

Cornish Bagpipes: Roots and Revival

Merv Davey: Paper presented to Bagpipes Society May 2006

Etymology

From time to time in the pages of "Chanter" I have seen concerns expressed about ascribing regionalisation to bagpipes, most recently in relation to the Irish origins of the Uilleann / Union pipes. I find myself quite sympathetic to this as bagpipes seem so ubiquitous within European folk culture and so variable in form that you get a feeling that almost anything could pop up anywhere! We are perhaps driven here both by social convention and modernist scientific methodology, which assign labels and taxonomy in order to organise and better understand phenomena. This has its limits, however, and I tend to feel more comfortable in regional ascription when people in that region consciously adopt an instrument, or better still, when a maker assigns a specific name to a creation as a result of inspiration or influences from that region. Courtesy of messrs Bayley and Goodacre, together with those members of the Cornish community with a mind to be interested, the Cornish Bagpipes would seem to meet both these criteria.

To consider the origin of today's Cornish pipes we need to consider two threads, the inspiration provided by historical references and the drive of the Celtic revival in Cornwall.

Medieval roots

The earliest texts with any reference to pipers we have in Cornwall is the *Vocabularium Cornicum*, a 12th Century Cornish / Latin Vocabulary in the Cottonian library¹. We do not know, of course, whether any of these pipes had a bag attached to them but later references in the *Cornish Gwary Myr* (Medieval Mystery Plays)² do provide a context in which the instrument referred to was played outdoors and for dancing which strongly supports the likelihood of bagpipes³.

We finally see the bag when we look at the 5 carvings depicting pipers in Cornish Churches⁴ which are contemporaneous with the period of the *Gwary Myr*. The question does need to be addressed, however, as to whether the Church iconography was deliberately commissioned to represent local events or whether this was an artistic extemporisation on the part of the carver. The carving at Launceston certainly represents local activity⁵ but the pig playing bagpipes at Braddock church is hopefully creativity on the part of the carver! We do not know about the remaining three but in "Ilow Kernow 3"⁶ Mike O Connor shows that the bench ends at Altarnon Church illustrate clothing of contemporary fashion but instruments of a much earlier period, a detail suggesting that the carver was not working to standard templates for his figures.

Subsequent Cornish / English vocabularies⁷ also make reference to pipes and pipers and whilst these do to some extent draw on the texts mentioned above the number of references to music and pipes in relatively small vocabularies is unwitting testimony to the significance they were felt to have. Parish, Church and manorial records⁸ broaden our picture of bagpipe use with pipers paid for a variety of activities from performing in plays to leading riding processions and the end of season barn dance. Indeed Lord Bottreaux of Boscastle seems to have hired his pipers out to nobility across the border in Devon.

How distinctive Cornish pipers and their music were in medieval times is difficult to judge due to lack of written information and my inclination is towards them being part of the general melting pot of music and cultural tradition in Europe. As a major source of tin lying on important sea trading routes Cornwall was certainly not remote during this period and linguistic affiliations with Brittany meant that there were communities of Breton speaking people in the west of Cornwall and firm links with the continent up until the time of the reformation.

Some caution must be exercised here, however, as language is normally accepted as a distinctive cultural marker and of the 4 languages in use in Cornwall at this time Cornish was by far the most extensive. Indeed even after its demise as a language of the general populace, Cornish influence

on dialect still rendered it largely incomprehensible to outsiders. Another caution against presumptions of outside influence lies in the limited number of travelling players and musicians recorded as visiting Cornwall. There is evidence of 18 visits by minstrels to Cornwall between 1470 and 1576 contrasting with a total of 371 for Devon for the same period⁹. Whether this was because the moors discouraged land travel further west or because the Cornish were doing their own thing and not particularly interested we cannot know but it does suggest that English influences were limited.

This is an interesting theme picked up by Baring Gould who found that many of the folk songs he collected to the West of Dartmoor in the late 19th Century had similar words but completely different tunes to those found to the East. He surmised that these were remnants of songs in Cornish that lost their original lyrics and gained new English one's as the use of the Language dwindled¹⁰.

The standing stones of Cornwall's moorland landscape provide an interesting postscript to historical references to piping activities in the Duchy. Several, such as those at the Hurlers near St Cleer, have acquired names such as pipers and maidens or dancers, an allusion to perceptions of degenerate youngsters being turned to stone for dancing instead of going to church. Both the fact that these are in English rather than Cornish together with their temperance overtones suggest an 18th or 19th century origin to the name and also suggest that pipers were seen to be associated with dancing in peoples minds at this time.

