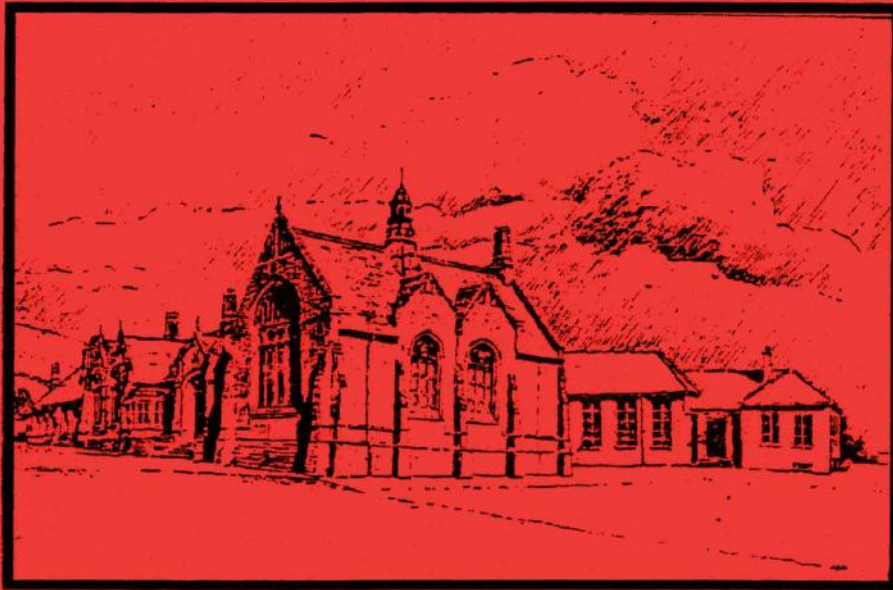




THE GOBANNIAN



King Henry VIII Grammar School, Abergavenny

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THE GOBANNIAN

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The magazine of the KHS Old Boys Association

CONTENTS

GENERAL SECTION

Contents	A 1
Editorial	A 2
The President's Address	A 3
Libya — Yesterday and Today	A 4
Sevenoaks School, This is Houston	A 7
If It's Tuesday ...	A 8
Engineering Project in South Lebanon	A11
Nostalgia Is What It Used To Be	A16
A Year of Flowers	A17
The Grass Isn't Always Greener	A20
Picture Gallery	A21
All At Sea—My Early Life	A24
A Dip Into The Archives	A27

THE SCHOOL SECTION

Head Teacher's report	B 1
School Newsletters	

THE ASSOCIATION SECTION

Secretary's Report	C 1
Statement of Accounts	C 2
Officers and Committee	C 3
Golf Report	C 4
Annual Dinner 2010	C 5
In Memoriam	C 7
Obituaries	C 8
Past Presidents	C10

Editorial

Welcome to The Gobannian 2011. My thanks once again to Old Boys who have contributed another selection of interesting articles.

We start this edition with a topical item from the Association archivist Bryn Seabourne. Bryn worked in Libya in the 1960s, and recounts the nation's history and how it changed under the influence of Colonel Gaddafi. The final outcome is still uncertain as the Gaddafi regime continues to crumble.

Graeme Lawrie is a new contributor, a science teacher a Sevenoaks school. He was responsible for putting together an exciting collaboration with NASA for his lucky students.

Regular contributor David Eastwood has a nostalgic piece about one of the first school trips abroad after World War II.

Engineer Robert McAdam has undertaken several volunteer project overseas thanks to the generosity of his employers. He tells us of his experiences in Lebanon, helping to rebuild schools in that war-torn country in 1982. Presented in the form of his diary entries made at the time, the story of danger mixed with humour springs from his pages.

But life isn't all so tense. Bringing us up do date and simultaneously back to the war years, the Old Boys report on their annual summer trip, this time to the Forest of Dean and the Foresters War Exhibition at the Dean Heritage Centre. Spam Fritters anyone?

John Barnie is another regular contributor who recently wrote a delightful little book of poems and photographs of the flowers found near his home in Aberystwyth. In this article he gives us a selection of his poems as he talks us through the creation of this literary gem.

Haydn Gear is a retired art teacher who kicked off his career in Stepney Green in London's east end, home of the Kray twins among other frightening neighbours. Haydn tells us about life in this environment and the pleasures of returning home.

Stuart Rogers is a keen amateur photographer who shares with us some of his favourite photographs. We don't get enough of these hobbyist articles in The Gobannian, so send them in for the next edition!

We were delighted to hear from David Ball, an Old Boy who settled down in Canada after completing what he admits was a disappointing academic stay in KHGS. David only recently rediscovered the Association, and as well as sending us this account of his early career as a navigation offer says he will be attending this year's annual dinner.

We have lots of treasures buried in our archives, and in a second contribution to this magazine archivist Bryn Seabourne dug out a couple of items from 1964. We hope to bring you more archived stories in future editions.

So once again many thanks to Old Boys for bringing us an interesting collection of interesting and varied stories. Enjoy!



Carl Davis
Editor

THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

When I was asked by David Spencer I admit to feeling surprise as I never expected to be the President of the Old Boys. I certainly qualified as an Old Boy having first walked through the school gates in 1947 into a first form of 36 pupils, all with our new caps and ties. Little did I know at the time that I was entering an important phase of my life, as the years at King Henry would turn out to be an experience I would never forget.

I was a proud Oppidan always in opposition to those rival Rusticans whom I seem to remember did better at sports than we Oppidans, especially on the cross country. I lived within 10 minutes walk from school which whilst being handy in lots of ways was a disappointment in bad weather as I could never use distance from school as an excuse not to attend.

In my year as President there have been events I look back on with great pleasure, starting with the Rugby matches against the Irish school, two games played in the best of spirits and I am pleased to say both won by King Henry. The sports day (which I looked forward to being somewhat of an athletics aficionado) turned out to be a victim of the weather as only about 3 races took place before all the youngsters disappeared as if by magic as the heavens opened. We were told by Huw Jenkins that due to Health and Safety the grass was deemed too dangerous to run on. I would love to have heard Mr 'Percy' Porter's reaction to that! No such problems with the cricket as we were blessed with fine weather and a victory for the Old Boys; the school had them at 10 for 3 at one stage and were very unlucky to lose. Huw Jenkins informs me he has virtually the same side for next year, so Old Boys watch out. Once again a big thank you to Abergavenny Cricket Club for allowing us to play on which must be one of the most attractive grounds in Wales.

After much discussion the Old Boys annual outing was to the Dean Heritage Centre and the wartime theme was embraced by all present although the thought of eating Snoek was a step too far for most of us. The comradeship and humour shown on these outings emphasise what being involved with the Association is all about, and long may it continue. I would urge any Old Boy to come on one of our trips, you would be most welcome.

The Golf day was another successful event, ably organised by Mike Powell, and about 35 Old Boys had a good days golf and an excellent meal. I am afraid I can't tell you who won as I seemed to be handing out golf umbrellas, tee shirts, golf balls, cups to so many people that I lost track of who won what. The judging of the joke competition was a hard task but Mike Powell was a worthy winner.

It has been a good year and as always the secretary and committee have been very supportive. The continuing success of the Association is a vital part of life in Abergavenny and I would say to anyone reading this who is not a member come and join us, and help to ensure that the tradition of the Old Boys will carry on into the future.

