

The White Heather Club Reassessed

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INTRODUCTION

The *White Heather Club* was a popular Scottish light entertainment television programme that was broadcast between 1958 and 1967. Featuring Scottish dance and dance music, folk songs, comic songs and bothy ballads, the *White Heather Club* had an anchor or host who provided the links between the acts and sang a song or two. The programme is particularly remembered by the older Scottish population for its popular annual *Hogmanay* shows.

In subsequent decades, Scots have often dismissed the *White Heather Club*, together with tartan and shortbread, as being aspects of Scottish culture that they love to hate. One commentator suggested that the programme communicated a 'dated' and 'tartanised view of Scotland'.¹ It is more than time to reassess the position of the *White Heather Club* in Scottish culture as it was a technically and culturally creative approach to home entertainment on the small screen. The programme reflected many innovations in television broadcasting and has had a long-lasting influence.

In this article, I will consider the context which led to the commissioning of the *White Heather Club*, the innovative format of the programme, the experiences of performers and the legacy of the *White Heather Club*. I make particular use

of archive material and interviews with former *White Heather Club* performers.²

TELEVISION BROADCASTING IN 1950S SCOTLAND

A combination of factors led to three Scottish-themed light entertainment television programmes being commissioned between 1956 and 1958, one of which was the *White Heather Club*. Although the BBC continued to pour resources into radio programming in the immediate post-war period, television broadcasting slowly began to expand. (Potter 2022: 132). The 1951 Beveridge Report on Broadcasting recommended that Scotland should have control over its own television broadcast output, although the BBC in London decided not to devolve the finances to Scotland. (Sweeney 2008: 94).

As the 1950s progressed, an increasing number of people were able to access television reception and as a result, more television licences were purchased. Between 1955 and 1960, the number of licences in Scotland doubled. (Potter 138; 143). STV (Scottish Television), the first Scottish commercial television station, began broadcasting in 1957 (Potter 146). This meant that the BBC would have to compete with STV for viewers. Around this time, the BBC offered its radio producers the opportunity to take a television production course to encourage them

to make the move from radio to television and to develop more Scottish-themed television programming. (Stewart 2025 d). As 20 percent of the Scottish radio audience regularly tuned in to Scottish dance music programmes in the 1950s, it is hardly surprising that during the middle of the decade, no less than three Scottish-themed television programmes were commissioned.³ These were the BBC's *The Kilt is My Delight* (1956–1963), STV's informal alternative *Jig Time* (1958–1962) and the *White Heather Club* (1958–1967), a second Scottish-themed light entertainment programme from the BBC.

THREE SCOTTISH LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT TELEVISION PROGRAMMES

The Kilt is My Delight (1956–1963) was transmitted nationally, meaning it could be viewed in both Scotland and England (Stewart 2025 a). It featured singers, Scottish dance bands, pipers and Highland and Scottish country dancers. The dancers often wore formal Scottish country dance costumes: the women had long white gowns and the men, kilt and sporran outfits. Some of *The Kilt is My Delight's* regular performers, including accordionist Jimmy Shand, his dance band and the Highland dancer Bobby Watson, took part in the *White Heather Club* when it began broadcasting two years later. Until 17 October 1961, when the *White Heather Club* became a nationally transmitted programme, *The Kilt is My Delight* was the only Scottish light entertainment programme that was regularly broadcast on the national BBC-tv network. (Stewart 2025 a).

The rival STV production, *Jig Time* (1958–1962) also featured Scottish music, song and dance. To emphasise its informality, *Jig Time's* studio set resembled a barn interior. The show's dance director Bruce McClure (1925–1989) approached the Scottish School of Physical Education to recruit students as dancers, assuming that they would have studied gymnastics, which they had not (Ballantyne 2019). Physical Education student John Ward and some of the other students who joined *Jig Time* as dancers, also performed on *White Heather Club* programmes.