The coming of the Celts

Although the Keltoi were recognised as far back as the Greeks, the term as it is used today was largely coined by 19th Century scholars and rooted in the sociolinguistic links between the peoples of the Arc Atlantique¹¹. Pipers might appreciate the following examples: Piob Mhor in Scotland would be Pib Meur In Cornish and Pibroch, Pibrek; The Irish "Uilleann" and "Na Pioboiri" would be "elynn" (elbow) and "An Piboryon" respectively; there is no equivalent of the Breton "Binou Kozh" or "Binou Nevez" in Cornish but the "Kozh" would be "Koth" (old) and "Nevez" "Noweth" (new); and I must not forget my favourite Breton folk rock band here, Sonierion Du (black pipers / musicians / singers) - Sonoryon Du in Cornish.

The burgeoning interest in things Celtic in the late 19th century mixed with desire of different peoples within the British Isles to assert their distinctiveness gave rise to what might now be termed the Celtic Revival. The Celtic revival in Cornwall was led Henry Jenner¹² who was in close contact with Celtic scholars and enthusiasts from the other Celtic regions, Ireland, Wales and Brittany in particular. Hand in hand with the more academic linguistic and historical studies of this era went an enthusiasm for Celtic iconography. Knotwork designs, tartans, kilts, harps, Druids and of course *bagpipes* all became an essential part of the Celtic image. This is admirably illustrated by a display of "neo-celtic" costume circa 1915 in the National Museum in Dublin including an Irish piper¹³.

For Celtic revivalists in Cornwall this iconography was supported Celtic artwork on crosses ,and churches, the tartan shawls of the fishwives painted by the Newlyn School of Artists and an abundance of folklore around Druids and stone circles. Fuelled by references in the Cornish Gwary Myr and the Altarnon bench end there was no doubt from the point of view of the revivalists that bagpipes were part of the Cornish Celtic package.

The Celtic revival in Cornwall was symbolised by the Cornish Gorsedh ¹⁴ which was formed in 1929 with an inaugural ceremony at Boscawen An Un and continues to stage procession and ceremony each year in September. This was occasionally lead by a piper playing a binou in the early days, in 1978 there was a bombarde / binou combination and in 1983 the Gorsedh formally

created the office of Pybyor, honorary piper, with yours truly, plus my GHBs, appointed to the role. I continue in this role today although I now use the double chanter pipes whenever practical.

There are currently some 12 pipers that I know of in Cornwall who supply a varying repertoire of Cornish tunes on GHBs, Gaita or Cornish double pipes for any occasion that wants them. I certainly find myself in reasonable demand and know the others are as well. Cornish pipers make regular appearance at various traditional processions – e.g. Tom Bawcocks Eve in Mousehole, The St Ives Hurling and the Polperro Mock Mayor as well more recent innovations like the Annual “Surfers Against Sewage” rave at St Agnes! Cornish Rugby now offers the ultimate opportunity for Celtic symbolism with fans providing a sea of black and gold, Cornish tartans, St Piran flags and of course the ubiquitous bagpipe. The period around St Pirans day, March 5th is prime time for Cornish pipers, however, starting with pipes playing a salutation as the Cornish Flag is raised at Launceston Castle, processions and at various locations throughout the day and a promenade performance of the St Piran play involving a 2 mile, piper led pilgrimage across Perran Sands to the oratory.

For a long time I clung to the principle that the Cornish Double pipes belonged to the realms of historical interpretation rather than the modern Celtic revival, but you can see from the above that I was fighting a losing battle. I still resist to much association with tartan's and kilts but was recently exposed to post modernist reality when booked by a proud father for his daughters wedding. “I want you to wear a Cornish Kilt and play your Cornish pipes, name your price” and just as I was about to explain my problem with kilts and bagpipes the last phrase started to resonate, well *he who pays the piper ...*

Reconstruction

There are 5 pipers depicted in medieval carvings in Cornwall:

- All mouth blown
- Chanters: Two single, Two double of equal length, One double with unequal lengths,
- Three have clear single drones, one is obscured and one does not look a drone but this is the least unlikely interpretation!

So as far as reconstructing a set of Bagpipes for Cornwall is concerned we are not short of options!