Sam Cole
President, KHS OBA



LIBYA - YESTERDAY AND TODAY

The Association's archivist Bryn Seabourne spent some time in Libya during the late 1960s and visited the country again about ten years later. He traces the country's history from early times to the present day from a uniquely personal perspective.

I taught English, through the British Council in Tripoli, between 1966 and 1968. It was full time in the then leading government boys' secondary school. This was shortly before the coup which brought Gaddafi to power. We returned in 1977 for a holiday. It was really a different country.

Libya is the fourth largest country in Africa and the seventeenth in the world. The population in 1969 was around 2 million. Before the recent bloodshed and exodus it was about 6.5 million. Life expectancy then was claimed to be relatively high. Basically the habitable area is a narrow strip of terrain on the Mediterranean coast, with some high land in the east, and south of Tripoli. Tripoli, Benghazi, Misurata, Beida are the main urban centres. The rest is desert which continues to encroach. The far east coast is notable for the huge oil and gas terminals, such as Marsa Brega. The desert oilfields have their own cosmopolitan communities. Otherwise the scattered oases would appear to be tribal still. The biggest town in the desert is Sebha. Rainfall is sparse and unpredictable. There are no permanent watercourses and there are often destructive winds. Temperatures, particularly in the south, can be punishing.

In 1969 it became an Islamic republic. The dominant language and culture is Arabic, but, as with much of North Africa, a large part of the population is of Berber extraction. Zidane the footballer, and probably Gaddafi himself, is the type. Before World War II there was the usual sprinkling of people from around the Mediterranean, including Jews, and a large number of Italians even after 1945.

Until 1953, there was no real independent Libya. The Greek word originally referred very loosely to all Africa. There are in the east and in the Fezzan/south sculptures and paintings from prehistory. The area then came into the sphere of influence of Greece, Carthage, Rome, Byzantium, the Ottomans. Italy and, finally, the victorious allies. In classical times the whole habitable coastal region was much deeper and more productive. It was a valuable part of the Roman Empire for various foodstuffs and animals. Overgrazing, neglect, pastoralism, climate change and the destruction of local fauna progressively impoverished the interior over the centuries.

In the 1960s, apart from the huge petroleum, gas and mineral reserves, which were beginning to be seriously exploited, it was a very poor country. Olive oil, esparto grass and WW2 scrap metal were among the major exports. And as in all third world countries, there was a stark contrast between town and tribal country life. Each of the occupying powers had in turn left extraordinary traces of their presence. Beyond Tripoli are the magnificent classical sites of Leptis Magna, Appolonia and Cyrene. Tripoli was Carthaginian/Roman Oea, with, to the west of it, the lovely Roman port of Sabratha. Both have witnessed heavy fighting

lately. The Christians left splendid basilicas, the Ottomans beautiful classical mosques, and the Italians impressive neo-fascist architecture and sculpture, as well as substantial churches and colonists' farmhouses.



A splendid Roman mosaic of the Pharos lighthouse from the Qasr museum on the eastern Libya coast

In early modern times. Tripoli had been a haven for pirates. In the early 1800s the Americans bombarded it in order to free Europeans hijacked at sea. The reference is found in that US marine marching song – "From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli". So Reagan was not the first American to wield the big stick.

In 1911, as part of the scramble for an African empire by the new European powers, the King of Italy annexed what became the colony of Libia. The hold was consolidated by despatching thousands of colonists, prospectors and carpetbaggers, mainly from the desperate south of Italy, to settle and develop a part of the new Roman Empire. There was resistance, mainly in the tribal areas. There is a quite convincing film starring Anthony Quinn as the martyred rebel Omar Mukhtar. After WW2 and the collapse of the Italian empire, British influence was high in the new Libya. One king was installed in 1953, head of a constitutional monarchy. This was Idris, from an eastern clan that had had a good war record, the Senussi. It was a united kingdom of 3 provinces – Cyrenaica in the east, Tripolitania in the west and the Fezzan in the desert south. I think the French had a share in the latter for some time. British help was sought in training new armed forces, setting up a constitution and generally introducing ideas of democracy. This was deep in the period of the cold war and of tensions within the Arab world, rooted in the

Israel/Palestine issue. So Libya was a prime strategic location, and the source of essential energy reserves for the West. Britain retained training areas for its forces and RAF stations. The Americans had a huge airbase at Wheelus Field, close to Tripoli. And undoubtedly the Libyan regime of the day listened favourably to what Washington, London and the big oil companies had to say.

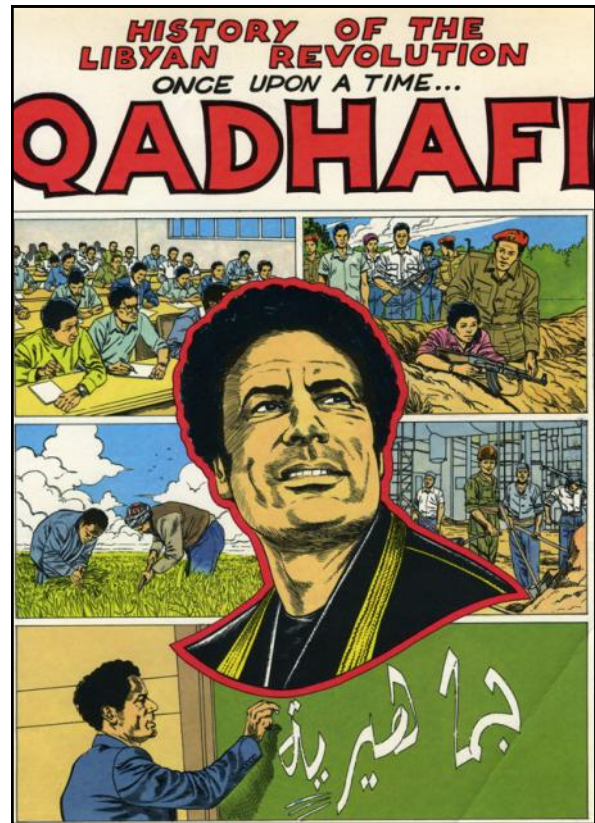
In 1966 the signs were quite encouraging. A relatively free press had developed. A serious attempt was being made to set up a modern education system. Social services were founded, and on the surface at least, things were positive. But the undercurrents of disaffection were quite obvious. As a teacher it was not hard for me to sense the anger in students about corruption in high places, the helplessness they felt over the Palestine impasse and the hostility to the US in particular. The British were more trusted and reliable, it seemed. Less of a threat.



Our old Morris Minor at Cyrene in 1968

Things came to a head during the Seven Days War. The humiliating capitulation of big brother Egypt, the permanent loss of Palestinian territory, the collusion of the West – all were hard to bear. The authorities clamped down on demonstrations, many of them in favour of the PLO, and for a time martial law operated. Western dependants were evacuated, as usual, but it was all quite orderly. I stayed behind. School shortly reopened. It was weird marking end of term exams in the staffroom with others as we listened to reports of the war and its aftermath on BBC World Service. (Incidentally, it was while working at the school that I first found there are a lot of Arabic speakers who are Christian, not Muslim. For instance the teachers of French were Lebanese. They, like all immigrant workers, were treated as second class citizens, but they tolerated that for the money.)