Like *Jig Time*, the *White Heather Club* (1958–1968) was informal and light-hearted. Its former Floor Manager, Lea Ashton said that the series had developed from the *White Heather Club New Year Party* (*Reunion* 21:50) that Iain MacFadyen (1926–1983) had produced for Hogmanay 1957/58, after taking the television production course designed to help radio producers make the switch to television production. Under the pseudonym Neil Grant, MacFadyen composed and arranged Scottish songs and dance music, which proved useful for the *White Heather Club* series. The popular Scottish singer, Robert Wilson was the programme's first host. According to the entertainer Andy Stewart, it was the name of Wilson's own touring variety show, the *White Heather Group* that provided the inspiration for the name of the new television series – the *White Heather Club* (*Reunion* 23:41).

In 1958, when the *White Heather Club* started, Scottish folk songs and ballads were just as popular with Scottish audiences as Scottish dance

music was. Folk clubs had begun to appear, the first of which was Edinburgh University's 'Folk Society' in 1958 (Bruce 2022: 35). Glasgow had the 'Blues and Ballads Club' at Allan Glen's School and the 'Ballads Club', which started in 1957 at Rutherglen Academy (Bruce 2022: 182,183). Many of the songs and ballads sung at these clubs, gathered and published in the *Little Red Book* (1962), were performed on the *White Heather Club*. This brought them to an even wider public.

The *White Heather Club* was filmed and broadcast from the BBC's new studio premises at Springfield Road in Glasgow which had previously been the Black Cat Cinema (Stewart 2024). The programme featured Scottish folksongs, bothy ballads and humorous songs and poems, Scottish dance and dance music, and new songs and comedy scripts that were created specifically for the programme. It was so popular that by the summer of 1961, more than a third of the Scottish population was watching the *White Heather Club* every week.⁴ As a result, it was moved to a national broadcast slot in October 1961. At its peak, the show was able to attract an audience of 10 million viewers.⁵

THE WHITE HEATHER CLUB PROGRAMMES

The Aberdonian dancer and teacher Bobby Watson (1914–1997) was both a solo dancer and a dance director on the show at various times between 1959 and 1965. During this period he also appeared on *The Kilt is My Delight*, the *Andy Stewart Show* and toured with the *White Heather* stage shows in Scotland, Australia, New Zealand

and Canada. As a champion Highland dancer and respected Scottish country dance teacher, Watson was well-known and had performed and taught in Scotland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and the USA. He kept a significant amount of material that related to his dancing and his dance teaching practice and performance, including rehearsal scripts from the *White Heather Club* programmes that he had either participated in or acted as dance director on. Now held at the University of Aberdeen, the scripts contain useful information about each programme, such as the times and locations of rehearsals, the names of the performers and production crew and detailed lists of the contents of each show, including song and dance titles and the programme's running order. The scripts also document how filming the programme changed over time. The associated camera scripts provide an extra dimension by recording exactly how the cameras would film each act. It was particularly important during performances for the dancers to know where each camera would be at any time and where they would move to next, in order to avoid accidental collisions in the often limited studio space. (Ballantyne 2019)

THE DANCERS

The dancers were an indispensable part of the programme. There were sixteen dancers on each show, eight female and eight male. The women were all professional dancers and able to learn new dances quickly so did not need to have any prior experience of Scottish country dancing. The men either had been, or were students at the

Scottish School of Physical Training at Jordanhill College of Education, Glasgow and often had no previous dance experience (Ballantyne 2019). Between 1958 and 1964 three dance directors worked at various times on the *White Heather Club*: Bobby Watson, Dixie Ingram and Jack Cooper (Ballantyne 2019). The dance director identified, choreographed and arranged suitable Scottish country dances and Highland dances for each week's show.

Bobby Watson was the dance director on 40 programmes between September 1959 and December 1960. He did not take part in the television show again until August 1964 when he appeared as a guest artiste but he did participate in the *White Heather Show's* five-month long tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1963. He had a further period as the *White Heather Club's* dance director between April and June 1965. His final involvement with the television show was in September of 1965. With the Deeside Dancers, he took part in the *White Heather Club Stage Show* at the Edinburgh Palladium in the summer of 1967.

