

Memories of Gatehouse Festival Group

by founder member Lyn Hampshire.

How it all began

You could say that Gatehouse of Fleet's folk festival was born in Ayrshire. At least the idea was...

Inspiration came from our experience at Girvan's well-established folk festival in the early 1990s. The Ayrshire town was abuzz with live music in the many venues it had in those days. One pub would have wall-to-wall Irish fiddlers; another bar would host varied musicians and singers; yet another was reserved for mainly unaccompanied singing.

"We could do something like this in Gatehouse," my husband, Roger Hampshire declared. We already knew a number of folk musicians who played at regular pub sessions in Gatehouse and Twynholm and the idea quickly took hold.

Before long Roger had recruited a number of people keen to support the cause. Notable among them was George McCulloch. Roger, the go-getter action man, and George, with his network of contacts in the media and experience of the hospitality business, made a dynamic working partnership. But they couldn't have done it without the enthusiasm and support of many others.

Meetings

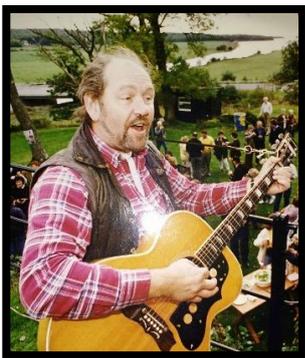
The initial meeting was held on Wednesday, 17th June 1992 at the Bank of Fleet Hotel. Those present were:

Roger Hampshire	acting chairman
George McCulloch	acting secretary
Rosemary Evans	Mill on the Fleet
David and Anne Wright	Bank of Fleet Hotel

A follow-up meeting took place where the officers and committee were voted in comprising:

Roger Hampshire	chairman
Liz Knox	vice chairperson
Marcia Sheard	treasurer
George McCulloch	Secretary and public relations officer

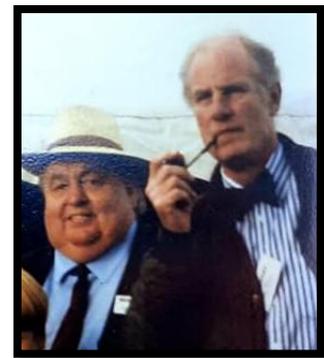
Those on the committee were: Helen Keating, Jane McGivern, Billy Martin, Donald Cowie, John King-Barker, Mary Dougan and David Wright.



Roger Hampshire



Lyn Hampshire



George McCulloch & Nigel Hesketh

It was decided that the festival should be held on the last weekend in March unless that coincided with Easter, in which case it would take place the previous weekend. The idea was to extend the tourist season by attracting visitors at a usually quiet time. A constitution was drawn up, grant aid applied for and planning the first festival began in earnest. Advice on running a festival was sought – and gained – from folk singer [Phyllis Martin](#), a member of the a capella group [Stravaig](#), District Councillor [Nigel Hesketh](#) was appointed Honorary President, a title later bestowed upon [Ramsay Hannay](#) who was always a staunch supporter.

Valuable support also came from local hoteliers who offered free rooms for visiting musicians.

1993

The town's first festival weekend opened on Friday, 26th March 1993 at the Murray Arms Hotel featuring [Sheena Wellington](#) (who years later sang at the opening of the Scottish Parliament), and Galloway based band Runt o' the Litter, supported by local musicians [Liz Knox](#) and [Donald Cowie](#).

These artistes also performed at the main concert in the school hall on the Saturday when well-known folk duo [Gaberlunzie](#) headlined. Singalong sessions where anyone could join in were held at various venues, led by [Scott Maxwell](#) and other local musicians.



Liz Knox

While folk music was at its heart, Gatehouse festival's original format embraced other artistic endeavours. The 1993 programme featured art and crafts exhibitions, including demonstrations by artisans such as glass blower [Ed Iglehart](#). Future festivals added poetry and art competitions as well as traditional singing and songwriting.



Honorary President Ramsay Hannay taps the barrel with Roger Hampshire, Mary Dougan and Zoe the dog.

Starting a festival is one thing – keeping it going and financially viable is another...

By the time the accounts were completed the festival group's bank account was in the red, not drastically and only in double figures, but action was needed. The officers discussed the best way to redress the balance with the committee, by then comprising

Mary Dougan	Joanne Smith	June Neaves	Joan McKie
Sarah King-Barker	Rosemary Evans	Franca Bruno	Lyn Hampshire

None of us on the committee had experience of running a festival. We shared out the workload by giving individual members responsibility for different aspects of the event.

Franca Bruno	Craft convener tasked with organising the craft fair, no easy job
Marcia Sheard	Treasurer and raffle convener. Her bubbly personality charmed the punters into buying many tickets.