Outside we had to be sensible, and it was a little chancy going to collect some younger colleagues from their country school to bring them into the more secure city. I never felt personally threatened. In fact, my students were helpful and surprisingly calm. But things would never be the same, and since then I have



Once Upon a Time -
Gaddafi's own version of Libya's "glorious" revolution

always been disturbed by irresponsible reporting and political posturing during international crises. This was also the case when we lived in Pakistan, of course.

King Idris went into exile, and Gaddafi began with programmes of nationalisation. Western bases were closed. Traces of the non-Arab recent past were systematically erased. He proposed fanciful unions with other Muslim states, particularly Egypt. All were short-lived. He interfered in sub-Saharan politics and funded terrorism in the West. Vast amounts of money went on improving the road system and building modern airports. More importantly, he created a closed police state, regularly cited for crimes against humanity. A series of outrages, particularly against the US, brought years of sanctions. Clearly Libya remained commercially important to western countries throughout the Colonel's period, particularly to Italy just across the water.

When the more crippling sanctions were lifted in 1999, outside business returned once more to exploit – in both senses – Libyan oil and other natural resources. Much of this was obvious during our second stay, before Gaddafi became acceptable to the West again and tourism was resumed to the wonderful classical sites. For us there was no direct flight to Libya. We were bussed from Tunisia to Tripoli. There were frequent armed road blocks. We had a Libyan guide/minder, as well as the excellent English tour company rep. Everywhere there were signs of neglect in "the rubbish capital of the world" and roads were littered with abandoned machinery because "you couldn't get the parts".

There was a large mosque building programme. Street and road signs were in Arabic only. Green was the prevailing colour. In the east we passed monstrous vehicles and components for the massive civil engineering project to draw water from a huge lake below the Sahara. The imposing Italian triumphal arch at the Cyrenaica – Tripolitania boundary had been vandalised and western visitors were still a curiosity, especially in the countryside. There was too a strong hint of tension between the provinces. When my back was turned the Colonel had had his home village of Sirte transformed into a small city of about 70,000 and transferred parliament and the civil service there. Tripoli, with about 1 million people, remained the nominal capital. Before this, Sirte was a nowhere place on the Gulf, notoriously dangerous in the days of sail both for freak weather and piracy.



The grave of a Welsh airman at Benghazi British Military Cemetery - "What he could do, he did".

Some striking new archaeological finds had been made, but it was largely as before, since Gaddafi and co were not interested in a non-Islamic past. There was the same old red tape and the signature Italian colonists' bungalows – now presumably recycled – still dotted along the coastal landscape. We visited some places new to us. Memorable were the beautiful Jebel Akhdar hills - delightful in spring - a wonderful newly excavated Roman villa on the coast and Gaddafi's symbolic tent on display in our hotel. I didn't get as far as Tobruk. But particularly in our early years in Libya, the evidence of the passage of Allied forces through it, including cheery messages, was very moving. Then later, so was the Benghazi British war cemetery.



A German tank at Marble Arch during Italy's colonisation of Libya marking the border between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. Opened in 1937, it was demolished by Gaddafi in 1970.

I was genuinely surprised that the Arab spring has led to the Colonel's downfall. He seemed a fixture, and however much of a loose cannon, cunning and ruthless enough to turn his coat endlessly. I was almost as surprised that it all began in Tunisia. It is remarkable how little coverage there has been in English language media through decades of another dictatorship.

At present the fate of what, for a comparatively short time, has been the independent country of Libya is uncertain. It will always be a very important geo-political focus and source of essential primary materials. But questions remain. What kind of democracy will be possible in an Islamic culture: how to rebuild after so much war damage: the fate of the refugees and migrants: the chances of reconciliation and reconstruction after a bitter civil war: whether western powers will react with respect to the new alignments within Libya and the wider Islamic world.



A statue removed from the top of the triumphal neo fascist Marble Arch which was 31 metres high

SEVENOAKS SCHOOL, THIS IS HOUSTON

Graeme Lawrie grew up in and around Abergavenny. He entered KHS in 1989 and left in 1996 to do a computing and science degree at Staffordshire University, followed by a year studying teaching at Nottingham University. After teaching for six years in the Midlands he took up a head of department post at Sevenoaks in Kent. Four years later he became Head of Science and Technology with responsibility for Design Technology, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, ICT and Sports science. In his second year in this role he has run a successful second Science Week, this time on the topic of the International Space Station

In the spring term of 2010 pupils from Year 7 through to the Lower Sixth entered a competition to put questions to the crew of the orbiting International Space Station. To their delight they won, and became the first school to speak directly to the astronauts on video links via satellite and mission control.

On 20 January 2011 a satellite minivan was parked outside the school and Houston mission control was on standby. Dr Nicholas Patrick, a mission specialist from NASA, spoke to a thrilled audience for half an hour before the link was initiated.

Around 400 pupils and staff watched as the astronauts, led by Captain Scott Kelly, sat facing the video camera 238 miles above the school. Bobbing up and down in the weightless conditions, they answered the questions which ranged from queries about the harmful effects of radiation to the inevitable question of how they use the toilet in space. For 17 minutes the audience gained insights into life onboard a space station. At the end of the session the crew signed off with "Have a great day there at Sevenoaks" before departing with a display of somersaults.

Before and after the live link, Dr Patrick gave a presentation about his experiences as an astronaut. A graduate of Cambridge and MIT whose experience includes over 638 space hours, he made life in space and the training come alive. Students learned about logistical issues (such as the effects of gravity), simple facts (such as the types of food eaten onboard) and the pleasures of looking out of the window at the Earth during brief moments of free time.

For those considering a career like Dr Patrick's, he explained that the vast majority of astronauts are Engineering graduates, with Physics coming in second place. Some astronauts studied other subjects at university such as Biology or Economics. Asked about the personal qualities of a good astronaut, he listed technical expertise, reliability, leadership skills and perseverance. He added that, given the nature of the workplace, you also need to be forgiving and 'good to

Dr Patrick covered a range of interesting facts. The astronauts eat tortillas, not bread. In space all time is recorded in Greenwich Mean Time (but not British Summer Time). Contrary to popular opinion you can't see the Great Wall of China from space, but you can see the launch pad. The ISS travels at 230 miles above the earth and at 17,500 mph, circumnavigating the globe over a dozen times a day.



Pupils commented that it was "an experience most students don't even get a chance to dream of... absolutely phenomenal" and "It was surreal, inspiring, fantastic, weird... everyone present was enthralled." Those who put questions to the ISS crew acknowledged that they were extremely lucky to have had such an opportunity.

Dr Patrick said, "This was the first time in my 12 years as an astronaut that I've been able to witness a live link during one of my presentations." He added that it had been fun and a treat to see the crew members he had worked with in Houston.

Looking back over the day's events, Graeme was well satisfied. He said "I've been planning for this for eight months now. To see the reaction of the kids was fantastic. It couldn't be any better. That's why I went into teaching, and why I want to continue teaching".



Left and above: Dr Patrick conducts the International space station link session with the aid of a giant screen.

IF IT'S TUESDAY

David Eastwood (KHGS 1955-1963) worked for Booker Tate Ltd as a tropical agriculturalist in many parts of the world, and is now a part time senior advisor. He remembers one of the first school trips abroad in the post-war era.

