

Pipe Majors of the Kiltie Band of York, Pa

Historical Sources:

Ayres, James (P/M, 1956? – 1960?), personal communications
Crawford, Donald T. (P/M, 1971-1990), personal communications
Lewis, Robert D. (Piper, 1947-1957, D/M 1993), personal communications
Wagner, Richard (P/M, 1961-1963), personal communications
Wales, Gladston (Blackie) (P/M 1964-1970), personal communications

Richard F. Yost, 1928 – 1935(?)

Mr. Yost was indeed a World War I veteran and evidently did serve near Genoa, Italy with the American 3rd Army. However, he did not serve in the military police, but in the medical corps. I was doing volunteer curatorial work at the York County Heritage Trust (now the York County History Center) when the museum received the donation of Mr. Yost's medical chest that he used during the war. It had his name in it and I believe the museum still has this artefact. Further, this would explain why, when he returned to civilian life, he took up a career as a pharmacist and ran a chemist's shop in York until he retired.

Mr. Yost was pipe major of the Kiltie Band of York, PA when they did their first parade in York, PA on 11 November, 1928. According to Don Crawford, Mr. Yost actively played pipes with the band for only a very short time, perhaps two or three years. Jim Ayres and Dick Wagner essentially had the same view, although they were not sure just how many years.

However, in the photograph of the Kiltie Band in September 1935 at the 36th Encampment held in New Orleans posted on the Kiltie Band's website, I believe that is Mr. Yost in uniform with his pipes. If it is Mr. Yost in this photo, it would indicate he was evidently still actively playing and marching with the band until at least 1935. After this date, I have no information as to how much longer he may have continued performing with the band if at all.

1935(?) – 1956(?)

Dick Wagner told me that after Mr. Yost retired from the street, upon occasion, when the band had a particularly prestigious job or parade, Mr. Yost would turn out in his uniform and march along on the right side the band with his swagger stick. According to both Jim Ayres and Dick Wagner, after Mr. Yost quit performing with the band, he remained on as the permanent president and treasurer of the band. Even so, this still begs the question of who actually was leading the band between the years 1935(?) and 1956(?).

Mr. Robert D. Lewis (piper, 1947-1957) told me that when he first joined the band in 1947, the band was and had been led for a number of years by **Harry T. Cassel (Kassel?)** both at practices and on the street. Mr. Yost's activity in the band was purely administrative. Bob Lewis told me that Mr. Cassel retired and was succeeded by **Robert (Bob) Peiffer (Peifer?)**. Evidently, Mr. Peiffer led the band for approximately four years or so.

I specifically asked Bob Lewis if he could remember whether Mr. Cassel and Mr. Peiffer wore pipe serjeant rank and were merely 'acting' pipe majors or whether they actually wore the four stripe pipe major's rank insignia. Mr. Lewis said Mr. Cassel and Mr. Peiffer absolutely wore pipe major ranks on their sleeves and were addressed as pipe major.

James (Jim) Ayres, 1956? – 1960?

When I joined the Kiltie Band in 1973, I was told the standard story that Jim Ayres was the 'second' pipe major of the band. It wasn't until I met Bob Lewis that I heard about Harry Cassel or Bob Peiffer leading the band.

Jim Ayres told me he and a friend joined the Kiltie Band in 1940 and were the first two members who had not served in World War I. Prior to their joining the band, one had to be a World War I veteran to join the band.

After Mr. Peiffer resigned from the band, Mr. Yost appointed Mr. Ayres to be pipe major. This may have been as early as 1956. I was once shown a photograph, dated 1957, of several pipers and drummers at a local York pub and prominent in the photo was Jim Ayres wearing the pipe major's stripes on his right uniform sleeve. Further, Dick Wagner gave me an audio cassette tape of a recording he made in 1957 of the Kiltie Band playing at a private party. Jim Ayres was giving the commands for the band to play and there is no question it was Jim's voice. At any rate, Jim was certainly pipe major by 1957.