Lyn Hampshire	Music convener which meant looking after the various performers and ensuring they had everything they needed and got to the venues on time.
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We put our heads together over the burning topic of finance. What sort of fund-raising event would be popular enough to bring home the bacon? Sales of alcohol and food are generally the most reliable way to make money at events so, when someone suggested an **Oktober beerfest**, plans were soon underway. Finding the right venue would be key to success and everyone agreed that **Cardoness Castle** would make a spectacular setting. Committee member Joanne Smith, who was custodian at the castle, knew the right people to ask and so with the cooperation of Cardoness Estate, who own the site, Historic Scotland, who



manage it, and adjoining landowner Alexander McCulloch, it was all systems go. This was a novel event for the area. Visitors and local people flocked to the beerfest and a surprising number of Gatehouse residents said it was the first time they had even visited the castle. Casks of real ale were set up in the vaulted cellar a few days before the beerfest. These included Spitfire Ale, imported from Kentish brewery Shepherd Neame, and Hon. President Nigel Hesketh, with a wicked twinkle, invited some German tourists to try it. Eric and Mary Cowan's famous barbecue provided sustenance for the revellers. There was music from

Newton Stewart based duo [1066](#), along with many other local musicians including [Ben Hanraads](#) on Northumbrian pipes. The castle's great hall echoed to the sound of pipers [Donald Cowie](#), [Ross Irving](#) and [Craig Fergusson](#). Altogether the event was a huge success and put the festival group's finances into good heart, ensuring there would be a festival the following spring.

1994

“Bigger and Better” was the headline forecasting the 1994 Gatehouse festival. With support from Dumfries and Galloway Arts Association, the programme starred Bolivian band [Awatinas](#) with their exhilarating blend of indigenous and Spanish music. Not only did the group wow the audience at the main concert but they also spent time at the Bank of Fleet, meeting people and demonstrating their music. Other performers included [Danny Kyle](#), who hosted the festival, ceilidh band [Paddy Ryan's Dream](#), a capella group [Stravaig](#) and the [Rugrats Roadshow](#) for children. Along with art exhibitions, the craft fair, workshops and pub music sessions, this was another well-supported event.

Despite its popular and artistic success, the festival again made a loss. That summer Nigel and Fiona Hesketh hosted a garden party at their home, Bleachfield, where the guests of honour were American band [Joyful Noise](#), then touring Britain. Joyful Noise did a concert at the Mill on the Fleet, moving on later to perform at Stranraer folk club.

The garden party raised £200 for the festival, but more funds were needed. The committee decided to host a second beerfest. This time the ancient cellar at Cardoness Castle sheltered a variety of British cask ales and, by special arrangement, also featured the strong lager brewed by Lowenbrau for the 1994 Munich Oktoberfest. Once again the beerfest proved a very popular family occasion and helped ensure that there would be a Gatehouse festival next year.



1995

Spring 1995 saw Newton Stewart based the [Family Jones](#) leading the Friday night ceilidh, [Blackeyed Biddy](#) (Lionel McLelland and Kris Koren) headlining the festival concert and many other musicians, including the [Canniffe Family](#) from Northern Ireland, performing at various venues in the town. Singing competitions were held for the first time, while the programme included art exhibitions, the craft fair, buskers and the Rugarats children's show. [Noky and Patsy Watson](#), proprietors of the Bank of Fleet Hotel, offered "floor and breakfast for £5" where people could bring a sleeping bag and spend the

night in the function room with a cooked breakfast included in the price.

Ever ambitious, the festival group decided to stage a special summer event in 1995 which was Gatehouse of Fleet's bicentenary year, celebrating 200 years since the town was awarded Burgh of Barony status. Roger and George came up with the idea for "A Midsummer Night's Dram" and barbecue at the castle, a musical event where adults were offered a complimentary dram of Pride of Galloway whisky upon arrival. As is ever the way in Gatehouse, the "one-off" Dram became an annual event for a few years...

1996

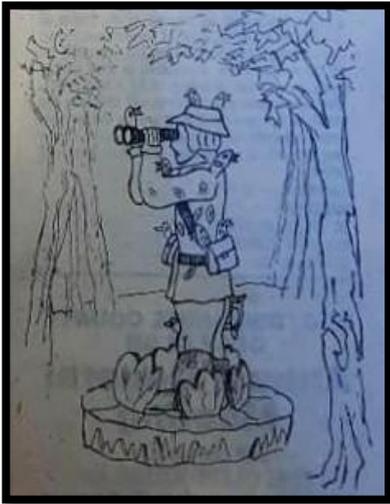
The 1996 festival marked a return visit from [Blackeyed Biddy](#) who led a traditional ceilidh party at the Mill on the Fleet, while the main concert starred the folk rock band [Dunragan](#) and [Joli Blon](#), the all-female Cajun group with their foot-tapping music. Street entertainment was provided by [John Cowan's Traditional Jazz Four](#), led by trumpeter [John Cowan](#). Other programme features included a children's art competition, sponsored by the Murray Usher Foundation, and a poetry competition which attracted many entries from across the Stewartry.