Belgium? I imagine that most people, if they think of Belgium at all, think of Brussels, Beer, Chocolate, Waffles and those ten famous Belgians (Poirot, Adolphe Sax, Hergé, the lovely Kim Klijsters, the rather less lovely Eddy Merckxx, the Muscles from Brussels Jean-Claude van Damme, Django Reinhardt and all those others far too well known to need mention here). But after this what? For me it was the knowledge that I had in 1959 as a fourth-former visited Belgium and Holland as one of a large party of KHGS pupils in what must have been one of the first, if not the first, of such trips after the end of World War II. Apart from this knowledge and wisps of memories, that - for many years - was that.

All of this changed in 2007 when my father in one of his (infrequent) bursts of house clearance energy came across a box of 8mm cine-films, all of which had interesting, but cryptic titles and among which was one labelled simply "David/Belgium". This reminded me that I had indeed taken some film on the trip, the first photographs of any kind that I had ever attempted, and that these had been spliced together, viewed a few times and then forgotten.

The projection equipment had long since joined the camera on a one way trip to the civic amenity tip, but one of the many entrepreneurs willing to transfer such cinematic relics to DVD willingly obliged and the images were seen for the first time in more than 50 years. Unfortunately I then binned the original film not realising that even Windows 7 combined with Photoshop would one day be unable to extract good images from the disc, hence the very poor quality images submitted now to The Gobannian.

The whole timed-out to 9 minutes and 30 seconds, presumably 3 films as my fingers appear twice at separate times as the result of my fumbling efforts at changing the reels. There is something to see almost every second, in very small part because I managed to get exposures at least approximately correct, but mainly due to the quality of Kodak's chemistry and manufacturing processes which had preserved everything for 50+ years under less than ideal storage conditions.



Lunch for Viv Bevan, Clive Jenkins, Richard and Robert Wall

What is to be seen is quite another matter as I made the mistake of moving the camera to film still objects rather than focusing on moving objects and people. Apart from London and Dover there are no clear indications as to where the images were actually taken. Fortunately my fixation with filming buildings and statues coupled with some Google-research to identify the buildings and statues has helped me to reconstruct the trip – to my satisfaction at least.



Group includes Phil Williams, Mike Nicholas and Alan Parry

I still don't know when we made the trip. It seems likely that it was during the 1959 Easter Holiday, sometime between 25 March and 14 April, as we did visit a seaside resort with beach huts galore but with few people on the beach and even fewer in the water suggesting a Spring rather than a Summer visit.

The first stage is simple, Abergavenny to London. How we travelled I have no idea but the guards at Buckingham Palace and Nelson's Column are unmistakable. Then onto Dover – how? No idea, but we obviously boarded a ferry and off to sea leaving the harbour and some towering white cliffs behind us. At this point I was obviously joined by some fellow travellers among whom are Phil Williams (Sportsman Supreme), Mike Nicholas and Ray Woods who were clearly enjoying the trip.



Jan Francis

I imagine that we landed at Oostende (this is no longer possible as the port is for cargo only) and then travelled to Bruges where by happy chance I have a lovely (unintended) shot of the bell tower under repair, some pretty views of the canals along which we cruised with a shot of John Jones' head of copper hair beautifully captured in Kodacolour as we approached a dramatically low bridge. while Robin Phillips appears later on a similar bridge as a very slim, camera-toting "Man in Black".



John Jones



Robin Phillips on a bridge over a canal in Bruges

Bruges has given me two memories. The first is of me smiling at a pretty waitress (who has in memory grown ever prettier as the years have passed) at a cafe and nearly dissolving into jelly when she smiled back. In hindsight this must have been a smile at the temerity of such a callow youth but perhaps too she was being kind. At the same time her hands were full of large glasses containing an interesting golden liquid which the labels on the glasses told me was called "Stella Artois". Quite what this might be I could not imagine. No such problem for Phil, (my second memory), as elsewhere he was sampling this (as I later learnt) delightful liquid. Unfortunately Phil was CAUGHT and denounced in front of the assembled party with all the fire of a Victorian temperance rally. The gist of this was that "beer is best (left alone)" which only whetted the appetites of others to emulate Phil's explorations, sooner rather than later!

With these various pleasantries completed we headed off to Ghent, with a heroic statue, no doubt relating to good news from somewhere or other, clearly identifying the place. Regrettably nothing else comes to mind about Ghent.

After Ghent where? Some anonymous canals are followed by numerous images that internal evidence suggests must be Madurodam, the 1:25 scale village at Scheveningen Den Haag. If it is then it must have been quite a long trip through boring countryside to get there. I am persuaded that it is as there is an image of Ray Woods giving scale to a model tower, with the real tower in the background, which was echoed many years later by an almost identical image (without Ray) posted on the village website. Here, too, I must have belatedly realised that it might be useful to have more people in the film but with a singular lack of school spirit seem, for some reason, to have focussed on a group of girls with short(ish) skirts rather than my fellow travellers.



Ray Wood and others at the model village in Holland

And so away to Blankenberge, an easily identified seaside resort. The beach was empty (except for a wartime DWK landing-craft that had been converted to a beach tourer) bordered to one side by a sea equally empty (except for a small fishing boat bouncing from left to right across the screen with its single funnel puffing clouds of smoke) and on the other by row upon row of empty beach huts. Many of these carried names, presumably of the owners, as it is difficult to understand otherwise why a beach hut should be called, for example, "Helene". The images of the empty beach and sea are then replaced by a long shot that demonstrates as clearly as anything that could be produced by Bill Oddie or David Attenborough that Belgian sea gulls fly very efficiently – or at least did so 50 years ago.



Converted landing craft on the beach at Blankenberge



Statue (commemorating who?) in Ghent

The other item of interest in Blankenberge, especially for those of us who had read “Casino Royale” (first published not long before) was the casino. What a disappointment! This was not a place of beguiling sophistication but rather a displaced concrete railway terminus brightened only by a few flags fluttering in the breeze, a cold breeze if the passers-by clothing is anything to go-by. Of course we could judge from the outside only and Google suggests that this soulless box has since been replaced by a much more glamorous casino in which it must be a pleasure to lose one’s money.



The splendid Atomium, one of the sights we never got to see

Did we then go to Brussels and if so for how long? My (always fallible) memory suggests that we did if only for a short time. But there is no shot of the Atomium and I am sure that had I seen it I would have filmed it.

Certainly I had enough film, as is shown by numerous shots of Oostende harbour as we sailed-out (presumably for Dover) with the twin spires of St. Petrus and St. Paulus Church towering over the wharf-side buildings as we pulled away, with a very small craft powered by an optimistic oarsman rocking violently in our wake, followed by some rousing shots of an empty sea.

At the last, too there are images of Richard and Robert Wall enjoying their sandwiches on the ferry flanked by Cliff Jenkins and Viv Bevan (even then a more brilliant photographer than I have ever managed to be) and Jan Francis giving a huge “thumbs-up”. And wait – who is this with head on hand, feet on bench and sound asleep? Why it is games teacher Gwyn Jones – worn out from marshalling so many boisterous charges and enjoying some well earned rest.



