

Bytepipes

Bob Dunsire talks about building the most travelled piping and drumming destination on the world wide web.

WHO IS ONE OF THE MOST FAMOUS pipers in the world? Thousands of pipers worldwide know his name. Is it Jack Lee? Willie MacCallum? Alastair Gillies? Bruce Gandy? Nope. That piper would be Bob Dunsire.

If you are asking “who?” you obviously do not travel the Internet much. With what started (and remains) the single greatest link directory on the web for all things relating to bagpipes, Bob is responsible for single-handedly shrinking the piping world through the launch of his online discussion forums four years ago at BobDunsire.com.

For some quick name dropping, Jim McGilivray, Roger Huth, Chris Hamilton, Chris Apps (among other well known names) are currently all moderators. The forums occasionally see posts by the likes of Willie MacCallum, Alastair Gillies, Jimmy Bell, Ian Whitelaw, John Cairns, Aaron Shaw, Eric Rigler, Ian Speirs, Jack Lee, Bruce Gandy—among others.

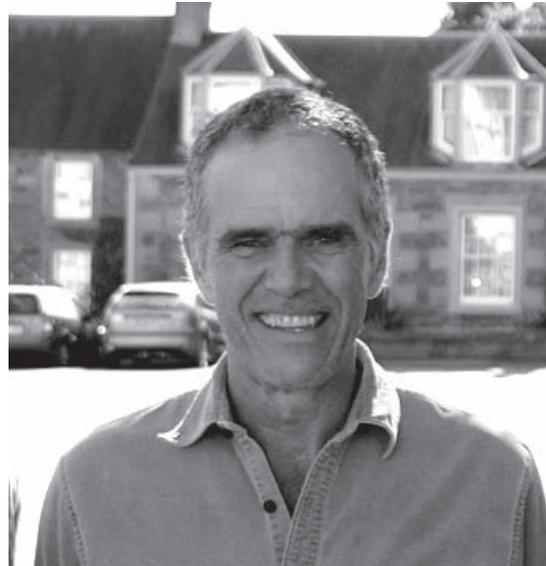
In addition to his successful directory and forums, Bob has also been deeply involved with *BCPipers.org*, and, as an avid photographer, the popular Piping Photo of the Day (PPOD) also located at BobDunsire.com.

After much coersing (seriously), Andrew Lenz (who operates his own website at *www.bagpipe-journey.com*) managed to corner the humble Bob Dunsire for *The Voice* and get him to agree to this interview.

THE VOICE: How did you get involved in piping?

BOB DUNSIRE: I can't help but think how easily my daughters could answer the same question: “my dad was a piper, he taught me when I was about 10.” But for me, the answer is a bit less simple. My dad wanted me to learn the pipes when I was young, but I was really a lot more interested in racing motorcycles and learning all I could about girls.

Later in life, while living in Northern California, married with two very young daughters, I rediscovered Highland games. My sister Barbara, her husband Robin Belanger



(a piper with the Cameron Highlanders of San Diego at the time), and their two daughters, both Highland dancers, were attending Highland games all around California. When they would come to Northern California, we met them at the games. Robin has been a piper since he was about 12 and a family joke is that the main reason my dad let him into the family was because he was a piper. After attending just a couple of Highland games to visit with Barb and Rob, I decided the heavy events looked like a lot of fun, so I started to compete in the athletics. A while later, our daughters started Highland dancing also—Alison was about 5 at the time, Liz 4—and by then my body had started giving me serious problems, so I thought I'd learn a few tunes on the pipes. Truly, my goal was just to become competent enough to play a couple of tunes. It was 1989, 1990 when I finally started piping—24 years after my dad had tried to talk me into it. My brother-in-law, Robin, is in fact responsible for my being involved in piping, and as a result for my daughters involvement.

VOICE: You must have been somewhat committed to do as well as you did. There are adult learners that never make it out of Grade 4. Can you tell us about your competition experiences and challenges learning? Did your father help with instruction?

BD: Committed is perhaps a reasonable way to describe most of my activities. I tend to throw all of my efforts and energy into everything I try, often somewhat fearlessly and foolishly. I think I came to piping with perhaps just the right skill set for an adult: humble, intelligent, good looking (oh—skill set...sorry). I think adults come to piping with life experiences that can be quite a big advantage over kids, and if we're able to apply these things to piping, great satisfaction can follow. As a result of a somewhat unique childhood—partici-

pating in every sport I could find—the desire to learn new skills has always sort of defined my recreational life, even as an adult.

