

THE MAINTENANCE BLOOPER REEL

Brett Tidswell National Principal of Piping

These are a series of humorous events that occurred at seminars or band practices that relate to the (lack of) maintenance of peoples bagpipes. Some make you laugh; some make you shake your head in disbelief. In any event they are all things we talk about and have a chuckle at years after the event. I think in over 30 years I have seen it all and heard all of the excuses so many times that nothing can take me by surprise. Or can it?

A Piper who seasoned his bag with mutton fat came to practice with pipes that were full of maggots. Yuck!

My old Pipe Major's bag was seasoned with honey and he left under a tree and found them full of ants.

A "regularly" played set of pipes were full of cob webs. I saw this again at a recent seminar!

So much seasoning in a bag that the pipes weighed twice their normal weight and very little air could go in.

Breaking a Naill wooden chanter in half whilst demonstrating to his wife what an "idiot" band member did to break your old crappy plastic chanter in half (and just gave you the Naill as a replacement through guilt).

Playing a leather bag that had never been seasoned and complaining pipes were too hard. 20 years experience as a player but excuse was PM didn't do it for him!

Soaking an old set of McDougall's in a tub of oil then complaining about a bad purchase as they all cracked (severely) shortly after. Then his mate soaking his Henderson's and having the same experience shortly after!

Putting pipe case on the ground behind your car and then backing over them yourself. Lucky he has a good case!

My old Pipe Major put his pipes on the ground behind the Drum Major's wife whilst she was putting his plaid on and ended up with a stiletto heel through the C hole of his chanter!

A piper at a solo competition walked under a tree whilst playing and emerged from the other side with drone tops still in the tree and continued to play whilst all around fell over laughing.

Cleaning F hole in chanter with the wire stem of a drone brush and enlarging the hole twice it's normal size, then complaining that the chanter had an unstable F.

Playing a roaring set of plastic drone reeds when you have a fine set of Ezeedrone reeds in your case that went perfectly. Excuse: "the others cost more"!

Not a maintenance issue, but we played a joke on an ex PM by taping the bottom of his chanter with black tape and then cutting it around the sole. We asked him to demonstrate Cabar Feidh and all sat around laughing at the gurgling low G's in the last part. It took days of trialling reeds before he realized you couldn't see down the chanter bore. Anyone else who tried his pipes, surreptitiously removed the tape before playing and then replaced it before handing the instrument back.

Piper when marching onto the field to compete says "there's something wrong with my pipes" and pulls his chanter out at which time the bag spews it's contents all over his hands and reed. 30 seconds under a tap, no re-tuning and he goes on to play in the winning performance in grade 2 in perfect pitch! Go figure!

A young piper tried treacle as bag dressing for the first time. Walked through the house and dripped treacle all over the carpet! (Sorry Mum, I'll never use treacle again!).

There are a million variations of the rotting blow stick hemp. But the best I saw had only about 1 cm of gluey stinking hemp holding the blow stick into the stock and it actually worked. The white fluffy stuff all over the leather valve was a bigger concern at the time.

Saw a piper setting up a new silver and ivory set. The mouthpiece had a sleeve over the thread with about a 2 mm hole to let air through. It was quite funny watching the guy testing reeds and going blue in the face! He couldn't seem to equate the fact that the pipes were hard even before struck in with the fact that it couldn't be the reeds!

Saw a set of pipes where the owner couldn't get his outside tenor working. It went perfectly outside of the bag, but wouldn't make any sound in the pipe. The bag had been seasoned with a beeswax concoction which had built up and totally blocked the bottom of the stock!

I was once given a couple of OLD tins of Hardie's Airtight which were tarnished and sounded very watery. When opening the tin the lid blew off and dented my ceiling! The second tin I opened outside, facing away from myself! I couldn't help but laugh as the lid went sailing over the neighbour's fence!

Saw two pipers in a band quickstep course contest (yes we did do that stuff), get their cords tangled in a front to rear and ripped ones tenor tops off! Great sound! There is a reason for not having long ends on the cords.

Saw drone reeds that had been held in place using beeswax and no hemp. The beeswax had built up in the reed seats until it had halved the bore diameter above the reed and had set like rock.

I had a set of McDougall's re-finished. A beautiful shellac finish. A friend borrowed them and played in the rain without drying them and when he returned them the timber had turned a mottled white colour!

This one is always funny. The Ross canister system with the unsteady outside tenor and the chanter that goes higher and higher in pitch because the canister is installed the wrong way around.