Gwyn Jones takes a well-earned break

The film ends on that happy note but I’m sure that I would not be alone in saying that the trip had a lasting effect. At a time when there were no low-cost airlines, when television meant a single black and white channel and computers, if they existed outside science fiction, were as big as a house and less powerful than a Blackberry is today, it was a revelation to see a world outside the United Kingdom and to begin to realise, however hazily, that there was so much more of that world that could and should be seen. I suspect that it was a suspicion that the trip might have had such a beneficial effect (possibly more so than might a similar trip today?) that let Mr Jones sleep soundly knowing that the job had been well done by him and his fellows (was Harold Ashton among them?) to whom I now say a very belated but nonetheless sincere “thank you for all your efforts – they have indeed been much appreciated”.

AN ENGINEER'S DIARY - SOUTH LEBANON 1982

Rob McAdam (Mac) was in the grammar school from 1956 until 1963. He started his engineering career with Cwmbran Development Corporation. His employers were generous in releasing him for a number of overseas engineering projects, including a schools rebuilding programme in South Lebanon in 1982. The following story is told in the form of an introduction followed by his summarised diary entries recorded at the time.

In the late nineteen seventies there was a flow of refugees from Vietnam to the east coast of Malaya. The government wanted to keep these 'Boat people' separate from the local population. They directed many of them to an island called Pilau Bidong. The island was small and steep with little fresh water and few buildings. Water, food, medicines and building materials were shipped from the mainland. However, expertise was needed to organise the refugees, many of whom had suitable skills, into teams to build accommodation, washing and toilet blocks, clinics and schools. These were needed quickly with tens of thousands of refugees flooding in.

There was an obvious need for the engineers' expertise in this type of urgent but short term work. Jack Muggeridge and Peter Guthrie were working for consultants nearby and offered to help with considerable success. On their return to Britain they helped to set up the register of engineers for disaster relief {REDR}. This is a charity which interviews and trains engineers in relief work. I thought that I might be able to help and my Chief engineer agreed to my being seconded for up to three months once every three years if requested. More importantly my wife Jean, who was expecting our first child, also agreed.

I was accepted to join REDR in 1982 and at the end of October I took leave and attended a training course for Royal Engineers at Brompton barracks, Chatham. The army officers expected to learn from us about the third world and we learnt the skills of the army engineers including our building a full sized Bailey bridge. We all stayed in the officers' quarters, I had the temporary rank of major and even shared a batman – a lady. The week gave me an understanding of the military which was to prove invaluable in the next few weeks.

After a weekend in London with Jean I returned to work and four days later received a phone call from Jack Muggeridge asking if I was able to go to the Lebanon immediately for a month. My Chief and the County Council agreed and more importantly so did Jean. There followed a rush to tidy up my workload, extend my county insurance to cover the Middle East and to have lots of injections.

I learn that I was going with the United Nations welfare and relief agency for Palestinian refugees {UNWRA}. I would be interviewed and briefed in Vienna and if successful given a UN {Blue} passport. I read all I could about the country and its politics.

The Israelis had invaded the south of the Lebanon a few months before to push the Palestinian refugees displaced from Israel further from its border. The Israelis, supported by Lebanese "Christian militias", extended the invasion and were currently besieging West Beirut. The Palestinians hoped to return to their homeland and were tending to live separately from the local population in towns, called camps, of more than ten thousand people. These were as well built as the

Lebanese towns but had been progressively fortified as a result of attacks and air raids. There were UN troops on the border who had been brushed aside and UNWRA with a mandate to provide aid and civil support to the refugees.

In Vienna I was told that I was taking over from the UN engineer based in Tyre looking after the south area next to the Israel border. The team included two volunteer Swedish Royal Engineer officers, two Palestinian engineers and a number of foremen and supervisors for the local workforce. There were a few other engineers helping from time to time including a British Royal Engineer officer.

There were three camps in the Tyre area with a total population of over forty thousand. The camps were real towns with mosques, churches, roads, schools, drains, clinics, shops and other public buildings. To fortify the camps, the roads had been made narrow, there were huge bomb shelters everywhere and below ground an extensive network of tunnels.

What I found was utter devastation. Most of the roads had been cleared of rubble but I found no building undamaged. Most were destroyed or unstable. The whole area was covered with broken reinforced concrete debris. The water supply was destroyed in many areas. Medical care was provided from temporary clinics manned by very brave dispensers. Food and aid was coming through distribution centres. Munitions were everywhere including bomblets from cluster bombs. Landmines were rare in the camps and their locations had been marked by the Israelis. Some of the thick concrete shelters were badly damaged. They could hold several hundred people each and smelt revolting.

The Israelis provided some security but they could not be everywhere and there were still some bands of dangerous militias.

Wed 17 November We were up at six to take Jean to Brough to catch the train to Leeds. Jean was very sad. I returned home and finished packing, then drove back to the station to leave the car for Jean on her return. In London I bought some detailed maps of the Lebanon from Stamfords and stayed the night with relatives. There was a small panic when I tried to ring Jean but she was at her pre-natal class.

Thurs 18 After breakfast I travelled to Heathrow and caught the Austrian Airlines flight at ten to Vienna. I was met by a driver who took me to a hotel and then to the UN building. I met several UN delegates, got some money and went for dinner with a delegate and his family. I then caught the Urban train back into Vienna and walked around the old city.

Fri 19 I had an early start without breakfast and travelled into the UN. There was a medical examination followed by some food. After a couple of interviews and some paperwork I had a very good

lunch with the administration people. I was getting to know the work and they were learning about me. I rang Jean and collected my tickets and UN passport. I walked and visited beautiful buildings in the city in the evening.

Sat 20 I was up at 4.00 and I got a taxi to the airport. We flew to Damascus and then to Beirut. It was slightly misty and I saw little from the air. Peter the engineer for Sidon met me and we went to the Mayflower Hotel, a favourite with the UN. His Land Rover was Arabic registered, mine would be Israeli registered. I would not be able to drive into Beirut in mine nor could he into Israel in his. We swapped when necessary. We drove around the city. In some places the devastation from fighting and the bombardment was staggering. Later we went to the cinema to watch French films.

Sun 21 In the early morning I walked around the city discreetly taking photographs. Martyrs Square had been like Trafalgar Square but everything was full of bullet and shell holes. The 'Green line' between West and East Beirut was the great trench that formed part of the historical defences. The Israelis controlled the east. I travelled south with Peter. first to Sidon and then on to Tyre. I booked into the small Elissa hotel in the old city. It was less damaged than most but there seemed to be few guests and those seemed suspicious. We briefly visited a camp. Tyre had clearly been damaged by fighting but the camp was devastated. However lots of people were living there.

Mon 22 This morning was a festival day. I met Andy who I was replacing and with Peter we drove into the Souk or market area of old Tyre. It was packed with people. Suddenly we heard two aircraft swooping low and opening fire. We three dived under the Land Rover. The planes were strafing the beach for effect. We got up and remembered that the Land Rover contained 22 gallons of fuel. The souk was deserted. Everyone had gone into the underground passageways left by the crusaders. We looked around the distribution centre, the camps and visited the French administrator in charge of our work in Tyre. I met Erik and Ake the Swedish volunteer military engineers and went around the camps with them. Peter returned to Sidon and I had dinner with Andy in a restaurant in Tyre overlooking the sea. We returned to Rachidiye camp to look at problems and I walked the few miles back to my hotel along the beach at the waters edge to avoid munitions. On the way I called on the Swiss in the International Committee of the Red Cross house to introduce myself and to have a beer.