I have spent my life so far, acquiring new skills. I tend to spend years involved in my new “passions”—I’ve thought about this, and for me it was typically five to seven years for me to see how well I could do with each new thing—usually by then I’d have broken some parts of my body beyond repair, and then I’d have to find a new physical activity, one that used different body parts. I approached piping in the same obsessive manner, with a set of personal goals to try to accomplish in five to seven years. It was sort of “Oh Boy, here is a new and fun activity, using new skills, and they require body parts that still function!”

My brother-in-law Robin was my first piping teacher. I had encountered a great deal of difficulty finding an instructor, in part because I was an adult, and in part because I wasn’t interested in being part of a pipe band. My early lessons were done with cassette tapes, phone calls, and occasional visits with Robin, who was living in Illinois by then.

Sort of the grand circle of things, daughter Alison was my first student, and years later—by this time she was a Professional class competitor—she became Robin’s teacher!

My goal in piping was to progress at a rate similar to a youngster—but to do that I guessed I had to work twice as hard, which was fine with me. Ultimately, my time frame was five to seven years to get to a Grade 2 level, and I was comfortable with my progress when my spine let me down—for lack of a better word—and I was, as a result, not able to put the full seven or so years into the experiment. But I did make it to Grade 2.

As for competition experiences, for me, piping competition was simply a way to test my skills, in an environment that was predictable and that “counted.” I competed in piping as a way of testing myself, and that was the

point. It seemed to me that it was too easy to be satisfied if beating others was the objective, but doing your very best, when it counted, *that* was a big challenge. I loved it.

My complete piping “career” took place while living in Pleasanton, California. I lived in California for a total of 29 years, but had we lived here in the Pacific Northwest—where I was born, and live now—I am sure I would never have gone into piping with anywhere near the same passion as an adult. In California, at the time I was involved in piping, an adult competitor not in the professional class was not unusual, in fact we were the majority. A few years later my daughter Alison, as a 10, 11, then 12-year-old girl, was the unusual one—for being so young, and for being a girl in piping in California. Things are very different here in the Pacific Northwest, where the average age of graded pipers is probably something like 12. Back “when,” in California, I think the average or median age of piping competitors was probably 35-plus.

VOICE: *Where did the idea for your web directory come from? It’s obvious that you must have had some computer background, perhaps with some kind of analysis involved?*

BD: In 1998, we moved to Camano Island Washington. That summer Alison (14 at the time) joined the Robert Malcolm Memorial PB in Canada (2 hours away), and Liz (13 at the time) joined the Northwest MacGregor Pipe Band in Mt. Vernon Washington (30 minutes away). I was no longer able to play the pipes, but it was very clear our daughters were going to be involved in piping for a long time, so I decided to stay involved too, and the web gave me that chance.

My working career was in the computer and software field. I started my computer career in 1975, computers and technology fascinated me, and more important, they offered more opportunities for a future than my professional motorcycle racing “career.” My work world—for over 20 years—was

the world of large business computers, and when the Internet arrived I found it to be a lot of fun (in the hobby sort of way), fascinating, with all sorts of interesting new technical challenges.

I started playing with web pages in early 1995. It was a fun time of learning new things—when I would see something I found interesting on the web, I’d create a web page as a way of learning how to do the technical stuff that interested me. I’d guess that from 1995 to 1998 I created 100-plus different web sites/pages, and each was different—some spectacularly nonfunctional and ugly, but certainly different—each one was created just because I wanted to learn some new technique, or use some new tool—or tools—or try some new software.

All these sites were hosted where others could find them, and back then I used to think a dozen to twenty visits a day was really cool. I had at least 50 pages/sites about radio-controlled aircraft—years ago I designed some of my own RC aircraft and even had some of my designs published, so there was a fair bit of interest in those web pages. I also had a fair number of pages/sites on the history of my family, back in 1995, 1996. I think many of us did that with web pages, and from those it was a lot of fun hearing from Dunsires from all around the world. Of course, there were even a few of my web pages about piping back then, but really just a few.

My web sites must have looked really, really ugly to anyone paying attention—no two web pages of mine every looked the same, but that was my point at the time—learning and having fun on the web. Each site/page was simply a way to learn about stuff that I found interesting. I was well into my web learning experiences before I actually came across an idea for content that drove the creation of a web site of mine—it was bound to happen.

Very shortly after moving here to Camano Island in the summer of 1998, I had an “inspiration” that resulted in the Bagpipe Web Directory. Simply, it was to have a site with only piping

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links, and they were to be checked for validity on a regular basis. Like so many "web surfers" back then, I would go to piping web sites, and use their links to find other piping sites. But this was often frustrating because so many of the links were out of date or invalid, so I thought I could fix this problem. I saw this as a way to create a new sort of piping web site, and one that could be helpful to others too. Now seven years later, I'm still maintaining the Directory, although I no longer have the time to check the links every month, I still try to do that every three months or so.

