

# Blackford Fiddle Group - 2006-2023

## How BFG began

In 2008, two years after a stroke, BFG founder Pete Cope wrote about the early days of the group. Anyone who wants to understand BFG should read his essay, which is on the BFG website. He explains that BFG was not a plan but a concept, and it emerged organically and unconventionally. BFG became a force of nature, attracting many musical moths to its bright lights. In his history of the first 12 years, Pete was kind enough to credit a few of us with the success of BFG, success that later led to two nominations at Na Trads, the annual national Traditional Music awards. Over those twelve years several of us had supported Pete and had become integral parts of the chaos that purported to be "management". However, the Group was still Pete's creation. It began in September 1996 and his final direct involvement was at the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Ceilidh in 2006. Please read his essay ([LINK](#)).

## After Pete Cope

In 2008, Pete described how BFG was learning to get on without him. The injuries he sustained in 2006 from his stroke were very severe and he was never again able to play a significant role. We tried to maintain the ethos that he developed, resisting any inclination to be selective or to become reliant on resources that could not be found internally or locally. He remained disappointed and angry that he was unable to play an active role. By the time of his death in 2014, there were more members in the group who did not know him, than those could remember him. Such were the dynamics of people coming and going. In the main, a few adult members provided continuity, while for other adults, membership was synchronised with the arrival and departure of their children. Under 18s, who were always the most essential members, might start at any age from about 6 upwards. Many stayed long enough to become valued members of the "tutoring staff" and the frontline of the ceilidh band. They then tended to head off to university and life elsewhere. Before they did, they prepared the next generation to keep the process going. If there is one change above all others that I regret in BFG, it is that this process of succession and hand over among the younger players faded away, a loss that was inevitable in the COVID years from 2020-2022. It would be wonderful to see it restored.

Bringing the BFG story more up to date could be a mammoth task (and we know what happened to mammoths), but I thought at least it would be good to continue what Pete started, by summarising our activities from 2006 to the immediate aftermath of lockdown. We tried very hard to stick to the principles of "fun, fiddles for fiddlers and gigs at which to play". There were wobbles but we always managed to stabilise the ship, even if we didn't have control of its course. In the end, I have to say, if you weren't there, it will be hard to imagine being in the middle of BFG, with its people, gigs, tunes

and banter, always being slightly off beat musically, and in so many other ways. It has remained fun and I know Pete would have approved.

## Continuation and Successes

The fifteen years from 2006 to 2021 saw BFG reach many milestones and achieve things none of us predicted. These included an official visit to Poland for a small group, a National TV appearance, playing as support act to Blazing Fiddles, two Na Trad nominations, playing our 700<sup>th</sup> live gig, and at a conservative estimate we had played *Twinkle Twinkle* (the first tune we play every Friday evening) about 2500 times, or if you prefer, for the equivalent of a day and a half without a break. We had bought over 100 fiddles and still had about half of them. Out there, somewhere, there are dozens of people who were part of the group, which at any time might have an active membership of up to 50 people. Of these, at least half would have been under 18. The ceilidh band played 32 ceilidhs one year - far too many to be honest. The CB relied on the skill and poverty of the teenagers who were paid to play, and on the obsession of a few adults who managed the PA system, did the bookings, played useful instruments to supplement the fiddles and provided a taxi service. None of us knew what we were doing until we started.

The rocks on which BFG was built were those of inclusion not prowess, informality not rules, and playing together as much as possible, particularly on Friday evenings. Friday night was "fiddle night" and people turned up week after week to play what they knew, to add new tunes to their personal repertoires, to chat and to help others. It was often a bit chaotic, and for my part, during the first 15 minutes as we all played together, I tried to calculate how best to group people into "help sessions" (lessons – they were not) each with a leader/tutor before we would re-group as a whole to play again. On occasions we did try to formalise things a little. We even had work books for beginners so they might remember what they'd been doing. Such attempts at good organisation were, fortunately, destined to fail. It was and should always be about people memorising what they played. Perhaps the key achievement of BFG was all those personal memories and how that translated into the visible skill of playing what was memorised; individual tunes, sets of tunes and indeed material for a whole performance, be that in a care home or at a ceilidh.

The skill of absorbing music is vital to what BFG did. Some people were lucky enough to be able to read music, which supplemented the process or learning by ear. But reading music is a double-edged sword. The players that achieved and advanced the most, were always those who could use and then discard the dots, or who did not use them at all. It goes without saying that these people tended to be young people who still had the sort of brains that helped them learn quickly without inhibitions. It was for these people that we coined the term "we never liked them anyway". An odd term of affection, but that's what it was.