We had a piper come into practice one afternoon. He walked in opened his case, closed it and abused everyone as he walked out and went home. Real personal, aggressive stuff. Everyone sat with mouths wide open except me; I was literally on the floor laughing. One of the guys finally spoke and said "ok what's the joke"? I was the only one close enough to see that when he opened his case his spare Ross canister had lost its lid and he had a case full of kitty litter!

Amused by the stragglers in bands who do "so much work at home", I often removed a drone reed and kept it between practices. Funny how no-one has ever realized it to be missing before the next practice. I have also been known to score the odd practice chanter as well!

I complained about a piper not blowing the dust out of his canister and filling his hoses with white powder. He decided the easier option was to wash the kitty litter totally destroying it.

One piper when told to put a few drops of water into the chanter section of his canister as it was too dry, he put the whole thing under a running tap, drone sections and all. He wasn't exactly the sharpest pencil in the box! (When travelling with a drummer to a contest and having to pass through a newly constructed tunnel he asked "when do we go through that bridge what goes underground"?)
Just goes to show piping isn't always an intellectual pursuit!

Saw a set of pipes that literally had a tide mark 1/2 way up the chanter reed. When I asked what it was the piper said "probably Whiskey"?

Saw a guy piper playing with treacle running out of his chanter and down his hands.

I just love the chanter hemped with Teflon tape that pops out mid contest. I have seen several, but the best story I heard was a PM that stopped the band when it happened to the P/Sgt and said: "Why do you always do that!"

I had a PM who was in the Royal Navy in the Second World War who has a great story about his chanter falling out when tuning his drones and dropping off the deck of an aircraft carrier into the ocean! "Best chanter I ever had", was always the finale of that story!

Young piper had tape slip on his F hole in a street march, knowing it would no longer be in tune, he decided the best course of action was to totally cover the hole so that it wouldn't play F at all. Too bad for the E instead of F and the Piobaireachd High G!!!!

Not Pipe maintenance but related; I had a friend watching an old band we used to play in during their more successful years. They had a young piper leave the band in the middle of a parade and my friend, being the experienced old war horse he was, thought he would find out what was wrong and see if he could help the lad! Seems his underpants were dropping down while he was marching! My mates comment was, "things have changed, and I didn't even know anyone wore such things"!

Saw a piper at wedding once who had his bass drone reed drop into his bag just as he was striking up to play the bride down the aisle. I was punched by my Mother who was standing next to me when I handed him a rolled up page I had torn from the Hymn book! She then made me put the value of the hymn book into the offering box! (Should have charged the piper for my services)

I love the guys who play with a bag cover several sizes too small with a bag all scrunched up, folded over and sticking out the back!

Saw a music teacher trying to demonstrate a practice chanter with a reed stuck in the top of the mouthpiece like an oboe!

This is one I heard about: A friend of mine had a Welsh chap telling him a story about a Scottish guy (who played pipes) he saw at a caravan park drying some kitty litter in a communal microwave. The Welshman said, "I never believed anyone could be so stingy, his cat must have an arse like the Japanese flag"!

Saw a piper play for a dancing display once, he marched out onto the stage, struck his pipes, very little happened, the dancers were all marching out behind him, he kept marching right off the stage and the dancing teacher took over on the piano. We then saw him later trying to fish his chanter reed out of his bag!

I was in a band whose pitch was rising on a weekly basis. Got to the point where chanters could not be sunk anymore when the Pipe Major confessed that his chanter was stuck in the stock and he hadn't been able to get it out for the past month!

I knew a piper who proclaimed that cooking oil was great for dressing the inside of a bag and then rub Vaseline into the seam and outside of the bag. He ran out of Vaseline and as an emergency had used Vicks Vapour Rub. He had to play at a funeral and says he couldn't stop his eyes watering as the Vapour Rub was so over powering!

Had a piper who was going through two or three chanter reeds a month. I couldn't work out why they were dying as he would deny anything other than just blowing them in. I drew a pen line down the centre of his reed and across the tone box and that reed lasted almost a year. When it finally died I took it out and saw that he had sanded the tone box after the last practice! Mystery solved!

We have a band rule about shouting drinks for everyone if you chip a corner off your reed. Amazing how you can go from one or two a month to none in several years!

My all time favourite excuse for not practising: "I won't come to lessons this week because I poked myself in the eye with my practice chanter"!

Ensure that your pipes are always going well with "The Complete Pipers Handbook" available from:

<http://www.schoolofpiping.com/handbook.html>