Bobby Watson first appeared on the *White Heather Club* as both performer and dance director on 15 September 1959. This episode was broadcast from the Scottish Industries Exhibition at Glasgow's Kelvin Hall and was preceded by three rehearsals which took place on the day before and on the day itself. The show was transmitted live at 6.20 pm from the Kelvin Hall Arena, which must have been a technically challenging enterprise, particularly for the performers in those early days of Scottish

broadcasting. Hosted by Andy Stewart, there were performances by the Aberdonian singer Laura Brand, the City of Glasgow Police Choir, the Joe Gordon Folk Four, Bobby Watson, the White Heather Dancers, Jimmy Shand and his

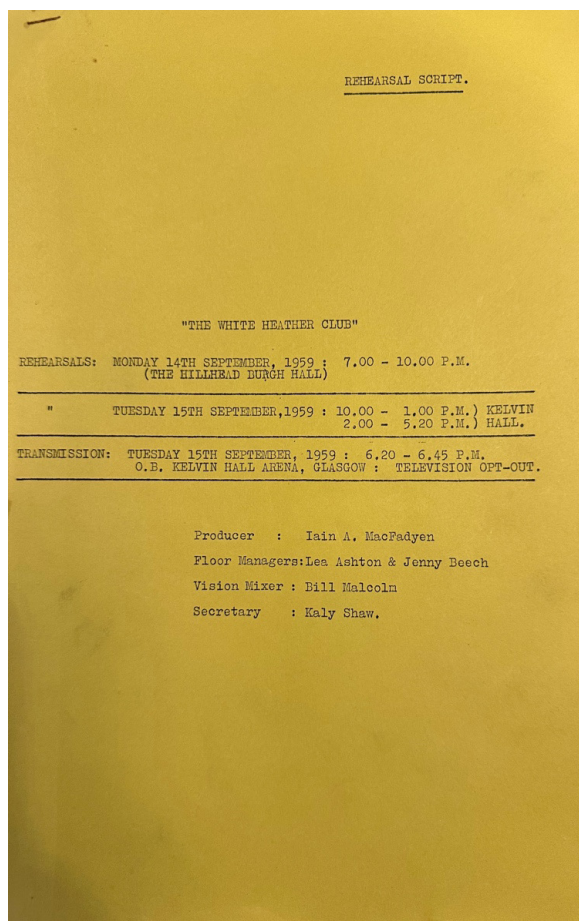


FIGURE 1

Rehearsal script cover page, 14 September 1959. With permission, University of Aberdeen Special Collections

Band and Harry Carmichael, who at that time was the show's resident pianist.

Stewart introduced the show by describing the exhibition as a 'king-sized sale of work'.⁶ The

mood set by his humorous introduction continued throughout the programme and all the links were light-hearted. The Joe Gordon Folk Four sang the bothy ballad *Drumdelgie* and Stewart recited a comic poem, told a short story and gave one of his earliest performances of *Donald, Where's Your Troosers*, with his own lyrics and with music by the show's producer and deviser, Iain MacFadyen. *Donald Where's Your Troosers* is still popular today. Stewart explained on the 1991 *White Heather Club Reunion* programme that although he had trained as an actor and not as a singer, he discovered that he had a talent for writing song lyrics. 'I would always write the lyric first. Iain [MacFadyen] would take the lyric home and almost inevitably, would produce a tune the next day' (*Reunion* 29:45). *Donald Where's Your Troosers* was not the only popular song to be created in this way. The following year, *A Scottish Soldier* and *The Battle's O'er* also became much requested hits from the series. Stewart said that there was an 'absolute sensation when I sang the *Scottish Soldier* on television. We had an absolute flood of mail asking us to do it the very next week and it was the breakthrough for me' (*Reunion* 28:13).

The *White Heather Club* was to return to the Scottish Industries Exhibition in September 1964 with changes from the original programme of 1959. The 1964 script covered two programmes that were to be recorded back-to-back in a 45-minute slot. The popular folk singing duo, Robin Hall and Jimmie Macgregor, were the hosts, having replaced Andy Stewart in 1963. The artistes were singers Moira Anderson and James Urquhart, dancer Bobby Watson and

pianist Harry Carmichael. The dance music was provided by Jim MacLeod and his band and Jack Cooper directed the dances. By 1965, the final year of Watson's involvement with the show, the format had altered further. By this time there was usually only one singing guest as the hosts Hall and Macgregor tended to perform most of the well-known folk songs themselves. The dance component remained the same as it always had been, with four dances per show.