An early experiment by Clive Palmer (of Incredible String Band fame) produced a small set of parallel bore pipes with Davidstow style equal length chanters in D but it is really the Altarnon bench end that has provided the principle inspiration for more recent reconstructions. Despite the ambiguity of the drone, this image offered the opportunity to make a set that was more distinctive, as unequal chanter lengths are less common in portrayals of double pipes. The accompanying bench ends of crowder, and dancers are also consistent with the context of pipers in the Cornish Gwary Myr.

In the early 1990s Will Coleman and myself contacted a number of makers promoting the idea of Cornish pipes and ultimately it was messrs Bayley and Goodacre who responded with different interpretations on the theme of Cornish double chanter pipes. More information about these pipes are available in earlier editions of Chanter so it suffices to summarise:

- Chris Bayley's pipes are configured with a single drone in G; RH Chanter D,E,F#,G; LH Chanter G,A,B,C#,D; with an opportunity for some cross fingering for flattened notes.
- Julian Goodacre's pipes do not have a separate drone but the configuration of the chanters provides for an effective drone in D: RH Chanter D,E,F#,G,A; LH Chanter D, A,B, C#, D; again with some opportunity for cross fingering for flattened notes.

I have versions of both, they are wonderful instruments and a tribute to the experimental, evolutionary culture encouraged by the Bagpipe Society.

A deconstruction of the notion of “Cornish Bagpipes” materialised in an edition of *Early Music*¹⁵ where they were routed out as “false history” along with their Celtic cousins the Welsh pipes. Well how do you respond to that? History is about debate and interpreting evidence according to different schools of thought not facts, you have to go to the hard science labs for demonstrable facts and as far as truth is concerned the advice of Indiana Jones still stands, just go down the corridor to the Philosophy department. All I can say is that there is a significant a body of evidence illustrated in the footnotes which supports the likelihood that bagpipes played a significant role in cultural activities during the medieval period and that if we want to reconstruct a distinctive bagpipe for Cornwall today the Altarnon model is a good one to follow.

A different form of deconstruction arises when we use the double chanter Cornish pipes in similar situations to those alluded to historically, ridings, processions and to accompany dancing. They do tend to be a bit on the quiet side and not sufficiently strident to carry through the extraneous noise of people and percussion. Conversely in the setting of one of Cornwall’s medieval Churches or manorial halls the sound is every bit as haunting and atmospheric as you could wish for. Darwinian processes are ever present and the practical result is that aspiring Cornish pipers tend to select an instrument best suited for their purpose with the GHB and Gaita competing strongly with the double chanter pipes. Depending upon the occasion I tend to draw from an armoury of all four pipes plus the Breton Veuze.

The holy grail for the Cornish bagpipe enthusiast remains a double chanter instrument that is loud enough, straightforward to learn and of course affordable. I have seen a picture of a double chanter Gaita in the *Anuario da Gaita*¹⁶ which is an inviting way forward but I am increasing of the view that a Bagpipe for Cornwall is about people, context and popularity rather than a specific design of instrument, perhaps it is the piper that is more important than the pipes.

¹ Vocabularium Cornicum 12th C, Cottonian Library

Fellores	Fidecina	<i>Female fiddler</i>
Harfellor	Fidicen	<i>Male fiddler</i>
Kerniat	Cornicen	<i>Hornpipe player</i>
Pib	Musa	<i>Musical Pipe</i>
Piphit	Tibicen	<i>Piper</i>
Pibounal	Fistula	<i>A Pipe, a flute</i>

² The Cornish Gwary Myr – mystery plays were performed in the open air rounds of which there were thought to be some 70 or 80 in Cornwall. They are currently performed at the St Just round annually in September

Origo Mundi 14th C, Part 1

Abarth an Tas, Menstral a ras, Pebough ware , In the name of the father, Minstrels of grace, Pipe at once

Beunans Meryasek : 1504

Pybough Minstrels volonnek May hyllyn donsia dyson; Pipe you hearty minstrels, That we might dance without delay

(Later in same play) Pyboryon wethugh in scon Ny a vyn ketep map bron Moys thi donsy; Pipers, blow quickly We will, every son of a breast Go to dance

Gwreans an Bys :1611

Mynstrells Grewgh theny peba, May Hallan warbarthe downssya, Del ew an vaner han geys; Minstrels pipe for us, That we may together dance, As is the custom and the fashion

Gwreans an Bys: 1698

Gwreuth an menstrells all tha pyba ,Mollen ny warbarth daunsya Kepare yw an for yn gwary; Minstrels all pipe That we may dance together As is the way in the play.

