

Hwedhel Bagas Golowan



Bagas Golowan / Golowan Band at the top of Market Jew Street, early 1990s. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

The Golowan Band, known in Cornish as Bagas Golowan, was formed in 1991 as part of the revival of Golowan, Penzance's midsummer festival celebrating the feasts of St John the Baptist and St Peter. From the beginning, the band was conceived not as a concert band or a formal marching band, but as a street band in the fullest sense: a band whose job was to move, to lead, to stir, to accompany and, at times, to unsettle. It was there to be the musical heartbeat of Golowan, walking at the centre of processions, serpent dances and celebrations, drawing people in behind it and giving shape to the festival as it unfolded through the streets.

It was created by Stephen Hall, then director of the newly revived Golowan. A fiddler himself, Stephen knew exactly the sort of musicians who might be persuaded into such an enterprise, and his friend Graeme Kirkham helped recruit and organise the first players. Out of that came Bagas Golowan.

As Stephen later explained:

“We wanted a street band, we didn't really want to sort of create a brass band, we realised that because there were all these traditional musicians and people playing folk instruments that we'd try and create a band which had this strange mix.”

That “strange mix” has remained one of the band's defining strengths. From the start, it combined fiddles, accordions, melodeons, drums, whistles, brass and whatever else could be pressed into service, all held together not by formality but by energy, commitment and a shared understanding that this was music for outdoors, for dancing, for walking, for celebrating, and sometimes for surviving the crush.



Bottom of Market Jew Street, 1993. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

The band's white clothing drew on nineteenth-century descriptions of St John's Eve in Penzance, when girls processed in white dresses decorated with garlands and flowers. There may also have been a nod to the white costumes of Padstow's May Day celebrations. Straw hats were added, and in time so were the blue sashes trimmed with black and gold. These later came to be explained as sea and Cornwall colours, though they also owed something to the practical matter of spare cloth from the making of Golowan banners. Members then, as now, often adorned their hats, instruments and themselves with ribbons and flowers. The result was never regimented. It was communal, festive and a little gloriously eccentric.

Prehistory

Long before the Golowan Band was formed, its roots were already quietly tangling themselves through the folk revival of the 1970s and 1980s.

At the centre of that prehistory stands Stephen Hall. In the early 1970s he met Graeme Kirkham in a London bookshop. They got talking, and the conversation lasted for hours. A friendship grew from that chance meeting. Stephen was already active on the Cornish folk scene, playing guitar and singing, sometimes as a duo with Mike Sagar-Fenton and occasionally accompanying Brenda Wootton, who even recorded one of Stephen's songs. Graeme travelled down to Cornwall to visit him. Later, after moving to Northern Ireland, Graeme took up concertina and then melodeon, while Stephen, after time spent in County Kerry, took up the fiddle. The two met again in Ireland and continued playing together there.

By the early 1980s, Stephen Hall, Mike Pritchard, Grevis Williams and others were accompanying Cornish dancers to interceltic events in Brittany, including Lorient. When an accordion player pulled out at the last minute, Graeme was hastily recruited and learned the tunes in an afternoon. Among them were Zeak Waltz and Heva, tunes that would later

become familiar to the Golowan Band. In hindsight, these improvised dance bands were an important forerunner of Bagas Golowan: musicians learning how to play for movement, spectacle and open air rather than for a hall or concert room.



Stephen Hall, 1995. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

Around the same time, Stephen, Mike and Grevis were playing Irish material in local sessions with Dave Scott and Pete and Geraldine Jones. Many of the same musicians overlapped in Bernard Evans' Newlyn Reelers and Mike Pritchard's Tinnerns. There was already a network of players in west Cornwall who knew one another well, and who were used to being gathered into scratch bands for whichever custom, dance or event needed music.