JOHN AND ELEANOR WARD

I interviewed former *White Heather Club* dancers, John and Eleanor Ward in September 2019. They met on the programme in 1960. John Ward, who was a Physical Education student joined the *White Heather Club* dancers in 1959 and performed regularly until the pressure on his time through his work as a teacher made his appearances less frequent. His last appearance was in 1964. Eleanor Cairns was a professional dancer who joined in 1960 and left some time after she and John married in 1963. Around 1960, when she was 18, Eleanor had auditioned for the *White Heather Summer Show* at the Glasgow Empire Theatre, which ran for three months every year. This was the first time she had performed set dances on stage, which she described as being a mixture of Scottish country dances and choreographed patterns. Two of her friends, who also danced in the show, asked her to come and watch a rehearsal of the *White Heather Club* television programme at the Springfield Road studios. She joined the television show as a dancer shortly after.

John's dance experience was somewhat different to Eleanor's. Like the other male dancers on the show, he had one term every year of Scottish country dance tuition at the College under the watchful eye of the tutor, Jean Milligan, one of the founders of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. As an amateur dancer, John was not expected to attend all the rehearsals whereas the girls, as professional dancers, were. John explained that although the boys 'hadn't really done [Scottish country dancing] with any career in mind it was going to be part of a career because we had to do all the activities in [the] Physical Education [qualification]'. The women, as professional dancers, were members of Equity, the performing arts and entertainment trade union, and earned twice as much as the men. The female professionals had to participate in more rehearsals than the men and were expected to help coach the men when they arrived at rehearsals, often at the end of a school or college day. Eleanor explained that when she started on the *White Heather Club* she earned 26 guineas a show, which according to the Bank of England's inflation calculator is worth over £500 today. By the time she left the programme in 1963, her wage had almost doubled to 48 guineas per show.⁷ John earned £8 per show, which is around £150 today, and £12 per week from teaching in the early 1960s. This is the reverse of normal wage inequality.

COSTUMES

One commentator may have mixed up the *White Heather Club* with *The Kilt is My Delight*

when stating that on the *White Heather Club*, the women wore 'white dresses with sashes', and that the dancers performed 'set-piece dances [...] with formal precision' (Royle 48). Eleanor Ward explained that on the contrary, as the BBC was keen to 'move on from the Scottish country dancing long white dress with the sash, some weeks we would have gorgeous, patterned dresses with all the petticoats' (Ballantyne 2019). At the beginning of each series, the women were fitted for their dance costumes and would wear the same brightly patterned, fashionable, waisted dress for an entire season. The fabrics were carefully chosen because some patterns did not work well on screen.

In the early years of the series the women wore high-heeled shoes, rather than the heel less, flat soled dancing shoes that the men wore and that were commonly worn by all Scottish country dancers. The men wore kilts, kilt socks, shirts with rolled-up sleeves and ties. It appears that tartan was particularly popular with viewers. Andy Stewart wore a kilt every week after his second appearance on the show. His 'tartan-clad image became indelibly etched in the public's imagination and a life-long relationship with the kilt began' (Stewart 2025 b).

REHEARSALS

Rehearsals were mostly held on Monday evenings and all day Tuesday. Tuesday was the usual transmission day. The dancers had their own rehearsal space and their Monday evening rehearsals were often held at Kelvinside Church Hall or Hillhead Burgh Hall, whilst the rest of

the cast rehearsed in the BBC's Studio 2. The dancers would not find out what dances they would perform in each week's show until the first rehearsal. In the early years, Tuesday rehearsals and the telerecording would take place at the BBC's Springfield Road studio unless the show was to be transmitted from an outside location. The Rehearsal Script for Tuesday 05 April 1960 shows that the band rehearsed for an hour before lunch and that the bulk of the afternoon rehearsal was taken up with rehearsing with the cameras. The camera scripts showed exactly what each camera would film and for how long. One camera script for a dance performed by Bobby

Watson and some of the female dancers shows how complex these scripts were. Three cameras were used and each camera would be featured at different times. One camera might be focused on Bobby Watson, another on all of the dancers and a third on just one or two dancers. Sometimes a camera zooms in on Watson's feet. The amount of time each camera focuses on each subject area is marked in the script in groups of four or eight bars of music.

