

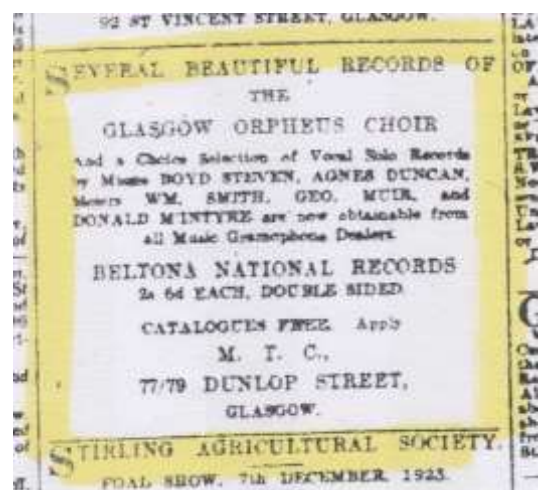
Beltona records will be little known outside the British Isles, in fact it would be true to say that they are not that well-known outside Scotland, but this relative anonymity hides the fact the between 1923 and 1975 they issued over 3100 singles as well as 100 x EPs and 289 x LPs. They were one of only seven record brands that survived the war and even one of these, Rex records, a subsidiary company of Decca, ceased production in 1948.

One may, I think, assume that its longevity was, at least partly, due to the decision made in the late 1920s to concentrate on providing Scottish music and song, performed by Scots for a Scottish public.

So what were the origins of Beltona records? The brand name was registered, along with others, by John G. Murdoch & Co. Ltd. of London on 12th. February 1912 for use with talking machines, talking machine accessories and records.

The Murdoch family had come from the village of Tibbermore near Perth, Scotland and had been involved in printing, organ building and retailing, the sale of musical instrument and a whole range of other activities. As early as 1905 they had been involved with the short-lived Star Phonograph cylinder Company, then they had been agents for imported Indestructible cylinders and were also responsible for organising recording facilities in London so that they could produce a British repertoire. In April 1911 they were appointed agents for Bel Canto records and, presumably, were responsible for selling “stencil” records for a variety of brands that used these masters. They were also factors (wholesalers) for many major brands of gramophone records and cylinders, including Edison.

They did produce an early version of Beltona records circa 1921 but only four issues are known three of which use masters derived from Grammavox/Popular and one using masters from Guardsman/Invicta. One example has been found in Britain, one in Tasmania, one in mainland Australia and one resides in a French collection, so I’m not 100% sure where they were meant to be sold, although I think that in view of the fact that Murdochs had connections there, that it was probably Australia. The lowest number known is 100 – the highest 150.



But now we come to what I may call the real Beltona. In 1923 they approached the Aeolian Vocalion Record Company and asked them to produce an initial catalogue of 250 records aimed at a mass audience. These first records, all of which were already available on Aco and other Vocalion group labels, consisted of what one may call the usual repertoire of dance bands, comic songs, military bands and so on, many of which derived from masters that had originally been issued on the American Vocalion label. However, 12% of these new records were of Scottish material – a slightly higher percentage than could be found on any other contemporary label.

The earliest advertisement I can find appeared in the Glasgow Herald of 10th. December 1923 and referred specifically to records by the Glasgow Orpheus Choir¹ and its soloists (formed 1901).

Towards the middle of 1924 Vocalion started to produce records solely for issue on Beltona, these had the letter “M” as a prefix to the master numbers, a practice continued by subsequent pressing companies, but Beltona still continued to share most of its material with Aco and other cheap labels.

Many smaller record labels seemed to feel that having more “serious” music in their catalogue gave them some prestige and also, perhaps, tapped in to an audience that couldn’t afford the premium prices charged by HMV, Columbia, Vocalion and other more prestigious brands. So in August 1924 they introduced the 5000 12” (30 cm) classical series and a 7000 12” (30 cm) classical series. None of the twenty nine issues were very noteworthy. Also introduced was a 10” (25 cm) “De Luxe Label”², which lasted until 1948 and issued some 189 records. Many of these were specifically produced for the Royal Scottish County Dance Society (founded 1923) who gave them their seal of approval, for playing dance music at strict tempo, and received a royalty on sales.

These early dance records by the Sutherland Orchestra³ were recorded in London by “studio musicians”, although they were conducted by a Scot, John Michael Diack (1869-1947), but their good sales must have alerted Beltona to the fact that there was a considerable market for country dance records.

