

2.08 Union Bagpipes in Museums: Treasures and Challenges.

By Mark Walstrom

Introduction

Some of the earliest and best examples of Union bagpipes are in museums. To better understand the development of the instrument, we need to identify, study and measure these pipes.

This research found about 150 Union pipe accessions in 39 different museums in 12 countries. These include Union and Pastoral pipes made in Ireland, Scotland, England and the United States. Many of these are not good quality, have been seriously altered, or are 'bits and pieces.' As a best guess, fewer than 30 top-quality, unmolested, full sets by the best makers (Kenna, Coyne, M.Egan, Harrington) are currently held in museums.

This list of bagpipes in museums is by no means complete and will be added to in the future. Information was gathered from the Internet, museum publications, catalogs, books, articles in 'An Píobaire'¹, 'The Piper's Review'², and 'Common Stock'³ and personal communications with many Irish bagpipe experts.

This paper also details museum curator's challenges with musical instruments, specific problems relating to Union pipes, and the role of museums in research and education.

The Museums

Most museums have musical instruments in their collections. In Great Britain alone, there are 104 museums with instruments, according to the CIMCIM (International Committee of Musical Instrument Museums and Collections) website. Most of the major museums are in large cities, however, in my search for the Turlough McSweeney set, I found that there are 5 different museums in sparsely populated County Donegal.

Of all the museums, only 5 are devoted to bagpipes alone – the Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum in Northumberland, England; the Piping Centre in Glasgow, Scotland; the Zampogna Museum in Scapoli, Italy; the Gaita Museum in Gijon, Spain; and the Bagpipe Music Museum in Maryland, USA. The Morpeth museum, with 120 bagpipes in its collection, specializes in the instruments of Northern England, but has many other wonderful examples of pipes from the rest of Europe, including some very good Union pipes. The Piping Centre specializes in Scottish Highland piping and has a museum that displays first-rate bagpipes on loan from the National Museum of Scotland. The Zampogna museum is devoted to Italian pipes, the Gaita Museum to Spanish pipes, the Bagpipe Music Museum to Scottish pipes, but they each have many other types of bagpipes.

¹ The journal of *Na Píobairí Uilleann*. Dublin.

² The journal of The Irish Piper's Club. Seattle.

³ The journal of the Lowland and Border Piper's Society.

The four largest Union bagpipe collections in the world are in the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, the National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh, the Edinburgh University Collection, and the Morpeth Chantry Bagpipe Museum. Of these only the Edinburgh University has a detailed, published list of accessions and a website. Very little information is readily available from the other incredibly important collections and they are worthy of much study.

The National Museums of Scotland (NMS) has one of the biggest and most important collections of Union pipes but is understaffed and could offer little help for this study. The museum has 750 instrument accessions including the largest collection of European bagpipes in the world. NMS has the wonderful instruments pictured in Duncan Fraser's book, "Some Reminiscences and the Bagpipe", including the elaborate M.Egan set supposedly given to piper Charles Ferguson by Queen Victoria⁴ They also house the extensive Ross and Glen bagpipe collections.

The Dublin museum has an incredibly important Irish bagpipe collection and some of the finest instruments ever made. The museum has recently relocated the Decorative Arts section, including the Musical Instruments, to the Collins Barracks site in Dublin. The collection was inaccessible for a time but is available again (to serious and careful researchers, by appointment) in its new home. The Dublin museum has more than 22 sets of pipes, including the ivory Lord Edward Fitzgerald / Egan, the huge Maloney set made for Vandeleur, as well as two fine Coynes and other masterpieces – see article 2.12.

Many of the small, or more isolated museums with few instruments have very important bagpipes nevertheless. The Donegal Historical Society Museum has the McSweeney / M.Egan set, the Arrowtown museum in New Zealand has the Paddy Galvin / M. Egan and the Wayland / M. Egan is at the University in Perth. All are important historical sets pictured and discussed in O'Neill's "Irish Minstrels and Musicians".

The British Museum, one of the largest museums in the world, with over 3,000 musical instruments in its collection, surprisingly has no Union bagpipes.

One of the most unusual museums is The Dayton Miller Flute Collection in the US Library of Congress. They have an amazing collection of over 1650 flutes and related instruments including, possibly, a unique M.Egan double chanter.

A wonderful example of what a museum can be with proper funding and support is the Piping Centre in Glasgow. The Centre has a museum, a school for music tuition and lectures, a 200 seat concert hall, a small hotel and café, in-house publications and recordings, conference facilities, a library, and a gift shop, all under one roof in a beautifully renovated old building. They also encourage pipe-makers to come and study and measure instruments. Another prime example, the Cite Musique in Paris, has a huge collection of musical instruments from around the world housed in a new facility with a state-of-the-art building that includes performance halls, a research / restoration laboratory, teaching areas and a library. They also have 10,000 instrument photos and 800 technical drawings available for purchase.

⁴ Irish Minstrels and Musicians, Captain Francis O'Neill, Chicago 1913.

Research Problems.

It is difficult to obtain collection information from some museums. Some of these institutions lack the staff or interest to assist researchers. Many of my queries to museums went unanswered.