The available space in the Springfield Road Studio had to be used creatively as many different camera angles were planned for each act. The large and unwieldy cameras were always moving, so the places that the dancers might move to in a dance were not dictated by the dance itself, but by what Iain MacFadyen had envisaged for each shot. John Ward explained that [on television] it 'looked as if we had tons of room', which, he suggested, was due to the 'clever use of the cameras' (Ballantyne 2019).

Scottish country dances can be quite long so it was usual to perform just a part of a dance on the show, depending on its place in the schedule and on the overall timing of the show. The Wards described a typical fast-paced final rehearsal:

[JW] The cameras would have their programme to move in or from a corner, so we had to know when to move – gracefully or disgracefully.

[EW] They [the cameras] were very hard to hold and they were big. Huge things.

[JW] And Fadyie [Iain MacFadyen] was changing [the dances] right up until the last minute. I think we'd come in on the Tuesday, about the back of 4 [pm] and the last rehearsal

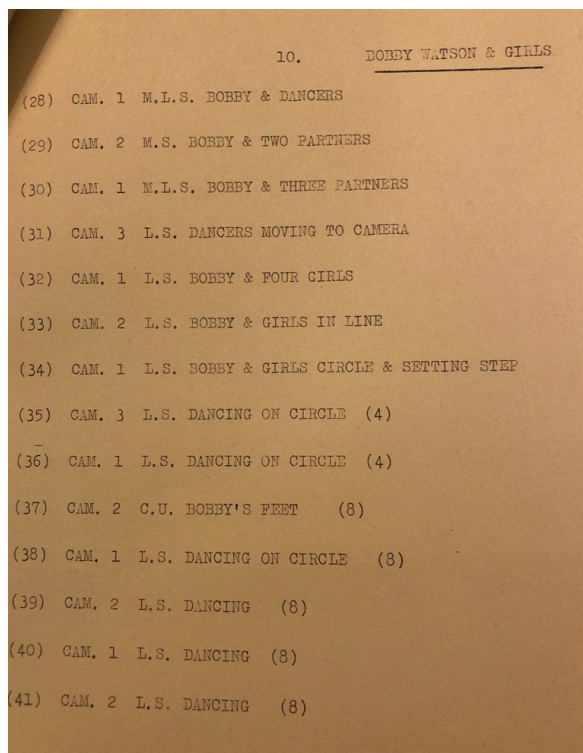


FIGURE 2
Camera Cues, 18 January 1960
With permission, University of Aberdeen Special
Collections

would be at quarter to 5. Then the lights went down. You [to EW] were my partner and you'd have to quickly tell me what bit [of the dance] we were doing: [if] we were only doing the first eight bars of it or if we'd just go through it once or twice, because it would all be changed. Fadyie would have other things to do with the band over here [indicates to one side], and the Brand sisters or Andy [Stewart] would be doing something over there [indicates to the other side]. And that camera had to get there [indicates to a different direction], so you had to get out of the way quickly. We'd rehearsed the whole thing as if there were no cameras but Fadyie would then want us to come in at that bit there in the dance, and Dixie [Ingram] or whoever in the middle of it because he was going to do a solo with three of the girls or whatever. And that was all now part of the running of the show, so it wasn't just a Scottish country dance. It had moved on to being [part of] a real variety show. (2019)

Bobby Watson often annotated his rehearsal scripts. His notes might refer to where a dance appeared in the programme's running order or how many bars of introductory and exit music the dancers would have for any dance. The notes also provide some insight into why a particular dance in its usual format might not necessarily work on the show. On one script, he noted 'Floor covering bad' to remind himself that something would have to be altered if the dance was to look good on the television screen.⁸

By his final series of programmes as dance director in 1965, Watson was writing all his dance notes on the otherwise largely blank rehearsal scripts. Some of his notes include story ideas for

the choreography of the dances he might perform with the girls on a show, or a note reminding him of which book to find a dance in. On the rehearsal script dated 19 September 1965, beside the entry for his solo dance, he merely noted that he was to perform 'something exciting'.⁹ Perhaps he chose to perform his unique version of the Highland dance, *Sean Triubhas*, which he had performed on the 1958 *Hogmanay Show*, accompanying himself on the bagpipes, playing the instrument as he danced.