Following the trend of the day, towards the end of 1925, Murdoch’s introduced a cheap record aimed at children – this was the 5^{3/8}” (13½ cm) diameter Beltona Bairn’s record. However, the only Scots contents in the whole series was an anonymous baritone singing the ubiquitous “Loch Lomond”. And so matters continued until 1927 when Vocalion introduced their new 8” (20 cm) diameter Broadcast record and decided to cease production of all standard 10” (25 cm) and 12” (30 cm) records for clients in order that they could concentrate their attentions on

¹ **GLASGOW ORPHEUS CHOIR**

Choir with Alex Mackay (tenor soloist) and piano.

Recorded London, August 1923

C-5813 A man’s a man for a’ that (Robert Burns, arr. Purcell J. Mansfield) Bel 246

² **CLYDEBANK BURGH BRASS BAND**

(Formed 1891). (John Dennis Scoins) (Skinningrove, Yorks, 1892 -) J. D. Scoins (conductor),

Recorded London, ca August 1925

MC 7262 Tam o’ Shanter fantasia - part 2 (arr. Harry Round) Bel 6010

³ **SUTHERLAND ORCHESTRA**

J. Michael Diack (conductor & arranger). Unknown violins, trumpet, piccolo, flute, bowed bass, drums;

Recorded London, ca late June or early July 1927

MC-430-E Scottish country dances - No.2- No.12. Eightsome reel (trad) Bel 6096

NOTE: These records were made by arrangement with the Scottish Country Dance Society.

their own brands.. This meant that Murdoch had to find a new company to record and press Beltona records – they chose Edison Bell Winner (J. E. Hough Ltd.) of Glengall Road, Peckham, London.

The mixture of records being issued continued much the same as before, although there was a small increase in the number of specifically Scottish records being issued – up from 12% to 14%. Much more importantly the man who had been in charge of the label since its inception seems to have decided, after a year or so, that the change in production companies merited a re-assessment of its market strategy and also a change in the type of record they were issuing.

Thomas Patrick Walker was born in Aberdeen in 1888 (died 1959) and started work in 1902 for Murdoch Trading Company at their Glasgow office. By 1914 he was the principal salesman for the whole of Scotland selling not only phonograph cylinders but laundry mangles, postmen's mail carts, sheet music, bibles, every type of musical instrument and more. Incidentally, his mother, brother and sister also worked for Murdoch's. Visiting retail shops all over Scotland gave him a very good insight in to what the record buying public wanted.

He realised that they could not compete with the major brand names (Columbia, HMV, Zonophone, Regal, Parlophone, etc.) nor with the multitude of small cheap labels aimed at the mass market (Piccadilly, Sterno, Goodson, Filmophone, etc.). Making full use of his specialist knowledge the policy of the company shifted not only towards concentrating on the demand for Scottish music and song but also on having this music performed by Scots rather than London based artists.

In 1928 14% of the issues were Scottish based but by 1930 it was 62% and in 1932 it had reached over 75%. With this change of emphasis also came a change in the artists – in 1928 only 12% of the artists were amateurs or semi-professionals but by 1930 this had changed to 60%. But of all the records issued over 90% of the performers were Scots born.

Walker chose his artists in several ways, the principal one being recommendations from local music shops and record dealers and the second way being prize winners at the many music festivals and competitions that he attended. Lots of these artists had very local reputations and the bulk of sales of their records would be expected to come from quite a small area, but as the records were listed in the main catalogue anyone in Scotland could purchase them. Because of this local approach the company became the first company to record Aberdeenshire dialect monologues, "Bothy Ballad"⁴ songs, Glasgow dialect sketches, Border ballads, Gaelic language sketches, evangelistic gospel songs and other records for minor market sectors.

One of the company's main stars was an Aberdeen born comedian, Harry Gordon⁵ (1893-1957), whose many recordings for Beltona were all good sellers. Barely known outside Scotland he was famous as a pantomime artist and stage performer who had created a mythical village called

⁴ GEORGE SMITH MORRIS

(Aberdeen, 1876 – 1958). "G. S. Morris".(baritone vocal, speech-1),

William S. Morris (Aberdeen, 1915 – Dingwall, 2004) (piano)

Recorded 62 Glengall Road, Peckham, London., ca early October 1930

M-13051-1 The muckin' o' Geordie's byre (G. S. Morris)

Bel 1573

⁵ HARRY GORDON

(Alexander Ross Gordon) (Aberdeen, 1893 – Woodside Hall, 1957).