As far as I can ascertain, Mr. Ayres resigned as pipe major and temporarily left the band circa 1960, but there are two slightly different versions (one by Jim himself, the other by Dick Wagner) as to the reasons for his resignation. While 'Colonel' Yost wanted Jim Ayres to be the pipe major, Jim told me he himself never really wanted the job. According to Jim, after a few years, the job just became too time consuming and, in Jim's words: *'I actually had to quit the band to get out from under the stripes.'*

However, according to Dick Wagner, Jim had begun doing things such as calling the band out, spur of the moment, to provide free entertainment for neighbourhood backyard barbecues. Not too surprisingly, this wore thin with the band members and there was open talk about voting him out as pipe major. Jim evidently got wind of this and resigned before a meeting or vote could be taken.

As with all occasions where there are two versions of the story, the truth probably lies somewhere between the two. There may, however, be some veracity to Dick's version as evidenced by the wording of Article 20 of the revised band bylaws that were written as part of the major reorganisation of the Kiltie Band in 1961.

Richard (Dick) Wagner, 1961 – 1963

According to Dick, after Jim Ayres stepped down as pipe major, he was approached by Mr. Yost at the beginning of 1961 and asked to temporarily take the position of pipe major until they found someone permanent. Mr. Wagner agreed to the promotion and Mr. Yost gave him the

pipe major's stripes and told him to **pin** them to his uniform. Dick Wagner carried on in this fashion for the next year and a half until the middle of 1962, but was beginning to have problems with some of the members.

Mr. Wagner went over to Mr. Yost's house and they sat down in Mr. Yost's living room to talk. Dick Wagner told me, *'I pulled the pipe major's stripes out of my pocket and threw them down on the colonel's [Mr. Yost's] coffee table and I told him I quit.'* When Mr. Yost asked why Mr. Wagner said, *'They [the band members] are telling me they don't have to listen to me because I'm only the temporary pipe major. Either I am the official pipe major or I'm out.'*

According to Mr. Wagner, Mr. Yost said *'Dick, you can't quit. You're the only one I can trust with the band. Take back the stripes and sew them onto your uniform. You're the official pipe major and I'll take care of letting them (the band) know.'*

Dick was the officially appointed pipe major from mid 1962 to the end of 1963. According to Mr. Don Crawford, by the end of 1963, Mr. Wagner had become a bit of a divisive figure and the band members decided to select a new pipe major. The band's board of directors* asked Mr. Gladston Wales if he would agree to become the new pipe major.

*(As a result of the reorganization of the band in 1961, Mr. Yost had his position in the band more precisely defined, which gave more power to the board of directors to make decisions that formerly had been Mr. Yost's prerogatives.)

Gladston (Blackie) Wales, 1964 – 1970

I personally saw and read a letter from Mr. Wales to the Kiltie Band board of directors, dated January 1964, in which he stated he agreed to take over as pipe major of the band, but only under the condition that he would have the support and cooperation of all the band members. I do not know if this letter and the other papers with which it was found are still in the Kiltie Band's possession or whether they may have been discarded over the years.

Mr. Wales was typical of the pipers of his day – playing the melody notes with a few 'G' gracenotes, birls and High 'A' doublings arbitrarily thrown into the music at each piper's discretion. *(See the following section for a fuller description of this.)* While the band did have, over the years, some members who were native born Scots who had played pipes in the Scottish regiments, Jim Ayres told me they tended to be a clique-ish lot who were evidently reticent to share the real techniques of piping with the Yanks. Consequently, the average piper had to pretty much figure out the pipes for himself.

Mr. Wales successfully lead the band for a number of years, but Don Crawford was becoming increasingly influential in the band by introducing new ideas of piping technique, playing tunes in sets, training student pipers, etc. In a conversation I once had with Blackie (Mr. Wales) at one of the annual band awards banquets, he told me: *'I saw Don Crawford was the up and coming young man and I tried to groom him for the pipe major's position.'* Since Mr. Crawford's knowledge, abilities and ideas seemed to have been beyond those of Mr. Wales, I can't say what particular grooming he was able to do, but perhaps this is the way he rationalised his decision to resign as pipe major at the end of 1970.

Donald T. Crawford, 1971 – 1990

Don Crawford joined the Kiltie Band of York in 1962 and became pipe major of the band at the beginning of 1971.

