

# Pipe Band

## THE BIRMINGHAM SCOTTISH PIPE BAND. THE EARLY YEARS.



The first Minutes Book kept by the Band secretary has recently come back into the possession of the Band. It records the history of the various Committee Meetings and Annual General Meetings that took place from the first General Meeting in October 1947 through to a Committee Meeting in June 1960.

This time spanned a period of both growth and set-backs for the band and these notes are of a few of the general themes that the Committee and members considered in that time.

The band was formed in mid 1946 by Mr. P. Rankine and a few pipers and by October 1947 was well set up with twelve pipers and sixteen drummers. Thereafter membership fluctuated with seven members resigning in 1951 and the drum corps being very low in the mid 50's. There were eighteen members present at an Extra-ordinary General Meeting in 1960. The call-up took some members.

There were strong links with the Birmingham and Midland Scottish Society and the Thistle Club and with the Seaforth Highlanders (as one member was the secretary of the Seaforth Highlander Association). The Birmingham and Midland Scottish Society presented the band with a set of drums in 1947 and their President, Mr. H. Purnell, O.B.E., became the Band's first President. He remained President until December 1953, when Mr. H. W. Mackay became President. They each chaired almost every meeting during this period, only missing one when business commitments kept them away.

The Band's funds generally were described as "not too strong" or "in need of strengthening" with 1951 and 1952 being exceptional "healthy" or "very satisfactory" funds. "Very satisfactory" was £131 but with pending commitments for uniforms, in 1953 it was down to £25 and stayed at this level until 1960. Annual subscription, reduced from 5 Shilling to 1 Shilling in 1950, was up to 1 Shilling per week in 1959.

It took several years to standardise on the uniform. The first five tunics were purchased from the Chief Constable of Birmingham at 10 Shilling each. Bandsmen tended to buy their own uniform, which made it harder to standardise. It was 1950 when it was decided to standardise on the Prince Charles Edward tartan, although in 1952 further McKenzie kilts and plaids were purchased. In 1955 hose tops were knitted by a member's wife so as to standardise on these and an attempt was made to purchase ex-army sporrans, also in order to standardise. More kit was still required in 1960.



Engagements were varied. The first one being a ceremony at the Grand Hotel, Birmingham, when the Band was presented with the set of drums and marched off to "The Pibroch of Donald Dhu", followed by a strathspey and reel. To get to Mappleborough Green, Pete transport was hired from Midland Red at a cost of £7. Shirley and Solihull Carnivals are mentioned in 1951 and Redditch in 1953. Knowle in 1955. In 1951 the Band was seeking more winter engagements (i.e. football matches). In 1955 a circular letter, with Band photograph, was sent to Welfare Officers at Works in the Midlands.

The fee for a full band remained at £25 through to 1955 and had increased to thirty guineas by 1959, with charitable activities being free or at reduced rates. Solo engagements were arranged through the Band. The fee in 1953 was two guineas before midnight and three guineas after, the piper receiving 25 Shilling. By 1959 it was three guineas and four guineas respectively, with the Band having one guinea for its funds. In 1955 it was agreed that the fee for the Pipe Major to pipe at a Dancing

Demonstration would be five guineas. In 1956 the suggestion that fees to solo pipers be reduced or abolished was not agreed.

Dancers were an integral part of the Band from its early days. In 1950 the dancers available were Miss Meredith - at her convenience, Bournville Girls and Mr. Williams, a member. The Young Scots Dancing Team was used through 1951 until it was agreed that the Band should have its own team, trained by Mr. Williams, with volunteers from the younger members. In 1953 the Bournville Girls Team were used but in 1954 it was decided to form a team of highland dancers "exclusive of women" as it was incorrect for ladies to dance these. In 1954 the Juvenile Team was disbanded because an Adult Team had been trained. In 1956 dance tuition was blamed for interfering with Band practice but it was admitted that little dance tuition had been done lately and attendance was still poor at Band practice.

In 1953 the Pipe Major made strong comment on unsatisfactory conduct at engagements, i.e. late arrivals, non-arrivals and excessive drinking. There were also complaints of irregular and late attendance at Band practice. This problem continued through to at least 1957 and in 1954 part of the fee had to be returned to Shirley Carnival because of the small numbers and late arrival of members of the Band.

Social evenings were occasionally organised and subsidised from Band funds, honorariums were given to the Secretary and the Treasurer between 1952 and 1955, although by 1957 it was decided to combine both these positions. Sums were also sometimes sent to members who had fallen ill or to the widows of members who had died.

The number of officers elected to the Committee tended to vary each year according to the number of members in the Band, only occasionally did the number include a Drum Corporal, Pipe Corporal or Drum Sergeant. In 1960 it was felt necessary to detail the duties and responsibilities of the quarter master (after problems had been experienced).

In 1953 the Band entered the Harpenden Highland Games Band Piping Contest and later in the year members were urged to work harder to achieve success at competitions (Harpenden and White City). At the same time it was decided not to let Stourbridge Pipe Band have discarded equipment because of the possible effects on this Band.

The general tone of the notes kept throughout the period is of a Band struggling to progress with inadequate funds, too few members, some internal strife and too little commitment from its members. However, progress it did and with great success as later events proved. It has also survived through great changes; where is the Thistle Club now, or the Birmingham and Midlands Scottish Society; The Harpenden Highland Games or the Stourbridge Pipe Band; where are all the Welfare Officers and the Works that held their own annual sports days; where are the venues at which the Band appeared such as the Kings Heath Horse Show or the Dunlop Sports meeting or the Castle Bromwich Playing Fields Association Carnival. Although events have changed so much the Band today is in as strong a position generally as it has ever been and now that it is well over forty years old there seems no reason to believe that it cannot continue far into the future as long as the public enjoy the sound and spectacle of a Pipe and Drum Band and some people are keen to learn how to play the instruments.

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