Baritone vocal, accomp. unknown orchestra

Recorded 62 Glengall Road, Peckham, London., ca February 1929

M-12218-1 The smith o' Inversnecky (Harry Gordon)

Bel 1437

Inversnecky. His records of songs and comic sketches provide many interesting comments on contemporary events.

One of the great treasures of the Beltona catalogue was its assortment of Gaelic language records, they were also the only company to issue a Gaelic language printed supplements⁶.

At a time when only Parlophone represented any competition they signed up the most important prize winning singers, in particular Archie Grant⁷ (1902-1991) and Allan MacLean (1891-1982), and they also issued the first records of puirt-a-beul – Gaelic mouth music⁸ and also of Gaelic church singing⁹.

Three famous pipers were among the roster who recorded for Beltona, Pipe Major James Robertson of the Scots Guards (1893-1948), Pipe Major Robert Reid of the Highland Light

⁶ ARCHIBALD GRANT

(Lenzie, 1902 – Glasgow, 1991). Archie Grant, tenor vocal, unaccompanied
 Recorded Kintore Rooms, 74 Queen Street, Edinburgh, ca March 1934
 M-206 Fagail Barraidh (Leaving Barra) (N. MacLean)

Bel 2085

⁸ DUNCAN McLELLAN

(? – ca 1958). (tenor vocal, unaccompanied).
 Recorded Kintore Rooms, 74 Queen Street, Edinburgh, late 1934
 M-306 Puirt-a-Beul; No. 1 - A Chur Nan Gobhar as a'
 Chreig; Cairistiona Chaimbeul; Mac-a-Phie (all trad)

Bel 2187

⁹ THE GREENOCK GAELIC CHURCH CHOIR

Allan MacLean, precentor. Morag Robertson, Marion Kennedy, Murdo Gilles, Duncan MacLellan, John MacLeod, Margaret Young, Helen MacDiarmid, Jean Falds (contralto), Effie Watson, Mairi MacLeod, Mary Wright, Dr. Iain MacDonald (cond)

Recorded Kintore Rooms, 74 Queen Street, Edinburgh, ca late November 1934 [a Saturday afternoon]
 M-364 Evan (Psalm 30, verses 4, 5 and 6) - Gaelic vocal

Bel 2159

Infantry (1905-1965) and, most famous of all, Pipe Major William Ross¹⁰ of the Scots Guards (1879-1966), known as “Pipe major to the World”. There were also, as one might expect. A variety of pipe bands, both military and civilian.

Violins (known colloquially as fiddles – from the German *fiedel*), accordions, concertinas, penny whistles, jews harps, mouth organs, ocarinas, clarsachs (celtic harps), dulcimers and, of course, bagpipes all made an appearance on this individualistic label. Violins and accordions pre-dominated as solo instruments but country dance bands became the best sellers. Violin player Jim Cameron¹¹ (1891-1974) and button accordion player Jimmy Shand (1908-2000) dominated the dance band sector up until the end of 1945 when Shand was signed up for the Parlophone label, where he became their best selling artist until the advent of the Beatles. In the post 1945 period one band, Jim Cameron & his Scottish Country Dance Band, dominated the Beltona catalogue. Many other famous bands recorded for Beltona but they are little known, if at all, outside Scotland, these included those of Annie Shand (1870-1936), Alec Sim (1870-1954), Angus Fitchet (1910-1998). Bobby MacLeod (1925-1971), Ian Powrie (1933-2011), Tim Wright (-1960), and others. I mentioned the non-professional status of many of Beltona’s artist from the period – The Cameron Men were all farm workers (Jim was a ploughman), Allan MacLean was a dock worker, Archie Grant a pattern maker, Alec Sim a piano tuner.

Up until 1933 all recording sessions had taken place in London with the exception of two that took place in Aberdeen (1932) and Perth(1933) but in 1933 the Edison Bell Company went out of business and the contract to produce Beltona records moved to the Crystalate Record Company, makers of Imperial and Rex records, and they decided to take a mobile recording van up to Edinburgh once or twice a year for a week of intensive recording activity.