There were theatrical influences too. Tom Bawcock's Eve processions in Mousehole, which began in the late 1980s, with their mix of music, ritual and performance, drew in some of the same musicians before Golowan itself was revived. Graeme also points to the influence of Welfare State International, whose outdoor work showed just how much lift, swagger and scale a band needed to be effective in the open air. That sense of music as something embodied, processional and dramatic fed directly into what the Golowan Band would become.

By the time the revived Golowan celebrations were taking shape in 1991, it was almost inevitable that there would be a band to lead them. Stephen knew who to ask, and through those people more players came in. Julie Carter remembers one such moment clearly: a Tuesday night Irish session at the Dock Inn in 1991, when Mike Clark asked if she fancied being in a band for the new festival. Graeme Kirkham was involved in getting it all going and was, in Julie's words, hugely enthusiastic. She joined first on bodhrán, later taking up fiddle.

The Band's First Music

The band's repertoire did not spring into being as a fixed Cornish canon. It was assembled in pieces, borrowed, adapted, renamed and gradually made local.

For the first year, Stephen found a set of three tunes on the LP *Traditional Dance Music From Central France* by the band Rosbif playing French dance music. He copied them onto a tape labelled "Mazey Tunes" and gave them to his friend Pam Betowski to transcribe. Pam produced the scores for what Stephen renamed Abbey Slip, St John's and Round By Land. Of those, St John's and Abbey Slip remain at the heart of the band's sound, while Round By Land later dropped away from regular use.

Other tunes came from Cornish printed sources. Bodmin Riding and Zeak Waltz were both taken from Ralph Dunstan's *Lyver Canow Kernewek*, and Zeak Waltz had already been used for Cornish dancing before it found its way into Bagas Golowan.

Graeme Kirkham later brought in Quay Fair and High Spot after hearing them on *Heart and Home*, a tape by the fiddler Lucy Farr. Their original names were Martin Kirwan's March and Lucy Farr's Barn Dance, but Stephen renamed them so that they belonged more firmly to Penzance and Golowan. That was very much the pattern. Tunes were chosen because they worked, because they had swing and strength and movement, and because they could be made to live in the festival.

In later years the repertoire broadened further. Bernard Evans, who would become one of the band's best loved leaders, contributed his own compositions, including Causewayhead, one of our core tunes, written very much in the spirit of Mazey Day and Penzance itself. By then the band was not only reviving and reshaping older material. It was adding new music of its own to the tradition.

The Band's First Performance: Mazey Day 1991

On the first Mazey Day, Saturday 29 June 1991, the band gathered at the top of Chapel Street. They had been given basic instructions to wear white, but there was plenty of room for interpretation. Julie Carter remembered that some members, especially those from the Acorn Theatre and the wider creative scene, had made a real effort with flowers and decorations. Others felt a little plainer by comparison. That was perhaps the beginning of a band tradition in itself: no two people ever quite looking the same.

The weather that day was unforgettable. Julie recalled:

"It rained. It rained a lot. We were soaked through by the time we reached the Dock Inn. We went inside to get some shelter and a drink, and suddenly the sun came outside. I went outside, and literally wrang out my skirt we were that wet through. I was glad that I wasn't playing the fiddle that year."

Graeme Kirkham remembered the conditions more drily as "moist", adding that Stephen Hall and Dave Mynne still managed to saw fine sounds out of their fiddles and were "a treat to watch" as they spun and twirled through it all.

Yet for all the rain, there was already a sense that something extraordinary had begun. Streets were closed, greenery was put up, the town was full of people and suddenly looked different. Mike Sagar-Fenton later wrote that Penzance felt like “a different town”. That was precisely the point. The band was there not simply to accompany a festival but to help transform the town into one.

At the end of the day’s official events the band led a serpent dance through the streets to Penlee Park for a Kneehigh Theatre show. From the start, then, Bagas Golowan was not a decorative extra. It was part of the machinery of Golowan itself.