Few museums have good documentation of their instrument collections. Photographs, catalogues, written descriptions and measurements are all extremely helpful tools for researchers and are sadly lacking at most institutions.

It is also difficult to determine what exactly museums have in their collections without observing the instruments firsthand. Substantial confusion stems from lack of knowledge of the instrument. In museum publications the terminology used to describe bagpipes is often inaccurate. The many parts of the bagpipes are confusing, even for the initiated. For example, regulators are sometimes called keyed chanters or keyed drones. Bessaraboff made up the term, 'differential bass regulator' and used it to describe M.Egan's extended bass regulator with an extra air supply tube. Also, foreign language museum publications often have their own idiomatic bagpipe terms, confusing things further.

Other problems result from misunderstanding the significance of specific details. For instance, keys are usually described as either square or round referring to the part that covers the hole. In identifying Irish pipes, however, the shape of the touch piece is far more significant.

Moreover, instruments are often crudely measured by museum staff. Overall length measurements are traditionally used by museums to provide relative scale, and chanters are often measured with the heads on – both useless bits of information.

Some museums refuse photography or will not allow flash to be used. Often the photographs they take themselves don't show the details needed to identify or learn much about the instruments.

Museums face many challenges with old bagpipes. Many makers did not stamp their instruments making identification almost impossible, even for experienced researchers.

One of the most contentious subjects among curators is whether or not to restore instruments to playability. Instruments, unlike most artwork in museums, require human interaction to fulfill the purpose for which they were intended. Few museums have the expertise or desire to restore instruments to playing condition, preferring instead to preserve and protect the original instrument without subjecting it to further degradation by playing or accidental damage. A few exceptions to this are the Smithsonian and the Paris museums which choose certain instruments to restore and make available for recordings and historic performance. The Ringve museum in Norway has tour guides that actually play some of the instruments for visitors.

Most often, the nicest instruments are cleaned and put on display, never to be played again. Many are put in storage, out of public view, and incomplete sets or orphan

chanters are often ignored completely in displays and publications. Sometimes the pipes on display are put together wrongly or the instrument is cobbled together from pieces of a few instruments, such as the set on prominent display in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The only known photograph of the wonderful Ferguson / M. Egan set in the Fraser book has the baritone drone sliding end piece wrongly placed on the end of the baritone regulator.

The complex workmanship involved in producing a set of bagpipes and the many components; leather, metal, wood, ivory, and fabrics, make complicated problems for the museum curator. Any piper knows how difficult it is to maintain one set of pipes in playable condition, much less a roomful.

Museums will usually allow qualified individuals to measure and study instruments. More of this needs to be done in order to learn from the best examples, as very little research has been focused on the Union pipes. There are many published drawings of musical instruments in museum collections but none are Union pipes and only a few are other types of bagpipes.

Museum Goals: Preservation, Presentation and Education.

Museums must weigh the benefits and risks associated with different levels of public access. A two-tiered approach is warranted because the public museum visitor and the professional researcher have very different needs and concerns. Studies have shown that casual museum visitors spend an average of less than 9 seconds in front of an object on display. Imparting information with attractive labelling, mounting and aural (headphones) methods are usually all that is needed for public displays.

Researcher access to the entire collection, however, is very important for historical study of the instruments and for measuring so that copies can be built. Accurate record keeping, organized storage, and a secure environment are vital.

Staffing, costs and space issues often leave museums with little ability to do much with the collections. Curators are often called upon to work in many areas of the museum. Most institutions do not have the luxury of dedicated musical instrument personnel.

CIMCIM is at the forefront of musical instrument research in museums. They sponsor an email discussion forum, conferences, museum visits and publish research papers. CIMCIM has a wonderful website to disseminate information. The site has links to hundreds of museum websites, technical drawings and publications available for purchase. CIMCIM promotes high professional standards in the use and conservation of musical instruments in museums and collections.

It is important for museums to adopt policies and goals for the collections. One such published Policy statement by the Edinburgh University director is a good example of this and could be used as a model for other museums looking to focus their curatorial and educational efforts. <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/ugmp2000.html>

The Edinburgh University museum also does one of the best jobs of information dissemination by an individual museum. They have an extensive set of publications and a huge, informative website.

Goals and questions.

Antique musical instruments with historical integrity are a diminishing, non-renewable resource, and in effect, the primary documents from which we can detail early pipe-making technologies. They must be protected by museums or other owners and be available for study by qualified researchers.

The goal of this research is information collection and dissemination. Much is yet to be learned about the development of the Union pipes and the pipe-making techniques of the great makers. It is necessary to know who the makers were, who developed which innovations, and when they worked. How can we differentiate the work of the two or three different makers named Kenna and the two (at least) named Coyne? How was information passed between the Scottish, English and Irish makers? Who were the early makers of the pastoral bagpipes? Where are all the old bagpipes? Many of these are identified on this list but much is yet to be learned.

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The best websites.....

CIMCIM

<http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/cimcim/index.html>

Cite Musique, Paris

<http://www.cite-musique.fr/anglais/musee/>

Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments

<http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/>

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