THE END OF THE RUN

The *White Heather Club* gave huge exposure to Scottish folk and traditional songs and popular bothy ballads. The performers presented these alongside new and often comic songs in an engaging manner. Scottish country dancing was also modernised and dances were recreated to look good on the small screen. Singer and star from the early years of the show, Joe Gordon, said that the fact that the content 'was a little bit different', meant that the programme had 'appealed to people at that time' [the early 1960s] (*Reunion* 18:26). However, it appears that through gradual changes in content, performers, hosts and production, the *White Heather Club* eventually reached the end of its popularity and the series finally ended in 1967, almost ten years after it started. The format had changed over the years but the excitement, informality and innovation of the early days had not endured with the programme. Lea Ashton thought that it had gone on for too long and that it should have ended its run around 1964 when it was still popular

(*Reunion* 31:51). Former host Jimmie Macgregor observed that by 1968 'there was a tendency to sneer about [it], it was past its sell by date' (McLean 2020).

THE LEGACY OF *THE WHITE HEATHER CLUB*

[B] Broadcasting developments:

In 1958 the 25-minute programmes were recorded live at the time of transmission. Live broadcasts were complex and challenging and the performers had to know what they were doing. By the mid 1960s parts of individual shows were pre-recorded and sound was recorded separately and sent to Broadcasting House in London in advance of transmission.

The layout of the programme scripts changed from the early scripts, which were very detailed with every word typed in advance, to a series of almost blank pages, with a programme item number header at the top of each page. The information on the front page of each rehearsal script, which in 1959 had comprised of rehearsal times, locations and contents, transmission time and production crew, had by 1964 greatly increased to reflect a larger production crew. Extra lines were added to show recording, project and recording numbers, the cast list, the production crew list and dressing room allocations. In 1959 the production crew had consisted of a producer, designer, vision mixer, lighting supervisor, secretary and floor manager. By 1964 a technical manager, sound supervisor, senior cameraman, floor assistant, costume supervisor, and make up supervisor had been added. This all pointed to

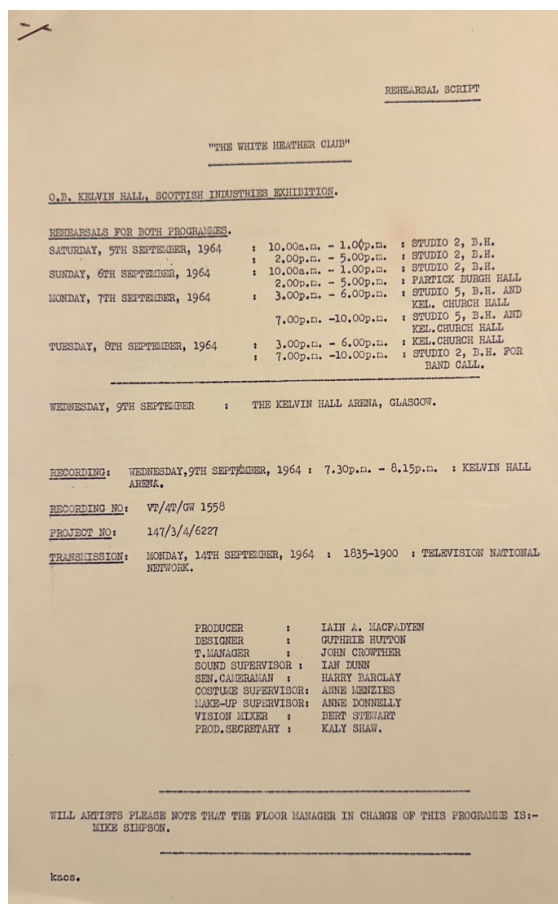


FIGURE 3
Rehearsal script cover page, 05 September 1964
With permission, University of Aberdeen Special Collections

a larger and more professional operation which reflected advances in broadcasting technology and production. However, although the production crew had increased, the cast had decreased from the 1959 format of host plus four or five guest acts, band and dancers, to hosts plus one or two acts, band and dancers by 1965. It appears that as the production became more sophisticated, the show's popularity decreased.