Don once told me about his initial training on the pipes:

‘Around 1961, a new Scot gas station was due to open in New Cumberland and I heard that a bagpipe band would be playing for the grand opening. Since I lived close, my two sons and I walked down there to watch them perform. During one of their breaks, I approach one of their members and ask: “How would someone go about joining an outfit like this?” They told me where and when they practiced and I went down to York that week to check them out.’

‘They got me a practice chanter and a green tutor book and sat down to show me what I needed to know. They taught me the scale, gracenotes, the birl and the High A doubling. I went back for a couple of week until I could play the scale and those movements. Then they told me to go away and come back when I thought I could play a couple of the tunes in the tutor book. I asked about all of the “little notes” I saw in the tunes and they told me not to worry about them – just to play the melody notes.’

‘I practiced some of the tunes from the tutor book for about three or four months and when I thought had several of them down, I went back to the band practice and said I thought I could play them. They listened to me and said it was time for me to start on the pipes. They had several spare sets of pipes they would loan to students until their pipes arrived from Scotland. They showed me how to blow them, gave me some band music and told me to go away and come back with I thought I could play some of the tunes.’

‘I practiced blowing and learning some of the band tunes for about five or six months and when I had three or four of them I could play on the pipes, I went back to the band practice. They listened to me and told me I was now in the band.’

Initially, Don played the tunes the way everyone in the band did – just the melody notes with gracenotes, birls and High A doublings arbitrarily thrown into the music. He started buying pipe music books like the Scots Guards Collection and notice that all of the tunes were written with those ‘little notes’ in them. He told me he got to thinking the composers must have a reason for including all those ‘little notes’ and he decided to try to learn how to play them.

He went back to his copy of the College of Piping tutor book and started trying to learn the throws, doublings and taorlauths on his own. The only help he got was from time to time when one of the pipe bands from one of the Scottish regiments came to the US to do a tour. At that time, the Saint Andrews Society of Baltimore owned a house in downtown Baltimore on the corner of Park Avenue and West Eager Street. Frequently, Baltimore was one of the stops on a regiment’s tour and, after their performance at the Baltimore Arena, the Saint Andrews Society would host a reception at their house for as many of the Scottish regiment’s pipers and drummers as could come. The Kiltie Band was invited as well and Don never missed an opportunity to get some expert advice on how to play.

I remember Dick Wagner telling me that Don Crawford was like a sponge. Don had question after question for whatever piper he could corner about how to play this or that. This was really the only informed instruction to which he had access and the regimental bands only came about

every other year or so. Actually, Don learned to play pretty well considering his lack of proper tuition and he started instituting this into the Kiltie Band.

As a result of his own efforts, he started to teach what he had learned to private students. His first student was a young woman, Jean MacDonald. Soon several other women students followed, among them Eleanor Hamilton, Laurie MacDougall Pfeffer and Carol Berkheimer. He also had several male students by this time as well. Eventually, all new pipers joining the band could play with all the doublings, leumluaths, taorlauths, etc., so Don was almost single-handedly responsible for a much improved playing technique in the band.

By 1969, Don had risen through the ranks of the band to pipe serjeant. As a matter of fact, you can see him on the far right hand side of the cover picture of the band's LP, 'A Wee Bit O' Scotland' recorded at the Saint Andrew's Society's annual Tartan Ball in the Spring of 1969. You'll notice in the picture there are no women in the picture at that time because, originally you had to be a World War I veteran to join and the band had just simply been all men.

Evidently, the band lost some members during 1970 and, since Don had these women students up and playing the pipes by that time, he proposed to the fellows in the Kiltie Band that they: '*... allow women to join the band temporarily, just until they got their membership back up.*' The band members agreed, but with the stipulations that women would not wear weaponry as only men were soldiers and they also would not be allowed to hold rank in the band. Of course, once the women were in, they were there to stay, so Don Crawford is the one who brought women into the band as members.