³ Those readers who attended Piva’s workshop at the blowout will be aware of the argument that in the context of dancing, which is that of the Cornish texts, pipes and pipers are more likely to refer to bagpipers than recorder ensembles or town waits.

⁴ St Austell Church Tower, 1480
St Mary's Church Launceston, East Wall, 1515
Altarnon Church, Bench end, 1520
Braddock Church Bench end, 16th C
Davidstow Church Bench end, 1600

⁵ Launceston Parish records of 1462
"Expended in wine to the Mayor and his fellow and Le Mynstrall in the vigil of st Mary Magdelene at the same time to William Parker and John Davey, clerk and other singers for the feast of Mary Magdalene".
Launceston Parish Records 1477
"paid to Le Mynstrall 12d "

⁶ Mike O Connor, "Ilow Kernow 3", Lyngham Press, 2005

⁷ Archaeologia Britannica Edward Llyud , 1707

Pib	pipe of what sort so ever, a water	spout a flute
Piban	shank, shinebone, a pipe a flute, a	flaggellet
Pibidh	a piper, a fiddler, a minstrel	
Kernias	a piper	

Antiquities of Cornwall, William Borlase 1754,

Harfel	She Piper, a viol, a harp
Harfellor	a player on the pipe
Kernat	a pipe, a blower of a clarion
Piban	a pipe
Pipidh	a maker of pipes;a piper
Pip	a song
Piphit	a songster, a player on the pipe.

Archeologica Cornu-Britannicum , William Pryce 1790

Kerrin	a pipe or tune
Pebough	tune you, pipe you
Peban	a flute, a flagellet, a little pipe
Pib	a pipe of any sort , a flute

⁸ Exeter 1417
John Wasson, Records of Early English Drama, University of Toronto Press, 1986: The pipers of Lord Botreaux of Boscastle paid 40.

Lostwithiel Guild Riding Accounts 1536/7
Dr J Mattingly Royal Institution of Cornwall Journal 2005 p92 – piper employed for the Riding.

Camborne Churchwardens accounts of 1550:
Paid to the piper in the play - 4d"

St Ives Borough accounts in 1575.
Item – paid to the piper

West Penwith Landowner records 1683
Penwith Local History Group "West Penwith at the time of Charles II" 1998 p 33 Wealthy landowners often hired a piper to provide entertainment in the evening for everyone involved in the clipping.

⁹ Sally L. Joyce and Evelyn S. Newlyn (eds). *Records of Early English Drama: Dorset/Cornwall*, University of Toronto Press, 1999. - I am indebted to Mike O'Connor for bringing these to my attention together with the reference to Lord Botreaux's pipers above.

¹⁰ Sabine Baring Gould, *Songs and Ballads of the West*, Methuen, London 1891, Preface, p viii

¹¹ The Arc Atlantique is frequently synonymous with Celtic in Eurospeak and refers to the Atlantic Seaboard stretching from Scotland to Brittany and has of late stretched further to include parts of Northern Spain and of course the Gaita of Asturias and Galicia.

¹² Derek Williams, *Henry and Katherine Jenner*, Francis Boutle, London 2004. Jenner set the scene for much of the Celtic revival in Cornwall by promoting the Cornish Language and links with the other Celtic Nations.

¹³ National museum of Ireland, Dublin, display in 2004. *Of particular interest to the piping fraternity is the figure of self styled Irish piper Eamon Ceant, resplendent in neo-celtic pipers garb. All a bit naff by the standards of today's more critical academia but it is sobering to realise that he was arrested and executed by the British for his political beliefs shortly after posing for this.)*

¹⁴ The Cornish Gorsedh is a collegiate of bards elected for services to Cornwall's culture and community who hold an annual Bardic ceremony in September. It is a sister organisation to the Welsh and Breton Gorseds and whilst essentially 19th century in origin is inspired by much earlier Welsh / Early British references.

¹⁵ Lucien Jenkins, *Guidonian Bands, Early Music*, Vol 2 no 5, Oct / Nov 2004, p18. quoting James Merryweather.

¹⁶ Anuario da Gaita, Escola Provincial de Gaitas, 1996, fresco Igrexade Rynkeby 1556