That year's Midsummer Night's Dram introduced heather ale, brewed to a very ancient recipe, along with the complimentary measure of whisky and real ale selection. The beerfest featured traditional jazz from [John Cowan's](#) band and a performance by a group of medieval dancers. A report in the Galloway Gazette described the festive atmosphere "with pockets of musicians playing inside the ancient castle and others in various nooks and crannies in the grounds."

In 1997 the festival group played a major part in commissioning sculptor [Andy Frost](#) to create the [Big Twitcher](#) statue in the grounds of the Mill on the Fleet, an idea promoted by artist [Rosemary Gascoyne](#), then the group's arts convener, and supported by many local organisations.

The 16ft high wooden figure was unveiled at the festival weekend by [Chris Rollie](#) of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. Andy Frost also hosted a sculpture workshop during the festival. Hosting the main concert was singer/songwriter [Frank Robb](#), from Aberdeen, whose ascerbic wit had the audience in stitches.

The concert starred accordion virtuoso Sandy Brechin and his band, plus American folk group the [Castlebay Duo](#). Other entertainments included interactive songs for children presented by Martin Smith and Alex Cook, aka the [Cookie Jar](#).



Plan Drawing of "The Twitcher"



"The Twitcher"

Traditional jazz again featured at the third Midsummer Night's Dram with music from the expanded John Cowan band, now renamed the [New Orleans Wanderers](#), as well as many other musicians who supported the family event. The castle events had grown so popular that ten cask beers were on sale at the fifth beerfest that October.

Circumstances changed, as did Historic Scotland's requirements on allowing events at the castle, so the festival group eventually gave up staging the Dram and Beerfest. The decision was something of a relief to the volunteers who no longer had to cope with the massive amount of planning and hard physical work that went into running events on such a steep and difficult site. However the spring festival continued to thrive and kept to its policy of supporting a range of arts, encouraging new talent and booking some of the best acts on the folk scene.

2000

To celebrate Millennium Year, the group commissioned [Doug Carroll](#) to produce a CD of that year's open stage at the Friday night party, entitled GoFF 2000 Live! The CD features original and traditional music by musicians from across Dumfries and Galloway, as well as from Ayrshire, Glasgow, Dundee and Leeds. Stars of the main concert that year included the [John Wright Band](#) and [Frank Robb](#).

2001

In 2001 [Sandy Brechin](#) returned to Gatehouse festival with his folk-rock band [Burach](#). Other acts in the programme included [Appalachian Mist](#), who developed their blend of bluegrass and Scottish folk music after meeting at our festival, bluegrass group [Home Made Jam](#), making their second appearance at the festival after their debut in Gatehouse a few years earlier and [Luce Women](#), from Wigtownshire, with their unique, and often saucy songs.

2002

All good things come to an end and the final Gatehouse festival in its original form was in 2002, starring the wonderful [Hokum Hotshots](#). Its demise wasn't failure and there was still money in the bank account. All told, the reason for ceasing was what I call "committee fatigue." Sadly, some committee members had died, others had moved away, some had indifferent health and others had increased business pressures, preventing them from giving the time and effort needed to keep the festival alive.

Over the ten years Roger and I were closely involved with Gatehouse festival it hosted many well-known names on the folk scene, too many of whom are no longer with us. Running a festival is exciting, challenging, stressful and can be exhausting but the joy, fun and the lovely people we meet makes it all worthwhile. On the whole we – and I include all the volunteers in that pronoun – managed the event without any major mistakes and with only very minor controversy. Gatehouse wasn't the first folk festival in South West Scotland but many others started after us, notably the very popular Moniaive festival, which I like to think we may have inspired...

2007



Five years after our festival ceased or, perhaps I should say, suspended its activities, Franca Bruno and others decided to bring back a music festival, albeit in a different form. Roger and I were delighted about the revival. The first “new” festival, known as [May Music](#), was in 2007 and featured a weekend of varied music. Later the festival was renamed [Midsummer Music](#) and held around the summer solstice, a format that is still going strong.

Lyn Hampshire

***Note from the writer:** this article doesn't rely solely on my memories of Gatehouse Festival, I could not have written it without reference to the scrapbooks compiled by George McCulloch.*