Amusing now is the memory of sharing with a friend back in the early days of the Directory that a goal was to see 50,000 visitors in total. I could never have imagined the visitor numbers of today. The Directory is now seeing more than 40,000 visits a week!

VOICE: *What stirred you to start your bagpiping forums?*

BD: Over a period of years, 1994 to

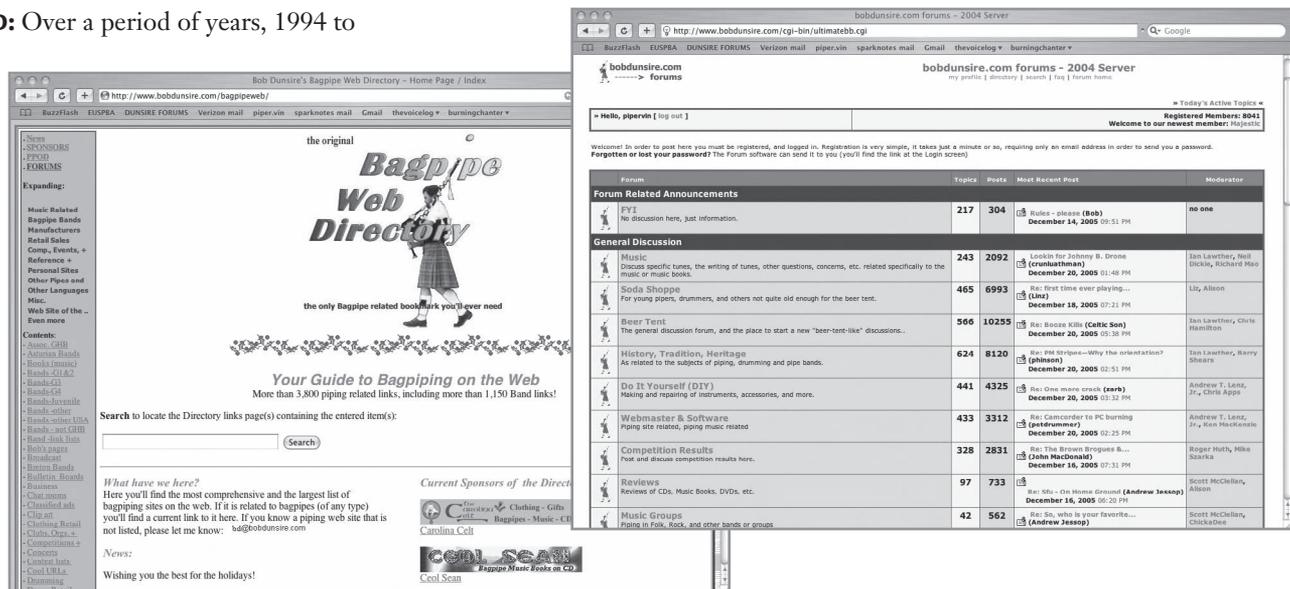
2001, I watched as the main discussion "site" for bagpiping grew less and less hospitable. As a direct result of the growing ugliness on what was then the usenet newsgroup *rec.music.makers.bagpipe* (RMMB), a few people had suggested I start my own piping discussion site. I didn't jump in to do that simply because other concerned folks also saw the need for a place for civil piping discussions, and a few had created new piping discussion sites and were working to attract an audience. I was quite happy not doing that, just maintaining my other piping sites.

After a year or so, it became clear the others were not going to succeed with their alternatives to RMMB—for a variety of reasons—and the ugliness on the RMMB newsgroup was growing. In the fall of 2001, Terry Lee made the suggestion I start a discussion site, and he made it in a way I couldn't easily turn down. (It is all Terry's fault!)

Through his business, Tartantown, Terry offered to support and pay the expenses for the first year of the new discussion site. We both knew the new site could easily fail to attract an audience, but it was something we could do to try to help piping, and that quite simply was all Terry wanted to do. For me it was a "what the heck" moment. I had the time and he offered money to pay the bills. It was not a great deal of money, and I actually had to go back to him for more, part way through the first year—oops!