Tues 23 Andy collected me from the hotel. We visited the distribution centre and the three camps meeting more staff. I managed to change some dollars into Lebanese pounds. In the afternoon I inspected some drainage works in Rachidiye. In the evening I walked around the historic ruins in Tyre before Mamoud, the Palestinian engineer, called for a drink and a chat.

Wed 24 One of the supervisors came for a chat at breakfast. Peter came and drove Andy and me around all the projects for Andy's last day. I tried to make sure that I knew all that was needed about all the work. At lunchtime we had a drink and a brief meal with the independent contractors. They seemed to drink a lot of Black Label whisky. I took Andy to the

Litani river bridge where he was collected by another UN vehicle to start his journey home. I went back to the school in El Bass and had a row about progress. In the evening I went into the souk and bought a cheap radio for £8 which would allow me to listen to the news and developments in the Lebanon on the BBC World Service. In the evening I went to the local movies. It was good fun, very sociable and the subtitles were in English.

Thurs 25 My first day in charge. I went to the office and with the schools superintendent visited the schools towards Sidon. Last night there had been shooting and star shells towards Rachidiye. More Israeli patrols and roadblocks than usual were in evidence. Some were obstructive but when I talked to the most senior officer I could find, he was usually helpful and explained his position. We reached a working understanding. In the afternoon I got my Land Rover from the administrator and was more independent. The drawback was that I had to disable it each night to prevent it being stolen. I took Mamoud to Rachideye to make a schedule of the bomb shelters listing those destroyed, those that needed removal and those I was going to ignore. Then I drove to Borj ech Chimali to meet Erik and Ake. I told Erik that I was uncomfortable being in charge because in real life he had a more responsible job than mine and he had been working in the camps much longer. He said that he preferred the official arrangement but would take responsibility for the disposal of munitions to avoid me blowing myself or anybody else up. In practice he did this with the Israelis. We became good friends for the short time we worked together. We then agreed a contract with Diab to supply good aggregate for our work and later went for an evening drink and a chat about Sweden and their army life. They preferred to drive back to their quarters at the Swedish hospital in the UN army base in Naqoura before dark. It was getting colder.

Fri 26 There was a meeting with Diab at seven to formalise the aggregates contract. Then I drove to Sidon for a meeting with Peter at 8.30. Communications were so poor that we agreed most things face to face. I drove around one of his camps, Eine Hilwe, above Sidon which was too militant for us to stop more than briefly. I looked at the harbours, the castles and the historic Arab and Ottoman buildings. I thought I was having problems with my camera but it seemed to be OK again. One of the staff was leaving and so we had a celebration at the flat and a party at the nurses' home.

Sat 27 I stayed at the flat and very early left for Tyre. It was raining at the Litani bridge and we were held up by the Israelis because of some shooting. I thought that they were being obstructive and said so in no uncertain terms. The nearest soldier replied to me in a strong Liverpool accent and apologised. He said the threat was real. I said that I had lived in Manchester and who was he supporting. He said he lived in Everton and was doing his Israeli military service. If he was on the bridge again when I was held up he would have a chat and direct me to the head of the queue. I got into the Tyre office and caught up with paperwork. Then I went to my hotel to freshen up before visiting Rachidiye and El Bass to check on work. Later I met with Erik and Ake for a drink and chat. In the evening I went to watch a film entitled "Bang Bong". There was no choice but it was quite funny if ironic for Tyre.

Sun 28 Yesterday Erik and Ake agreed with me that we should have a day off. I got up very early and made my own breakfast as usual out of the fridges in the hotel basement. I drove to Naqoura. Erik needed to do something else so we left my land rover in the army compound and travelled in Ake's car. My vehicle had UN signs on the sides, the bonnet and the roof. It even had a UN flag flying above the roof. Ake's car was much more discreet and would not cause comment in Israel. We drove across the border at Ras Naqoura where tanks were positioned to deter attack. We drove on down the coast road stopping briefly at Nahariyya, Acre, Mount Carmel, Atlit and Caesarea. We then turned inland for Nazareth and Tiberius where we stopped for a late lunch overlooking the Sea of Galilee. We travelled on to Caperneum and Safad before taking the Northern road back to Naqoura. We had a great dinner with Erik in the Swedish hospital before I drove carefully in the dark back to Tyre. I tried to avoid driving at night because of security, but this road was frequently patrolled.

Mon 29 In the distribution centre at 7.00 there was chaos. Bridi and Diab were trying to make some repairs and distribute aid at the same time. I told the administrator what I had seen. He also sent off for some more living allowance for me. I went to Rachidiye in time to see some old bombs being exploded although I thought that the Israelis were holding up work for longer than necessary. I was grateful that Erik was looking after munitions. Later Erik and I were invited to dinner with Hassan's family. He arranged a traditional meal around a common series of dishes. It was delicious and I learnt that the water bowls were for washing my hands between dishes and not for drinking. In the hotel there was electricity in the evening so I retreated into the bathroom to avoid the light showing outside and wrote a letter to Jean for someone to take back.

Tues 30 The senior nurse called and asked me to check on her car. Some bolts needed tightening but she was rightly concerned about breaking down on her own away from friendly help. She was involved in identifying bogus medicines as well as supporting local medical staff. This could put her at risk. I spent the rest of the day inspecting work in the distribution centre, El Bass and Rachidiye. There was a lot of military activity. Mirage and Phantom jets flew overhead releasing flares to distract missiles. In the distance we could see helicopters and hear gunfire and explosions. Peter arrived to see how we were managing. Later Erik joined us and we had a drink and a chat at Hassan's who knew more about the fighting from his friends.

Wed 1 December The rain showers had stopped but we could not get into Rachidiye until 10.00 because the Israelis were sweeping through the camp. In the distribution centre I found that the debris had been cleared so I could design repairs. I went to the secondary school in El Bass to meet the teachers keen to get the children off the streets and away from risk. It was a standard UN reinforced concrete school block of three stories with external stairs. There were 750 pupils in 50-pupil classrooms. It had been used as a fortress but there was little damage. I asked that the stairs be shored up with timber just in case. At lunchtime there was a farewell barbeque for Alia organised by Hassan and Mamoud. I had to leave at 3.30 to drive to Sidon, swap my Land Rover for one

with Arabic plates and drive on to the High Commissioner's reception at the Bristol Hotel in Beirut. The food and conversations were very good. While there we heard that Walid Jumblat, the Druse leader, had been slightly injured by a car bomb in Hamra. He could be important in any peace process. Erik and I took turns driving back to Tyre.

Thurs 2 I got the repairs to the distribution centre started and the supporting work to the school at El Bass. I was suddenly nervous about what could go wrong with the structure but the staff reassured me and said they would look out for cracks. They said that boys on their own were likely to get shot. I then had an urgent request for an inspection at Borj ech Chimali school. The problems were similar. I inspected work in Rachidiye and El Bass and had an unexpected visit from the Commissioner General. I accompanied him to Borj ech Chimali where we met Peter and Erik. There was no electricity this evening so I could not do paperwork. I fell asleep with the wireless on. The batteries did not last long.

