

## 2<sup>nd</sup> International Bagpipe Conference – 8<sup>th</sup> March 2014

Having celebrated two previous International Bagpipe Days locally at the Chantry Bagpipe Museum, a bargain £20 rail return persuaded me to head South to the International Bagpipe Organisation's conference in London. It also meant I could cram several piping-related events into one short visit, with a trip to the London Pipers' monthly meeting at the Calthorpe Arms (always a very welcoming group), a piping soir e chez Alan Douglass and a free inaugural conference concert featuring the Andy May Quartet at SOAS, London University.

Facebook's Northumbrian Piping Newsgroup have already viewed video footage I took at the 'World of Bagpipes' concert, which amply demonstrates just how much of an educational and entertaining evening it transpired to be. I'd never seen nor heard of Istrian bagpipes but they certainly sprang to life in the expert hands of Croatian musician Goran Farkaš, who also sang rural traditional songs along with his instrument. As the conference also coincided with International Womens' Day, organiser Cassandre Balosso-Bardin invited all-female Galician quartet Habelas Hainas to play for us. Such a burst of energy ignited that stage with their appearance, fiesta time had arrived in WC1! Besides bagpipes, there was accordion, an assortment of percussion, song and dance. Cassandre, who some may well remember playing gaita at the NPS 2012 concert, also joined the girls towards the end of their set.



Following the interval, it was the Andy May Quartet's turn to thrill an audience which included a good turnout of London Pipers' regulars. We'd heard them rehearsing their blistering opener whilst queueing for entry but the Sweary Box and The Hawk seemed even more death-defyingly presto than the practice. Andy has recruited some of the very best Tyneside-based musicians to his band: Sophy Ball, sporting bright red vertiginous high-heels on fiddle, Ian Stephenson (who's recently started learning pipes himself) on guitar and accordionist Victoria Laurenson. It was a real treat to listen to a band who really know how to support and enhance pipes beautifully without subjugating them, as can so easily happen.



Andy as usual, had the audience in stitches with his comedic patter, interspersed with some great varied tune sets, including Fred Picknell's March (composed by Andy, in honour of the man who shared a pipemaking collaboration with Tom Clough), which has really taken off and now widely played in pub sessions. As Andy quipped, he realised success was assured with several versions posted on The Session and none like how he plays them! There was also a lovely solo pipes spot with a James Hill compilation of Earl Grey, XYZ and the Quayside. All too soon the evening drew to a close and in the true spirit of international bagpiping, featured a lively muiñeira finale, with percussion and dance accompaniment by Habelas Hainas and a packed-out lecture theatre clapping along. No attendee could possibly have gone home disappointed and indeed, there was a happy buzz among the departing throng, as well as a massed assault on the CD sales counter.



Next day I was up bright and early for the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Bagpipe Conference, which took place at the Senate House, an imposing monument to art deco architecture, which legend has it, so impressed Hitler, he had it ear-marked as his British conquest capital HQ. During registration, I noted that a good representation of British bagpiping royalty were signing up for the occasion too, including pipemaker and musician Jon Swayne who had a sales stand and Professor Hugh Cheape, respected author and academic in the Scottish bagpiping cosmos. As a self-confessed seriously non-academic piper, I was starting to wonder if I'd have problems relating to some of the billed content and even manage to stay awake throughout but I was pleasantly surprised to find points of interest and common ground in all the papers read to us. I think I was not alone in struggling to decipher some content delivered in various international accents, much as I admired the efforts of those for whom English is a second language.

It was certainly a chock-a-block programme, so I won't attempt to cover everything in detail. However, we had talks on bagpipes hailing from Belarus, Greece (interesting to note differences in individual Greek island piping dialect and repertoire there), Mallorca, three papers on Great

Highland Bagpipes and not forgetting the French variety, given by musette virtuoso Jean-Christophe Maillard, along with a nicely illustrated lecture on the Limousin chabrette by Eric Montbel. There was even a contribution on Heavy Metal Pipes, as favoured by Eastern European rock bands. I also found composer Rohan Kriwaczec, a particularly animated and engaging lecturer. His perspective on bagpipes stripped of cultural identity, used as a composing aid with Swedish säckpipa, was especially fascinating and thought-provoking.

Being actual International Womens' Day, there was a talk on gender equality in relation to the University of Iowa's Scottish Highlanders Band 1936-2008, by former member Martha Moore-Davis. The band started life all-male, evolving into exclusively female during WWII and beyond, until the 1970s when sex equality legislation led to reluctant re-admission of the boys. I do recall a very audible collective sharp intake of breath, when one gentleman dared ask during question time, if the band's girlies required lighter-blowing reeds. Martha admitted to never having heard of our Dagenham Girl Pipers, quite astonishing, when their fame had even reached the Führer's appreciative ears. Little doubt that he'd have called upon their services, had he ever managed to secure that seat in the Senate Building!

Proceedings didn't quite terminate with conference closure at 5.30pm and it was followed by an evening of French music and dance, open to anyone with sufficient stamina and agility, willing to present themselves. I however, had a hot date with the Diwana Bhel Puri House in Drummond Street and that's where Francis Wood and I duly repaired, to discuss a very different sort of Saturday over a delicious Indian vegetarian meal. I should end with a special vote of thanks to conference event organisers, no mean undertaking on their part but very much appreciated by those fortunate enough to take advantage of their hard work. There is a 3rd International Bagpipe Conference being planned for 2016, which will take place in Scotland. Be sure to look out for further information on the International Bagpipe Organisation's Facebook page and through various bagpipe societies nearer the time.

**Maureen Davison**



*Conference participants gather for an impromptu lunchtime performance by Habelas Hainas*