VOICE: *How many unique visitors do you get each day? Or is that too hard to tell?*

BD: Unique visitors is nearly impossible to truly determine. I don't use any sort of tracking or monitoring "stuff," so I have no exact idea. Mainly, real time visitor display (updated every 5 minutes) regularly shows we seldom see fewer than 100 visitors over any 5



The Bagpipe Web Directory is probably the most comprehensive listing of Internet links for all things related to Highland bagpipes. In four years, the forums at bobdunsire.com have become one of the most visited discussion sites for pipers worldwide.

minute interval during the 24 hours of any weekday.

Of one thing I'm sure—we have a lot of visitors, and we keep getting more all the time!

VOICE: *You have a number of very high profile bagpipers contributing on your forums, how did that happen?*

BD: We're just lucky. I think this is an indication of the type of people we have in piping, at even the highest levels. Isn't it great that our piping heroes are so accessible. These are genuine, friendly, supportive, interesting, and just really nice people. If there were millions of "piper fanatics" I'm sure we'd have a very different situation, but I think, in piping, we're very lucky that our world is relatively so small and as a result so friendly and open. Given that we have a relatively small world in piping, I'd think it is inevitable that we'd see a lot of top-level pipers in any large discussion place—I mean any discussion place where there is a reasonable level of friendly support and respect. As a result of impeccable timing—OK, luck—our Forums are the main place on the 'net for piping discussion—and as a result, we see participation from all levels of piping, from all over the world.

VOICE: *Is there anything you would have done differently with your forums so far?*

BD: Overall I am quite pleased with how things are going, and as everyone who visits regularly knows, I am comfortable changing things when I feel there is a reason to do so.

The really big "miss" on my part was my original capacity plan and the site's growth expectation. As a result of underestimating, by an order of magnitude, the interest and growth of the discussion forums, I chose a software and hardware platform that quickly presented challenges for which I was not prepared. Staying ahead of the problems has been really interesting and a type of fun—I actually do enjoy it—but in the overall scheme of things,

it might be nice to not have had quite so much "fun."

Overall performance of the forums is still quite reasonable I believe, and having good response times for viewers is a major goal of mine. But, if I could do it all over again, I would probably choose a different a software platform so that we would have easy support for the existing level of activity and our continuing growth. We're doing fine now, but I have now exhausted every option to help performance. The next step will have to be a software switch.

VOICE: *Your daughters are moderators on your forums. You've found your family to be supportive?*

BD: Yes. My family has always seemed to accept that I found "interesting" and often unusual things to do with my spare time. The list is quite long, and they just know it is my way. To my wife and daughters, I am pretty sure the Forums are not a great big deal at all, just another one of my "things." It is sort of cruel in a way. Alison and Liz are very dedicated, talented, and accomplished pipers, and their dad, who doesn't even play the pipes anymore, is probably better known in the piping world (oops!).

VOICE: *How often do you get strangers coming up and recognizing you?*

BD: It happens sometimes when I attend piping events! When it happens it takes me somewhat by surprise. It is so easy for me to forget that many people sort of "know" me, I spend most of my 'net time at home, typing and reading, sort of one-to-one with a computer. When I think about the scale of my web sites it is fairly easy to be intimidated by how many people there are actually aware of the web stuff with which I'm involved—but that also makes it fun. Related to this, while my smiling face is not terribly often recognized, it does seem my name gets a bit of recognition in the piping world. This is comfortable for me because it allows me to be sort of anonymous as

a "face." I mean I can meet and talk to new people without the "Oh!" factor entering in, and meeting and talking to new people, making new friends, those are among the greatest pleasures for me at piping events. I don't take any of the recognition too seriously—how could one? I actually feel "funny"—for lack of a better word—being so well known in piping.

VOICE: *When you found out that you had cancer last year, initially only the moderators were told. Obviously you were entitled some private time to come to terms with surgery and chemotherapy. It now seems that's all behind you. How's the recovery going?*

BD: It is really difficult, having gone through that seven months of cancer "stuff"—six rounds of chemo, four surgeries, over 35 days in hospital—to reply with anything but "great" when asked how I'm doing. Having had such an aggressive cancer, and now being here after aggressive treatment for it, I fully realize how incredibly fortunate I am, to still be alive, and to realize how much I mean to my loved ones and friends. It was and is just an incredibly humbling and wonderful experience. In terms of recovery, I still have a few things hanging around from chemo—nasty stuff that chemo—and I have a great scar on my back—where the tumor was removed three times—but I have hair again, and I have friends, family, and life... it is good!

VOICE: *Any ideas for the future?*

BD: Yes indeed!

Andrew Lenz runs the piping reference site BagpipeJourney.com (which includes a "Who's Who in Bagpiping") and is a moderator at BobDunsire.com. As a result, he does a pretty good job of avoiding much needed practice! Many thanks to Andrew and Bob for this interview.