Fri 3 I wrote my report for this morning's meeting with Peter and then we visited the sites. It took all day especially the work in Borj ech Chimali. The new water pipe system was still not being laid deep enough. The broken concrete was difficult to dig through. Later we visited the Red Cross. We had a long chat and were invited for a meal.

Sat 4 It was very wet today and I felt that I had a cold coming on. I sent a telegram to the administrator via a messenger returning to Beirut. I told him that I was not receiving my subsistence. It was expensive to live in Tyre and so I was planning to come home early. The rest of the day I spent drafting simple plans for the repair of important buildings. I felt fed up and Erik invited me to a splendid Swedish style meal at Naqoura. We confirmed our plans to drive up the Beqaa valley to Baalbek. Hassan and Mamoud had relatives there and advised us of the best route.

Sun 5 I was up before dawn and met Erik and Ake. It was a cold and wet day. We drove to Sidon and met Peter and a volunteer British Royal Engineer Officer. Peter drove his Arabic registered Land Rover towards Beirut along the coast and up into the Lebanese mountains. The road was steep and bendy with heavy traffic. The rain changed to snow which got deeper. The Land Rover coped well but the other traffic was getting stuck. We got to the top of the pass where we could drop down into the fertile Beqaa valley. It was decided that we were losing too much time and although we would reach Baalbek, we would be driving back in the dark. There had been some nasty incidents on this road after dark. We reluctantly decided to return, but then found that the road had been closed by the Israelis who did not expect traffic in that weather. We drove up to an unmanned barrier and Erik went into the soldiers' compound. The rest of us waited and realised that the station wagon Land Rover had air conditioning but no heater. Erik appeared with some soldiers and they removed the barrier. We drove into Beirut and had a late lunch in a very upmarket fish restaurant. There was silver service and formal dress except for us tucked in one corner. However, because of the siege and the shelling we were all in the basement. We then drove along the Corniche and the harbour area to the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps. We stopped at the UN

Gaza hospital. The horror there defies description. Only UN and diplomatic vehicles could travel as we did. We returned to Sidon for a snack in the flat and drove on to Tyre. We found that a small shell had gone through my balcony wall, into my bedroom and made a crater in the wall near my bed. Erik was concerned and so was I.

Mon 6 I took some cheese out of the fridge and found some of yesterday's bread. Then I made my way out of the hotel via the basement to avoid the front door. I spoke to the administrator again about my lack of money. He was depressing and I was annoyed. I went to the distribution centre but work had stopped while they were distributing aid. I improved the drainage works in El Bass and measured the work done in Rachidiye. I had a meal with Hassan whose family have offered me a small flat.

Tues 7 I felt full of uncertainty this morning. I checked progress in the camps. Peter came for Bridi's last day and inspected the clearance work in Borj ech Chimali. There is a lot more work for me to take over. In the late afternoon I went for a meal at Mamoud's and talked about problems. Erik was leaving on Thursday.

Wed 8 I wrote to the administrator once it was light enough. There was no electricity. I visited Borj ech Chimali to look in more detail at the work needed to remove bomb shelters and to repair clinics, water tanks and some smaller junior schools. One school looked relatively undamaged but a cluster bomb had lifted the concrete roof and replaced it a little to one side. There were unexploded bomblets around. I went to El Bass to give some morale support to Hassan who was negotiating with contractors. Peter and Erik appeared and we went to my hotel where Erik's farewell party was being held.

Thurs 9 I was busy finishing packing, settling up with the hotel, writing reports and checking work progress. At 1.00 I drove Erik to Sidon. There we met Peter who drove us into Beirut. He recommended that I should move into the Sidon flat and travel each day. We booked into the Mayflower Hotel and visited the UN offices. I handed in my reports and received the £L1500 subsistence allowance I was owed. We went for a good meal and visited a nightclub that tried to rip us off.

Fri 10 I got up at 5.00 to write a letter to Jean which Erik could post from Sweden. I took Erik to the UN offices where he was being collected. The traffic was very bad and since the UN was recommended not to stop in a crowd for long, I overtook vehicles by driving onto the wide footways and sometimes driving up steps. I tried to change my air tickets home to Middle East Airlines flying to Cyprus. There would always be a flight home from there. Few airlines were flying from Beirut because of the fighting and I wanted to be home for Christmas. We were short of time and a helpful UN clerk offered to try to help me out. I drove with Peter to Sidon and settled into the flat with two others for a week.

Sat 11 I drove to Tyre. Work was not going quickly. Some families in Rachidiye were protesting about money not paid to wives in detention. They were blocking roads but were persuaded to move by threatening to withdraw rations. I tried to drive to see Beaufort Castle but was turned back by the Israelis.

Sun 12 I was up early in Sidon and drove into Tyre. There was only Hassan there. We visited the camps and there was a strike in Rachidiye. We got in but there was little to do. I drove back to Sidon. I was keen to visit Byblos and so was Peter. We drove up the coast through Beirut and Jounie to Byblos. It was fascinating with remains dating back beyond the Phoenicians as well as those of the Romans, the Crusaders and the Ottomans. We had a lovely meal overlooking the sea in the small walled town nearby. We were not allowed to travel further north although I would have liked to visit Tripoli. Instead we drove up the Nahr Ibrahim or Adonis valley to the source of the river. It was really beautiful and wooded. There were several temple ruins. At the source the river pours out of a cave in the side of the valley. The story goes that the goddess Astarte loved Adonis who was killed by a wild boar. She persuaded the underworld to let him come back annually. He then gets killed and returns to the underworld. Hence the river runs red annually. In reality the river runs under the mountains from the Syrian Desert where it picks up fine dust in the dry season. On another road down the valley we passed a few flat stones laid one on top of another. Young men leaving the village make these piles just when they lose sight of the village and as long as the pile remains they will return.

Mon 13 Up very early and drove to Beirut. My friend in the UN had successfully got me a flight to Cyprus and a British Airways flight a few days later to Heathrow. I was not going to have to fly backwards in a Hercules. I walked about Beirut and took photographs discreetly even at the Green Line and other sensitive locations. I sent a telex via Jeff in Vienna to Jean to confirm my time of arrival home. I had got to know Jeff on my way out via Vienna and knew he was keen on the nurse whom I had helped in Tyre. I drove to Tyre and spent two hours failing to find the engineers. I decided to try to see Beaufort Castle again although it was raining. The Red Cross said that I had the right to drive through Ansar prisoner of war camp where the Red Cross were trying to register all the inmates to reduce the chances of them disappearing. I knew that some of our local UN staff from Tyre were held in the camp. I arrived at the entrance in the barbed wire fence and showed my UN passport. After some reluctance a jeep appeared with armed troops in the back. I was told to follow and drove right through what looked like a lot of army tents. At the far fence we shook hands and I was on my way. I got to the spectacular castle perched a thousand feet above the Litani River and was met by some local militia. They seemed bemused by a UN vehicle and delegate turning up to look at a very strategic site overlooking the north of Israel. They checked my passport and then we walked together around the site. It was misty but I could see that there was recent damage from shelling. Two of the militia had names which could have been Frankish and we joked about their ancestors patrolling the walls a thousand years before. I took some photographs, being careful not show any modern defences, and returned to Sidon.