[B] The cultural legacy

During its first years, the *White Heather Club* had broken with the formality associated with the BBC of the 1950s, namely the ‘BBC accents’ and formal speech dress and behaviour. The *White Heather Club*’s informality extended to the programme’s content and the light-hearted banter between the cast members, the new comic songs and even to the dancers’ costumes.

It could be argued that the *White Heather Club* inspired the way in which other Scottish entertainment programmes continued to adopt an informal, party-style presentation. These include Hogmanay shows, Andy Stewart’s own show, Grampian Television’s *Round at Calum’s* and *Calum’s Ceilidh*. The success of the *White Heather Club* paved the way for BBC Scotland’s mid-1960s television folk music programme, *The Hootenanny Show*. The *White Heather Club*’s influence was seen in other countries too, for example, in Ireland’s RTE hosted *Club Céilí*. This was an informal presentation of music and dance that was broadcast in the mid 1960s. In 1982 Canadian ATV began broadcasting the very popular *Up Home Tonight*, to the Canadian Maritimes provinces. The series, which ran until 1989, featured a host and guest artistes from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick, who performed traditional music, song and dance to a studio audience, in a format strongly reminiscent of the *White Heather Club*.

Many of the performers who regularly appeared on the show went on to have very successful careers. These include Andy Stewart, dancers Bobby Watson, Isobel James and Dixie

Ingram, singers Joe Gordon, Moira Anderson, Jimmie Macgregor and musicians Jimmy Shand, Bobby MacLeod and Ian Powrie. Songs that were created for the show, such as *Donald Where’s Your Troosers*, *A Scottish Soldier* and *The Battle’s O’er* also endured to the extent that many people do not realise today that they are products of the *White Heather Club* and not older, traditional songs.

It has become fashionable during the last few decades to decry tartan and dance bands and indeed, all the Scottish entertainment that previous generations enjoyed, which is perhaps part of the trend for one generation to denigrate the taste of the generation before it. However, the tide may be turning. Tartan remains a fashion item and kilts are popular wear for weddings, for ceilidh dances and for the ‘Tartan Army’ of Scottish football supporters when travelling abroad. Scottish country dance bands are still in great demand and there appears to be a resurgence of interest in an earlier generation of popular Scottish entertainers. Scottish tenor Jamie MacDougall recently performed a series of concerts to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the once vastly popular Scottish entertainer, Harry Lauder (McLean 2025).

Perhaps it is time to reassess the *White Heather Club*. Rather than look at it through a ‘tartan tat’ lens, we should celebrate it as an important and influential part of Scotland’s rich cultural heritage

Endnotes

- 1 Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_White_Heather_Club> (Last accessed 20-02-2025).
- 2 Other than the very few episodes of the *White Heather Club* that are available online, the most useful general source of information come from:
 - a. *White Heather Club* rehearsal scripts at University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, MS 3605/5, 'Bobby Watson (1914–1997)'.
 - b. The comprehensive online resource created by journalist Graham Stewart, *Scotland on Air* wiki.scotlandonair.com.
- 3 'Listeners Seek Amusement', *Scotsman*, 16-01-1956, p.5 col.1.
- 4 'The White Heather Club', *Radio Times* (Scottish edition), 15 June 1961, p. 18.
- 5 Available at: <<https://wiki.scotlandonair.com/wiki/1961>> (Last accessed 08 August 2025).
- 6 University of Aberdeen, Special Collections, MS3605/5/1/1/1, 14 Sept 1959.
- 7 Available at <<https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator>> (Last accessed 25 February 2025).
- 8 MS 3605/5/1/1/1, Rehearsal script 03 April 1960.
- 9 MS3605/5/1/1/1, Rehearsal script 19 September 1965.

Links

The following White Heather Club programmes are available:

- (02 June 1959) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9MoA_rFsPw
- (31 May 1960) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3m3Onapa8>
- (10 October 1960) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9MoA_rFsPw
- (31 December 1991) Reunion https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M_ftDGOHITE

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86–103.