## Numbers, ages and lockdown

Over the years BFG had the occasional panic about falling numbers, particularly when numbers of adults began to exceed the kids. Adult learners have very different needs to under-18s and one of the things that made BFG different from many trad and community music groups is that we did not divide up on the basis of age, or even of ability. Everyone was special. When the numbers of kids fell, we tried recruitment and come and try sessions. They didn't achieve much so we supplied a tutor to the primary school. Lunch time and after school sessions were both tried and each had drawbacks in terms of accessibility. Some kids wanted to be outside playing at lunch time and some couldn't stay after school because of transport. It was also hard work for a tutor who had to tune 6+ fiddles, get everyone in order and then to teach in the space of 30 minutes. An emerging reliance on printed music became a problem for a while, because it didn't fit well with the way we tried to work on Friday evenings. However, the school club was the right solution for that particular moment and we had a very enthusiastic headteacher.

Over time we got used to the numbers falling and rising like the tides and that alone did not immediately change BFG. What caused the biggest shift, in my view, was the simultaneous increase in the proportion of adult learners and decrease in availability of teenagers who would typically have mentored and supported the younger kids. The change was in the dynamics of the group, particularly in the socialising between under-18s, for whom age had never been a very important factor. Of course, it was wonderful that so many, often not particularly confident adults became "tutors", doing something they never bargained for. But however good we were, we couldn't help being adults. At age 8-12 being taught by someone only 4-5 years your senior seemed to be highly motivating. An unintended consequence of more adult tutors was that it loosened the link that attached older teenagers to younger players, offering role models and mentors in ways that adults could not. From the very first days of BFG, there was an unbroken chain of teenagers bringing on the next generation, who in turn repeated the process. By COVID in 2020 this chain was no longer strong as we were already suffering from a lack of older young players to lead. The immediate lockdowns in 2020 and gradual re-opening afterwards meant there were two years when recruitment and advancement was lost and the chain broke.

During lockdown, BFG offered free online lessons with professionals and set up live rehearsal sessions for the ceilidh band using a software tool called Jamkazam. This allowed the band to play together in real time online. We also ran adult sessions online, but these tended to exclude people who were less confident with the technology. The main impact of the pre and post COVID changes is that, to some extent, we lost the "kids first" culture. Since 2022 things have moved on again, and it will be for others to write about this in a few years when they can see the results. I

would simply observe, that it is noticeable even now that BFG gigs and the ceilidh band have become adult dominated, which was rarely if ever the case before about 2018. This phase might be inevitable, although I have seen it in at least one other nearby group, and they have not recovered the old balance. Having said that, the provision of opportunities for adults to learn and play is a tremendous asset, one that must be cherished in its own right. Even so, what BFG had in addition was a cross-generational culture and practice that was virtually unique.

### **The Gigs must go on**

Gigs have always been part of the BFG offering, alongside loaning fiddles and having fun. In 2006, most of BFG gigs were “everyone” gigs. At these gigs, in care homes, at WRI meetings, community events and so on, no one was barred from playing. If you had learnt *Twinkle Twinkle*, you could come and play. If you got the bug and the incentive to learn Old MacDonald and so on, you were definitely a seasoned band member. People gave up evenings and weekend afternoons to entertain others. It was a win-win proposition and part of the glue that held many parts of BFG together. Gradually, the ceilidh band became much in demand ceilidhs helped us to earn money for BFG and to provide payment to teenagers. As a result, we retained their involvement in teaching on Friday evenings. One of the outcomes of this “business model” is that for most of its years to 2020, BFG had not relied on external tutors or funding, but had hired people in to supplement what we could do ourselves. Bringing in tutors, for which we did get some additional grants, had always been an on-and-off process which exposed us to a standard of playing and to styles that we did not have internally. It worked pretty well. Some kids also got private tuition, which we neither encouraged or discouraged. It reflected the priorities and the income of families, and we never drew attention to it. Many people simply could not afford it and BFG could not fix the tendency that is prevalent in most communities for those with advantages to get the most from collective opportunities. Providing free instruments and a social context for playing has helped broaden the reach, but it was never perfect.