The Early Years

In the early years, the front line of the band often consisted of Stephen Hall and Dave Mynne on fiddles, Pauline Shepherd on accordion and Graeme Kirkham on melodeon. They were not static players. They danced, twirled, moved in and out around one another and used the street as a performance space rather than simply a route to be marched.

Graeme remembered:

“All four of us were quite mobile. We’d twirl in circles, dance in and out around each other, take little excursions out to the front or sides.”

That mobility left room for the sort of mischief that seems always to hover around Golowan. Graeme recalled leading the whole band through the front door of the Star Inn, through the pub and out into New Street before rejoining the proper route down Chapel Street. This was not just horseplay. It was part of the spirit of things: a nod to older, rougher festival customs and to the idea that the band was there to animate the town, not merely pass through it.



Alverton Street, 1993. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

The band also developed an early reputation for playing one tune for a very long time. This was partly a joke and partly true. There were several tunes from the beginning, but changing tune while marching in a crowd proved harder than expected, so a tune might simply continue until the procession stopped. Graeme remembered the band once playing a single tune for an hour and a quarter for a late afternoon dance. It became hypnotic.

He explained that this was linked to the idea of “feats”, echoing older step-dancing traditions in which musician and dancer kept going to see who gave out first. Not everyone approved:

“It was that kind of thing that produced some minor tensions in the band: some wanted regular changes of tune, no long durations, regular rests, etc. Others saw the point and that occasion really built a sense of camaraderie among those who ‘got it’. The hardest thing was to try to get some of the musicians to put some lift, swing and bounce into the tunes. It was meant to be music to show off to, to prompt dancing and marching, not pretty tunes played to sound ‘nice’.”

That tension between polish and raw energy has always been part of the band’s make-up. The Golowan Band has never really been about playing prettily, but about about carrying people along with our music.

Stephen Hall himself put the look of the early band beautifully in 1999:

“We’re just a wonderful mess. I mean no one has the right whites on. But I quite personally, although it irritates us sometimes, I think actually that’s part of its charm.”

At the Centre of It

To describe the band only from the outside, as tunes and dates and line-ups, would miss something essential. The real history of Bagas Golowan is also the feeling of being inside it.

There is a particular thrill in stepping off at the Torchlit Procession on St John’s Eve: the first beat of the drum, the first quiet strain of St John’s, then the full sound gathering as the band starts down Chapel Street and Quay Street with the crowds behind carrying flaming torches. Penglaz appears and disappears, dancing in and out of the way, teasing and interrupting. Abbey Slip might take over as the band passes Abbey Street. By the Dock Inn, the procession has become a serpent dance and the whole thing feels half ceremonial, half delirious.

Then there is Mazey Eve, after the fireworks, when the crowds are thick and waiting for Penglaz. The band must force a way through, hemmed in on every side, music carrying just ahead of the crush. It can feel chaotic, exhilarating and slightly dangerous all at once.

Mike Sagar-Fenton captured that feeling perfectly:

“When I was Director of Golowan I watched proceedings from the top of the Barbican and was quite horrified. From above it looks like a mixture of a riot and a free fight, and all my H & S training was appalled. But it’s different when you’re in it. It’s a blast of adrenalin, a whiff of danger, with the solidarity of the band to support you and a sturdy instrument or a sharp elbow to clear the ways when you need to defend yourself. It is in the true unruly tradition of the ancient festival.”

That says something central about the band. To be in it is to be at the heart of Golowan, not observing but immersed. And somehow, even after the late nights, the crush, the noise and the miles, members still rise again for the Dawn Raids. Being part of it all seems to create its own energy.

Penglaz and those who danced before the band

Very early in the life of the revived festival, Penglaz, Penzance's bony 'oss, became one of the band's closest companions. Memories differ slightly about exactly when and how the first appearances happened, possibly 1992, which is perhaps only fitting, but by the mid 1990s Penglaz and the Golowan Band were already entwined in people's minds.

