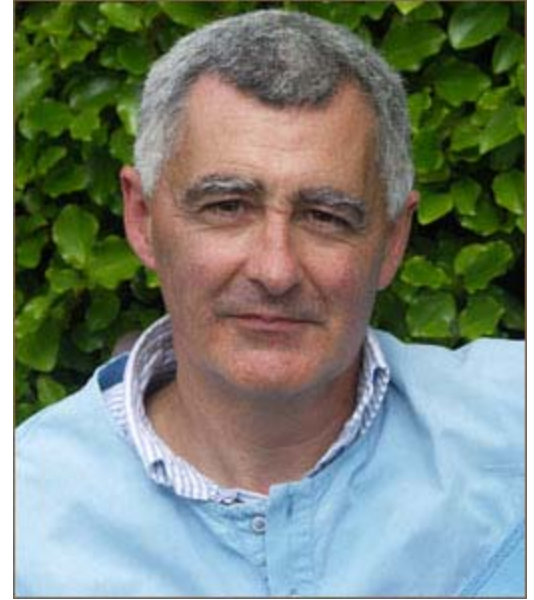


This article by Charles Guard was first published in the June 2015 issue of the Sylvia Woods Harp Center e-Newsletter

You can find Charles's PDFs at www.harpcenter.com/Guard

I'm a Manxman! An unusual word but it means I come from a small island right in the middle of the British Isles, mid-way between Ireland and England called the Isle of Man. We are an independent country (though very small) with our own Gaelic language, independent parliament and cultural identity. It was when I left the Island to study at the Royal College of Music in London that I really started to look at the music of my native Island (I was homesick!) and discovered that there was a wealth of traditional material. Although I was studying the organ at the College I decided to take up the Irish harp as it was an ideal instrument for accompanying folk songs.



Initially I taught myself but I ended up, in 1973, going to live in Ireland to study the harp with one of Ireland's most respected players, Gráinne Yeats, daughter-in-law of the poet W B Yeats.



I earned my living in those years teaching and playing the harp for Georgian-style banquets in one of the great Irish houses, Castletown House. Dressed in a tail coat, knickerbockers and lace cuffs I played for the (mostly American) audience who came for the banquets. My time in Ireland was great fun and I made many friends. I was playing the harp all the time with other musicians, and I eventually recorded my own LP (as they were in those days) for Claddagh Records called *Avenging and Bright*. The owner of the company, an eccentric Guinness millionaire called Garech a BrOn, asked me to join a Scottish folk group called The Whistlebinkies and for a time I commuted between Dublin and Glasgow and appeared on their first LP. It was during this time that I started researching the Irish wire-strung harp techniques that date back to Mediaeval times. By this time my harp maker was Jan Muylleart who was based in Navan, west of Dublin. Having built me a fine gut-strung harp Jan researched the construction techniques of the 18th century wire-

strung harps and he eventually produced a superb instrument, though it took some time to find the right brass wire to string it with. I found that my fingernails weren't strong enough when they were grown long, and so I had to use stick-on nails, which caused some puzzlement in the local pharmacy when I went to buy them; the assistant was dying to ask what I wanted them for but I didn't let on and left it to her imagination.

Eventually I decided to return to live on the Island and I took up a position with the local radio station Manx Radio becoming News Editor and presenter of a daily current affairs programme, though I still found time to produce a small **book of Manx tunes** arranged for the Irish harp.

Since leaving Manx Radio in 1990 I have been writing music for television, playing the harp occasionally, making my own films and documentaries, recording CDs and publishing books. I have always been fascinated by the Isle of Man's history and I have produced many documentaries about all aspects of Manx life, though I have made programmes about other areas as well. Filming from helicopters has been great fun and a few years

ago I made a film called *London from the Air*, which was a fascinating project. But filming the Isle of Man is the best thing to be doing. Follow the link below for a short aerial tour I did of the Island using my music - and there's some harp in there somewhere!



<https://vimeo.com/75958195>

Concerning our history, which goes back some nine thousand years, here's a section from my latest video called *The Castles and Forts of the Isle of Man* where I visit the remains of a Bronze Age (2,500 years ago) hill fort on the Island and try to work out what it originally looked like. I write all the music for my films using sampled instruments (full orchestras are so expensive) and real instruments and players where possible. I still play the harp whenever possible and the instrument has brought me some of the best times of my life.

-- Charles Guard

