Colin's Cattle' and 'MacGregor of Brora'.

Portree Pipe Band was formed in the late 1920s by Post Master William Watson. No uniforms were worn at that time and the band played every Saturday evening in summer from the Drill Hall, through the village and round the square.



The Portree Pipe Band, late 1920s

The first uniforms were bought by the band in 1932. They wore Glengarry bonnets with black cock feathers and Clan MacDonald Crests, dark blue tunics with white piping, red tartan hose with buckled shoes and kilts and plaids of the tartan MacDonald of Sleat. MacDonald of Sleat was unofficially worn as it had been intended for exclusive wear by the Clan Chief.

During the War years, the uniform was stored at 'Caberfeidh', Park Road, Portree and maintained in immaculate condition by Rory Cumming of Beaumont House. A highlight of the early years was when the Portree Pipe Band was invited to play at the wedding of General Harry Macdonald of Redcliff to Sheila Ross of Cromarty, in Cromarty. For the occasion, the band borrowed feather bonnets from the Cameron Barracks in Inverness. As payment, each member received £10 and two bottles of whisky. They were also given the bottom layer of the wedding cake, complete with its silver base. On its return to Skye, the hired coach arrived at Kyle of Lochalsh too late for the last ferry. Needless to say, by morning there was not much left of the cake!

On 2nd March 1961, the band was officially reformed (having been disbanded after a post-war lull) by piper Ewen MacKenzie, a Cameron Highlander who had returned to work in Portree. The first Committee President was piping enthusiast Colonel Jock Macdonald, Viewfield. Members were drafted from throughout the island and the band became known as the Isle of Skye Pipe Band.

Despite a lack of funds to buy new uniforms, the contrasting ex-regimental Cameron of Erracht kilts with red tunics were acquired. At this time, Cameron hosetops, white spats and garter flashes were introduced. Fund raising over a ten week period provided £201 which was used to buy four side drums, a tenor drum, Drum Major's white buff gauntlets and a scarlet gold braided sash. At later dates, ostrich feather bonnets costing £65 each were introduced and ex-regimental Seaforth tartan kilts added to the drummer's uniform.

In 1961, the services of Corporal Urquhart, Regimental Drumming Instructor of the Queen's Own Highlanders, The Barracks, Inverness, were procured to train twelve enthusiastic young drummers for the new band. Drumming classes were started in Portree by George Stoddart, leading drummer in the band.

Once the band became established, chanter and bagpipe classes were started throughout the island, band pipers giving instruction. The aim was to re-establish Skye as the home of piping in Scotland.

Here we can see that the band consisted of 12 pipers, led by long serving Pipe Major Donnie MacKenzie, front left, who selected the tunes and order of play. Pipe Majors past and present include: Willam Watson, Angus McKinnon, Donnie MacKenzie, Norman Stoddart and Ron Monk.

Drummers are two tenor drums, one on each side of the bass drum, followed by four side drums. The Drum Sergeant led the drum core. Drum Major Alasdair Campbell (The Duke) would pull the band to attention and lead from the front taking marching time from the Pipe Major. He used the mace to control direction of play, 'By the Left', 'By the Centre', or 'By the Right'. Drum Majors were Derek Isitt, Alasdair Campbell, Jimmy Devlin, Ian Graham, Jackie MacRae, Bill Millar and currently John Don MacLeod (Hoogie).

Regimented 2/4 marches traditionally played are, '79th Farewell to Gibraltar' and 'Captain Norman Orr Ewing'. 6/8 marches, 'Leaving Port Askaig', 'Farewell to the Creeks' and 'Blue Bonnets'. Retreat, 'The Green Hills of Tyrol', and the well-known tune 'Portree Bay', composed by John L MacKenzie of Portree.

A modern medley might be, 'The Man from Skye', 'Old Toastie', 'O Luaidh', 'Kenny Gillies of Portnalong and 'Corkhill', two hornpipes and a slow air, followed by two jigs. 'The Man from Skye' was composed by Donald MacLeod of Lewis and is believed to be dedicated to Piping Instructor John MacKenzie (Sheadan) of Sheader, Uig. 'Kenny Gillies of Portnalong' was composed by Peter MacFarquhar of Snizort.



Isle of Skye Pipe Band marching at the Games

The Isle of Skye Pipe Band has been accompanied on occasion over the years by visiting bands: The Queen's Own Highlanders, Tayside Police, Glasgow Skye Association, Isle of Lewis, Uist, St. Andrews Band of Rotterdam and the Queen's Gurkha Engineers in 1990. Pipers and drummers visiting Skye during the summer months have always been made most welcome to join in on band outings. Presently the band enjoys a close relationship with Uist Pipe Band.

Trips to Stornoway and to the Uist Games are commonplace. However, in 1990, the band made its first trip to Europe, invited to play at a festival in Germany. The five day tour was based in a town called Gefrees, only twenty miles from the former East/West border. They were able to experience the emotions of the period during which the Berlin

Wall was dismantled. The band was invited to play at half time during a football match which is reported to have been the first played between an East and West German side following German unity. Trips to France in 1992 and 1993 and to Kilkenny, Ireland in 1996 followed.

Standards have been maintained and awards achieved. In 1994, 1996 and 1997 at the Cameron Barracks side drummer, Drum Sergeant Andrew MacPherson won the Army Cadet Forces senior drummer award, marking him out as the best Army Cadet drummer in the country. Piper Alasdair Connor was the only piper invited by the Prince's Trust to perform at the 'Commonwealth in Concert' evening in Edinburgh during the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 1997. Alasdair has also been invited to play at a showcase at St. James Palace this year.



Duncan MacGillvray of Tain, one of Scotland's top pipers

Entertaining the crowds, leading its followers, enjoyment of music and camaraderie have always been features of the Isle of Skye Pipe Band,

described by author and journalist Derek Cooper as, 'Amateur in status, professional in playing'.

This article is dedicated to pipe band members past and present, April 1998.