Julie Carter remembered the first shock of seeing him emerge:

"I was flabbergasted and amazed. I'd not seen anything like it in Penzance before. It was very moving. The band were formed up in a circle when he came out and started dancing. I couldn't believe I was in the centre of it."

The relationship between band and 'oss has always been more than visual. Penglaz confronts the band, dances with it, interrupts it, leads it and turns processions into theatre.

Then there were those who moved at the front of the band and helped shape the atmosphere as the band weaved through the town. Cassandra Latham-Jones was one of the dancers who performed out in front, raising energy as the band played, and later took on the demanding role of Teaser to Penglaz. As she described it, the job was both practical and magical: keeping a clear performing space for the 'oss while also bridging the gap between creature and crowd. In that sense she was part marshal, part mediator, part performer. The band's story is not only the story of its instrumentalists. It is also the story of those who danced, teased, guarded, and transformed the space around it.

Pedn Bagas: Head of the Band



Roger White, the first Pedn Bagas. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

As Golowan grew, so did the crowds, and by the later 1990s it became clear that the band needed someone whose task was not to lead the music but to lead the body of the band itself through the streets. That role became Pedn Bagas, Head of the Band.

The first person to make the role truly his own was Roger White. Before that, Roger had played cello in the band, heroically strapped to his chest, a feat remembered with great affection by his fellow players. Roger himself later joked that his talent on the cello was “not renowned”, and that he could sometimes see people in the street wincing as he passed.

When offered the chance to lead the band instead, he seized it magnificently. Inspired in part by the New Orleans funeral leader in the James Bond film *Live and Let Die*, Roger assembled top hat, tails, whites and a ceremonial staff, and developed a style that was part drum major, part ringmaster and wholly Golowan.

Graeme Kirkham made Roger’s first staff, a sort of rhythm pole or lagerphone with ribbons and bottle tops, based on bushwhacker band traditions, especially the Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band and the Australian group Bullocky Bill’s Bushwhacker Band. It rattled wonderfully, even if it also tended to shed pieces along the route. Roger then upgraded it himself, using a curtain pole from his shop painted in the Cornish colours. A fellow band member from Mousehole, whom he remembers as an engineer, made the pewter emblem for the top, and that same stick has remained part of the regalia ever since. Roger was also given a whistle, once used by the father of another band member, an army staff sergeant in Helston, and that too remains part of the regalia.

After Roger hung up his hat it was boldly taken over by Joza Cardozo. In turn, Joza handed the role to Roger’s son Tom White, who leads with the same gusto and theatrical assurance. In that way Pedn Bagas has become one of the band’s own traditions: not ancient, perhaps, but now utterly woven into the life of Golowan.

Adventures

Although Penzance in midsummer has always been the band’s true home, Bagas Golowan has not been confined to it.

In 1996 the band travelled to Edinburgh for the launch of the Virgin train service linking Edinburgh and Penzance. Julie Carter remembered the small comic detail that Stephen Hall travelled first class with the dignitaries while “*us lot were at the back in standard class*”. The band stepped off the train at Edinburgh Waverley station and were met by the Glencorse Pipe Band. They then played on the platform, accompanied by Penglaz, and later headed to a pub for a session. It was exactly the sort of excursion the band seems made for: half official engagement, half glorious incursion.



Golowan Band in Douarnenez, 1998. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

In August 1998 the band travelled to Brittany to take part in the maritime festival Temps Fête at Douarnenez. Julie remembered the band sleeping in a school on camp beds, being looked after superbly by Breton hosts, and playing in and around the harbour in a wonderful atmosphere. The trip left a strong impression not only because of the music but because it felt so natural for the band to be there, carrying Cornwall into another Celtic maritime world.

The band also travelled widely around Cornwall and beyond, playing at maritime festivals, carnivals and revived celebrations in towns that were building traditions of their own. In that sense Bagas Golowan was not only a product of revival. It became one of the things helping revival happen elsewhere.

Traditions

Some of the band's traditions were inherited. Others it created for itself.