Beltona appear to have survived the depression era, 1930 - 1937 in several ways. Firstly they issued large numbers of records aimed at niche markets, probably pressed in small quantities and recorded by the artist for a small flat fee with very few receiving royalty payments and, of course, most Scottish songs and dance tunes were in the public domain and not subject to copyright payment.. Secondly they were fortunate in having some artists whose records always seem to have sold in quite large quantities – Jimmy Shand, Jim Cameron, Harry Gordon and Bob Smith (1855-1947) being the principal ones. Bob Smith’s¹² Glasgow dialect sketch “The

¹⁰ **WILLIAM ROSS.**

(Kilmorack, 1879 – 1966). “Pipe Major William Ross” (bagpipes);

Recorded 62 Glengall Road, Peckham, London., April 1930

M-12769-1 Kantara to El Arish (march) (William Ferguson), The piper's
bonnet (strathspey); Miss Proud (reel), (both trad) Bel 1548

¹¹ **THE CAMERON MEN**

Jim Cameron (violin), William Cameron (violin), George Cameron (violin), Stewart Cameron (piano) (sometime credited as

“Violin Quartette” or as “Fiddle Quartette”)

Recorded Kintore Rooms, 74 Queen Street, Edinburgh, ca March 1934

M-159 Circassian circle; Original; Berchin(sic) Brig; Victoria hornpipe (all trad) Bel 20942217;

¹² **ROBERT JOHN “BOB” SMITH**

(Hamilton, 1885 – Glasgow, 1947).” “Bob Smith’s Ideal Band” . Tony Capaldi (Continental button accordion-1), Niel Gownie (Stroh violin), James B. Andrews (piano), Robert John Smith (drums/woodblocks-2), Charlie Knight (tenor vocal), unknown baritone vocal duet-3, speech by 3 males-4, liltng-5, whistling-6, hand clapping-7;

Recorded 62 Glengall Road, Peckham, London., April 1930

M-12795-1 The canal cruise - part 1 (John Park; B. Smith) -1,2,4,5,7 Bel 1541,

Canal Cruise” is reputed to have sold 80,000 copies and judging by the number of copies that have passed through my hands it does seem possible.



In March 1935 the Decca Record Company bought Crystalate and so the contract to record and press Beltona records passed, yet again, on to another company. Recording sessions in Edinburgh continued until September 1938 after which they were moved to the Decca Studios in West Hampstead, London. A Gaelic language 4000 x 10”¹¹ (25 cm) series was introduced in September 1935. Decca also re-issued some of its own recordings from the early 1930s under the Beltona name.

Beltona’s parent company John G. Murdoch & Co. Ltd., had been trading profitably for many years both as a manufacturing and retailing organisation but in the first two years of the war they suffered severe downturns in profits and, possibly because they couldn’t settle their account, the trade name passed in to the ownership of the Decca Record Company.,

As I have said, the label survived the war although they had only issued fifty-four new records in a period of nearly six years. Beltona had always issued some records aimed at the Irish market, some of this material being Irish American from the USA Vocalion label, and some native Irish, but the post war period saw a major increase in recordings aimed at Irish record buyers both in The United Kingdom and the Irish Republic.

The more informal aspects of many of their pre-war records didn’t survive and these post 1945 issues have a much more professional and polished approach than their predecessors. Most of the performers had had formal musical training and were familiar with Western Art Music in a way that would have been rare with most of the artists of the period 1928-45.

New artists appeared, principal among them being the singers Calum Kennedy¹³, Alasdair Gillies, Tom Wright, and Mathew Dickie and the accordion players Arthur Spink and Archie Duncan. Acknowledging changing taste Beltona recorded some Scottish traditional jazz bands and made a tentative excursion in to rock ‘n roll with a couple of discs by Scottish groups, but they didn’t pursue either genre with any enthusiasm, unlike their parent company Decca. The

¹³ **CALUM KENNEDY**

(Malcolm Martin Kennedy) (Orosay, 1927 – Aberdeen, 2006). Tenor vocal, accomp. unknown orchestra (possibly conducted by Bob Sharples)

Recorded 165 Broadhurst Gardens, London, Friday, 27th. January 1956

DR -21568-1 The road to Dundee (Willie Kemp)

Bel BL-2637

brand name made an appearance in Canada where, although the colours were different, the label design, catalogue number and all other details were duplicated and in Australia some items were released on the London-Beltona label.

Beltona issued its last single in May 1974 and its last vinyl issue in February 1979 but the end of the label came with the deletion of the last issues in 1983 after sixty years. Decca let the trade name registration lapse in 1995 but in 2005 it was re-registered by Ronnie Cairns, trading, as Sleepytown Records who then issued CDs of material from the Beltona catalogue that was out of copyright.

And so ended this successful but virtually unknown record label that for sixty years gave the mass Scottish record buying public its own native music played by its own sons and daughters.