The 1969 band recording is interesting on another level as it demonstrates another major change in the band initiated by Don Crawford. Prior to 1969, the Kiltie Band had a repertoire of about 10 or 12 tunes they played such as Green Hills, 42nd Highlanders, Highland Laddie, Scotland the Brave, etc. The pipe major would call a tune and the band would play that single tune twice over and quit. Then he would call another single tune and the band would play that twice over and so on. Bob Lewis told me this was how the band did it when he came into the band in 1947 and this was how the band played in 1957 on the recording Dick Wagner made of the band at that time.

By 1969, as Mr. Crawford continued to build his collection of pipe band LP albums, he noticed the regimental and competition pipe bands seldom played single tunes, but played medleys of tunes. What makes the band record, 'A Wee Bit O' Scotland', interesting is that it was recorded just as this move away from playing single tunes to playing medleys was happening. There are tracks on the record where the band is playing individual tunes as they had traditionally done, but other tracks are medleys. One of the most indicative is the first track on the album's second side – a set of 2/4 time signature tunes – High Road to Gairloch, Scotland the Brave and Highland Laddie. Later Mr. Crawford substituted Campbell's Farewell to Redcastle for High Road to Gairloch and this became known as 'Set 2'. By the time I came into the Kiltie Band in January 1973, the vast majority of the tunes we played were in 'sets'.

As pipe major, Mr. Crawford was also responsible for instituting a new summer uniform for the band in June 1973. I remember sitting in his basement and him showing me the picture of a pipe major in the Scots Guards music book wearing the 'jungle green' uniform and him telling me he

was looking to institute something similar for the Kiltie Band. The only difference would be that he wanted the band to wear the World War 2 pattern 'khaki' balmorals rather than the glengarry. The new uniform, designated '#2 Summer Dress', was as follows:

- Khaki* Balmoral with Cameron Highlanders cap badge
- Khaki shirt with brass VFW buttons** and thistle collar ornaments
- Black Leather Waist Belts
- Brown Leather Day Wear Sporrans with 3 Leather Tassels
- Royal Stewart Kilts
- Full, Off White Hose with Scots Guards Style Garter Flashes
- Black, Plain Toed Shoes
- Dirks and Sgian Dhus worn at the individual's personal preference

*(Actually olive drab)

** (Eventually dropped in favor of plain tan plastic buttons)

The summer uniform you currently wear, what we knew as '#1 Summer Dress', was to be '*worn for military or other more formal summer occasion, while #2 Summer Dress will be worn for picnics, non-military parades, etc.*' I'm not certain, but I believe '#2 Summer Dress' fell into disuse during Donna Singley's term as pipe major.

Another uniform change for which Mr. Crawford was responsible was the introduction of white doublets as a summer substitute for full dress. Initially, the band wore the doublets without plaids or cross belts and they made their first appearance at the St. Andrews Society Tartan Ball in March, 1987. Early in 1989, cross belts and plaids were authorized for wear with the white doublet. The white doublets were used as a warm weather alternate for full dress all through the rest of my time in the band, but were discontinued some time after I left the band at the end of 1990.

As you can see, Mr. Crawford was the main influence that transformed the Kiltie Band of York from the old band of 'Colonel' Yost to the band you recognize today. Mr. Crawford retired from his job with the railroad around the end of 1986 and began looking to cut back some of his responsibilities with the band. From time to time, he delegated some duties to his chosen successor, Bob Davidson, but retained the pipe major's position until December, 1990 when he retired from the band in preparation for his move to Florida.

W. Robert Davidson, 1991 – 1995

Mr. Davidson was elected as the pipe major of the band by a split vote of the board of directors and took over in January 1991. Since Mr. Davidson had been the pipe serjeant of the band under Mr. Crawford some members were of the opinion he would provide the most continuity for the band. Over the five years Mr. Davidson was pipe major, the band began to dwindle in numbers until the band's continued existence was of concern. Dissatisfied, the remaining band members voted Mr. Davidson out as pipe major and he left the band, I believe sometime in the fall of 1995.

James C. Britcher, 1995 – 2005

Mr. Britcher was not immediately elected to the pipe major's position upon Mr. Davidson's departure from the band, but with the absence of anyone more willing or qualified for the position, he was eventually voted into the position by the board of directors by the end of 1995.