The white clothes, hats and flowers echo older midsummer customs. The sashes, badges and decorated instruments became recognisable marks of belonging. On Mazey Day the band fuel themselves together with a hearty breakfast, a tradition that began life at the Dock Inn.

The banner is another such tradition. Since 1991 it has always been carried by Terry Samson or a member of his family, a quiet but important continuity at the head of the band. Proudly borne before the musicians, it asks in Cornish, "*Ottomm' an eur, ple' m' an bagas?*" - "*Now is the hour, where is the band?*" It is a fitting motto for Bagas Golowan: a band expected to appear just when the town needs it most, to set things in motion and gather people in behind it (or alternatively, a joke from the early days - "*Where is the band? They're late!*"). In a

festival full of movement and change, that steady family presence beneath those words has become part of the shape of Mazey Day itself.

Once upon a time there was a teasing relationship between the band and the Mock Mayor - somewhere between mock battle and ritual exchange. And then there are the Dawn Raids, one of the warmest and most beloved traditions the band has created.



Dawn Raids, 2006. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

The idea came from Mike Sagar-Fenton, who once woke on fiesta morning in Spain to the sound of musicians moving through the streets before breakfast. He suggested that Bagas Golowan should do the same. It was a bold proposal, given that it meant rising early after the wildness of Mazey Eve, but the band took it on and the Dawn Raids were born. Windows open, families appear at their doors in pyjamas, babies are held up to listen, and the town is woken by music. It is hard to imagine a better expression of what the band is for.

Evolution

Like Golowan itself, the band has never been static.

In its earliest years it was smaller, looser and more improvised, gathering mainly for the festival weekend and playing with a kind of organised abandon. Over time it became more established. The percussion developed, with the drum sound shifting away from snare towards the deep throb of side and bass drums drums that carried better through the streets. More tunes were added. The repertoire widened. Rehearsals became more regular. The band

increasingly found itself not only leading processions but also giving more static performances and appearing at events beyond Penzance.

Leadership evolved as well. Stephen Hall was the founder and first guiding force, everywhere at once in the early years, playing, organising and holding the whole thing together. After Stephen, Bernard Evans took over the musical leadership of the band and became a much loved central figure in its later development, helping to shape both its repertoire and its sound. In the years after Bernard there were further changes of leadership. Alan Collins led the band for a period, and later John Gallagher, Rosie Reast and now Laura Clayton have each carried the role in their own way. The precise sequence and dates are a little hazy in memory, as is often the case in community history, but what matters is that the band has been sustained by a succession of people willing to take responsibility for it and shape its next chapter.



The band setting off on Mazey Day 2006. Photo from Graeme Kirkham.

John Gallagher's recollections suggest one such moment of development, when he began grouping tunes into sets and paying more attention to static performances as well as processions. That too is part of the story of Bagas Golowan: a band that began as a loose street force and gradually became confident in a wider range of settings without ever losing its raw edge.

And yet for all that change, something essential has remained untouched. Stephen Hall once joked, "*Golowan Band! The Golowan Band has musicians, as we occasionally say.*" It is a line that contains a truth. Bagas Golowan has always been about more than musical

correctness. It is about movement, memory, humour, stamina, comradeship and the thrill of being in the thick of things.

It is also about continuity, not the continuity of museum glass and fixed rules, but the continuity of doing. New members arrive, learn the tunes, scrabble to find white clothes, discover the routes, feel their first nerves and then, before they know it, find themselves at the centre of the Torchlit Procession, or edging through the crowds on Mazey Eve, or up at dawn with sore legs and somehow enough energy left to play again. That is how traditions survive.

Bagas Golowan did not spring fully formed into being in 1991. It grew from older friendships, folk sessions, dance bands, theatrical experiments and revival energies. In time it became one of the things that later generations simply expected to be there, one of the sounds and sights without which Golowan would not feel like Golowan.

That may be the clearest sign of all that it succeeded.