I have often said that I hoped every community could set up its own ceilidh band for local events. BFG has very successfully demonstrated is that it can be done and the BFG Ceilidh Band continues to thrive. That alone is a major achievement. A few years ago, I remember one parent saying to me that their child had gained confidence by being part of the CB. There was no doubt that this was true. The child arrived at BFG as a wee mouse and at some point, their determination to get into the CB allowed them to overcome their quiet nature and rather tentative playing. The young person in question was one of many who gained a range of life skills from standing in front of audiences for 3 hours and playing music without a sheet of dots to be seen, learning to regulate tempo and make allowances for the wide range of experience exhibited on the dance floor. As well as becoming proficient players teenagers gained confidence and social skills, becoming reliable and able to take responsibility for setting up PA

systems, staying up late and telling girl/boyfriends that on Saturday they were not available. BFG CB was a part of the coming-of-age experience for many. As a confidence booster, it was second to none.

### **Dot to dot**

BFG has always made music available in books or on printed sheets. This has been useful in establishing a common repertoire and helping new recruits to catch up. We also pioneered a simplified colour notation as a means to help learners. We later produced the Wee Music Book and the Big Ceilidh Book, with around 400 tunes that reflected and expanded the repertoire. All well and good, but with hindsight, both have resulted in too much dependence on "the dots", and the cementing of tunes in to sets. Inadvertently, they may have discouraged active listening. If learners do not spend time listening to better players online, in concerts and on CDs, or even going to sessions where local talent is on show, they will never absorb the feel of the music or learn to play traditional music in a traditional style. At best, dots are an approximation for the music. They have their place and their limitations. If I were to set a future goal for the group it would be to engage more directly with the wider grassroots movement of traditional music in Scotland, and with oral tradition. Many years ago, we had trips to festivals and usually these involved whole family groups and not just BFG players.

### **Thanks**

BFG has always been run by a voluntary committee, who have had to make their best guess about how a community group might be run to support participation in, and enjoyment of, folk and traditional music. The group has never been about producing experts or even excellent players. Neither has it been explicitly about carrying on a tradition, although many members have become well known faces around trad music circles. It was always about fun and always about being open to anyone, subject to everyone playing their part to keep the ethos as it was. Even so, it isn't clear that any of us who were around in 1996 -2001, when the new supergroup Blazin' Fiddles were invited to play at our fifth anniversary ceilidh, would recognise the BFG of 2022 let alone 2026. That may not matter, particularly when one considers that it is now 30 years since BFG began as a means to engage local children and their families in music. BFG continues to be a beacon of musical mayhem in a world where it seems increasingly important that people get to share with their communities, and where little attention is given to things that tend create divisions within such groups, like age for example. How many groups have regularly had three generations of the same family learning and socialising together? The only times BFG consciously split up by age was when we decided to have weekends away for under-18s. For me, these were the highlights of BFG life – ghost stories, tunes, food, laughter and mayhem. Later on, there were weekends for adults too – no was left out.

BFG has evolved and I've no doubt it will do so again and it is up to each generation to hand it on to the next and to guard against the malaise suffered by many clubs, that as the members age, so the group fossilises and may even fade away. That means continuous recruitment and empowering the incoming generation of players. It must be about them, as it has always been.

I want to thank all those who have helped along the way. No names – but if you served on the committee, organised events and Friday evenings, played in the band, gave up your time to play gigs, helped to teach others or took your children to play at gigs, please consider yourselves thanked. The reward, as I have found out, is in having the privilege to be part of BFG. To those of you who did all this for others and who hold true to the ethos developed in the first ten years I give my personal thanks. In 2023, seeing the new BFG rising from the ashes of the Covid years, I took my leave from organising anything, and then from the ceilidh band, for whose success I do take some credit - Sunday evening practices, the tune sets, the dance calling, the bookings etc. Eventually I stopped going on Fridays, mainly because I had moved 25 miles away. After 27 years, during which all of my kids had been part of BFG at some point, I knew it was time for others to decide where BFG was to go next, and it will be someone else's job to write another chapter in this history. 2026 is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a good moment for this retrospective, although it doesn't really cover 2023 onwards. I have just handed over the archive of BFG music books and other bits and bobs that are currently of no interest to anyone, but will be gold dust in the dim and distant future when we are a different sort of dust. I still have an archive copy of the original website with newsletters, gig lists and so on.

Thanks to BFG for being my obsession, the centre of my social and musical life for many years and for giving me so many opportunities to do things I had no idea I could do or even wanted to do.

Andrew Bachell (May 2026)

BFG Member since 1997, parent of some great players and just one of the people that organised the chaos from 2002 to 2022.