Mr. Britcher was first introduced to the Kiltie Band of York, Pa. by 'Colonel' Yost back in the early 1960s. Mr. Britcher was, at that time, a 16 year old errand boy employed by Mr. Yost to whom Mr. Yost decided to teach the pipes. Not surprisingly, Mr. Britcher was taught to play with just the melody notes, 'G' gracenotes, birls, High 'A' doublings and mostly by ear. As a matter of fact, Mr. Britcher essentially did or could not read music during the length of his piping career. Mr. Britcher was reasonably candid to me, when we met one another at parades that 'since the Colonel always ran the band that way, there was no reason it shouldn't work now!'

In all fairness, Mr. Britcher wasn't left with a lot to work with after Mr. Davidson's departure and he really did do as much as he knew how to keep the band from going defunct. Fair dos on that, but the band continued to lose members over the next year until he had only himself, one other piper, a side drummer and a tenor drummer left in the band.

For the next four years or so, the Kiltie Band of York really couldn't put a band on the street and Mr. Britcher depended upon a reciprocal arrangement with the Susquehanna Pipes and Drums to jump in and fill the ranks when the Kiltie Band had parades. There was more than one parade during that time when I saw what was billed as the '*Kiltie Band of York, Pa.*' was made up of Mr. Britcher and everyone else was wearing the uniforms of Susquehanna Pipes and Drums. Eventually, there was a disagreement of some sort and Mr. Britcher decided he really needed to recruit his own pipers and drummers and sever connections with the Susquehanna organization.

One of the positive things he did was to hire a 'Scottish instructor' who had recently moved into the York area to teach the band. I believe his name was Peter MacKenzie who had legitimate instruction on the pipes as a boy growing up in Scotland. It was about this time I first met Donna Singley and her husband Phil at their church when I was doing a performance and they told me about their instructor at the Kiltie Band. Donna eventually became Mr. Britcher's pipe serjeant and the band began to grow and retain members.

Mr. Britcher remained the pipe major of the Kiltie Band until his death in 2005.

2005 - 2008

I've got to say, I'm a bit hazy about this period of Kiltie Band history since I was living in Wales from September 2004 until July 2008. I was in the UK when Mr. Britcher passed away. I returned to the US during those years about every six months or so for three or four weeks to take care of family affairs and I would perform with the John F. Nicoll Pipe Band when they had parades during those times. When we would run into the Kiltie Band, the only one I ever saw in charge of the Kiltie Band during those occasions was Mrs. Singley, who was wearing the pipe serjeant's stripes. Perhaps it was coincidence? Perhaps the minutes of the Kiltie Band board of

directors meetings could confirm the status of Ms. Morgan and Mr. Fleming as official pipe majors of the band?

Donna Singley, 2008 – 2015

When I moved house back to the US in July 2008, I recall talking to Mrs. Singley at the Towson Legion before the 4th of July Parade and remarking to her that I was surprised she was still held the pipe serjeant's rank and that the Kiltie Band had not confirmed her as pipe major yet. I remember her replying that the band was just waiting for the right guy to come along. I was quite pleased to see, the next time our two bands had a parade together, she was wearing the pipe major's stripes and was officially the pipe major.

The band grew to a huge size during the time Mrs. Singley was pipe major and certainly the Kiltie Band of York improved their playing during that time. I was also glad to see our respective bands develop an amicable relationship with one another. It was a bit of a shock when I heard that Donna and Phil retired from the band, but time goes on.

2015 – 2016

Al Reist?? I've never been too sure of what his official status was. What confuses me is, in the couple of years he was in charge of the band, I never saw him wearing the pipe major's rank. I did ask him one time about it and he said he was content just to wear the serjeant's rank. So, was he officially promoted to pipe major by the Kiltie Band's board of directors?? No clue on my part.

Christine McEachern, 2017 – Present

(Well, this did turn out to be a bit longer than I had intended, but the Kiltie Band of York has an interesting history and it would be very worthwhile to see a really in-depth history done someday. As I was a member of the Kiltie Band for eighteen years from January 1973 to December 1990, I was able to speak with a number of the old members who had wonderful stories of the early years of the band. Hope you find this useful.)