Tues 14 I drove to Tyre again with a holdup at the Litani bridge and went to the office and got another £L1500 forward payment from the administrator. The staff said that the office was going to be raided. I

could see a riot up the street and went back in and tried to persuade the administrator to leave, but he would not. I filled the Land Rover with staff and papers and left. Some sites were still working and in Rachidiye some ladies invited me in for a tea and told me the story. They had entered the office and found the administrator sitting behind his big desk. They had carried him outside and closed the office. They had not harmed him but did not know where he was. I returned to Sidon and heard some shooting.

Wed 15 I drove to Mamoud's house in Tyre and met Hassan. The office was firmly closed. We drove around all the works in Hassan's car, as mine was too obvious. Everything had stopped. I had a farewell meal with as many as we could gather and coffee and a chat in several homes.

Thurs 16 I drove back to the Tyre office and found it closed. I opened it and Peter and a senior UN official arrived. The administrator was OK but had gone on rest leave. He had been in Tyre through all the horror. Jeff was coming from Vienna to take his place for a while. A riot threatened and so we went to Mamoud's house. The official invited the camp leaders back to a meeting in the office. Lots of things were discussed and the engineers were allowed back into the camps. I met my successor and took him to see everything. I then organised the final payments and we had a good drink.

Fri 17 The office was back in business. I visited all the camps and the contractors. There were lots of last minute problems. I handed over to the local engineers who took me for a meal and a long walk through the ancient ruins of Tyre. They were very knowledgeable about the history and showed me the Roman ceremonial arch and stadium. There were huge mounds of murex shells from the purple dyeing industry which had made ancient Tyre so famous. The centre of Rachidiye had been the city of Palaetyre in ancient times and had supplied Tyre with water via an aqueduct. The harbours in Tyre had been extensive but had been submerged by earthquakes and were now being buried by rubbish dumped in the sea. Back at Sidon I started to pack.

Sat 18 I finished packing and went to the Sidon office to brief Jeff and others about my difficulties with some payments. I got a lift to Beirut with Peter and we had an emotional farewell with the staff there. Peter took me to the airport and I got the flight to Larnaca. On the plane I was advised where to stay and on arrival I got a taxi into Limassol. I walked from the hotel into the town and on my return was invited to a party. I stayed a while before going to bed.

Sun 19 After a good friendly breakfast I took a bus to Kolossi Castle and Curium. In the afternoon I walked around more ruins and went to a service in the Anglican church. Afterwards over a cup of tea the congregation seemed disinterested in the fighting about seventy miles across the water.

Mon 20 I was up and ready to go to Polis but the bus went without me. I got a service taxi to Paphos, bought some picnic food and a bottle of commandaria wine and walked miles looking at the sites. I went down to the harbour and talked to some UN soldiers in a small castle and ate my picnic in the sun.

Tues 21 I went by service taxi to Nicosia and booked into a hotel. I walked around the Greek side with its huge Venetian fortifications and then headed for the Turkish side. An aggressive soldier at the border noticed that my British passport did not have an immigration visa from the airport. I had to return to my hotel and collect my UN passport. He was much more helpful after that and told me that the UN did not pay entry or exit taxes and that I should buy my wife a large bottle of expensive perfume on the way home instead. I walked and got taxis around the more interesting but more dilapidated side of the border before crossing back without a problem.

Wed 22 A service taxi took me to Larnaca and I booked my case into a hotel. I walked around the sites and sunbathed on the beach for a few hours. This was not possible in England. At the airport I found that my plane was about three hours late because of a strike in London.

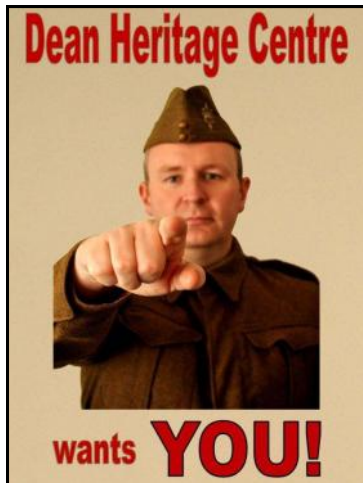
Thurs 23 We landed in Heathrow at midnight and I rang Jean. I slept until the first bus which happily changed its route to take me directly to Kings Cross. I got the first train to Brough and Jean was waiting at the station. She was looking even bigger. We got home and I rang work and had a good meal.

Fri 24 I went into work to catch up with events and to write a brief committee report about my secondment. The senior engineers were supportive but my colleagues were not. I met Jean after work for a drink and later went to the midnight service.

Sat 25 We opened presents and went to a friendly family service before returning for drinks with the neighbours and friends. I rang my relatives and went into Beverley for a late Christmas Dinner. I fell asleep soon afterwards. I was back.

NOSTALGIA IS WHAT IT USED TO BE

On 30 June twelve twelve brave souls sallied forth from Abergavenny cowering behind our intrepid President Sam to take a trip back in time. Destination – the Dean Heritage Centre to view and take part in “Forester’s War Exhibition”.



On arrival we were whisked back in time to those menus we used to “so enjoy” served up to us in the canteen at King Henry’s or before that down in the “British Canteen” now the Old Age Pensioners Dining Room (the fact that the menu hasn’t changed over the intervening years is complete disinformation).

The intrepid twelve enjoyed such delights as Spam Fritters served with hand cut chips and bullet hard dried peas (they were a prized possession in those days when combined with a blow pipe cut from a strong cow parsley plant) or Bangers and Mashed Swede with lashings of onion gravy, but no one was brave enough to try the Snook Fish Pie. The main courses were held down by Jam Roly Poly Pud or shifted by Rhubarb Delight.

On being handed out our “Ration Book Trail” we set off to view the excellent exhibition of wartime memorabilia, old time tools and farm equipment. We delved into the mysteries of the dark arts practised in the Forest such as charcoal burning, brown coal mining, the wartime Dig for Victory garden and admired the well filled out Gloucester Old Spot house pigs. Whilst looking, feeling and experiencing we also hunted for the wartime ration items secreted around the exhibitions such as 2 ounces of butter or 1 egg.

It only seemed like five minutes but suddenly three hours plus had elapsed and so back to the restaurant to enjoy Canadian Cocoa enhanced with “cream skimmed off the top of the milk” and good old stodgy fruit cake made with mashed potatoes.

The result - a very enjoyable day was had by all.



Left: Sam Cole, Anthony Davies, Dawn Davies, Linda Rogers, Stuart Rogers, Mike Tod

Right: Peter Games, Caroline Walker, Alan Walker, David Spencer, Adrian Francis, Malcolm Bowen

A YEAR OF FLOWERS

John Barnie, who attended KHGS 1952-60, is a poet, fiction writer and essayist. Here he describes the creation of his latest book, a collection of short poems about the flowers he found within walking distance of his home at Comins Coch near Aberystwyth. The poems are complemented by John's own photographs, from the humble Daisy to the minute Enchanter's Nightshade.

In the winter of 2009-10 I had the idea of writing a book of poems about wildflowers with accompanying photographs. There were however a couple of problems, one being that I hadn't touched a camera since I owned a box Brownie as a boy; the other that I knew a lot more about birds than flowers – like most people I knew the names of common wildflowers but beyond that they were a blur of yellow or white or pink blooms tucked away in hedgerows and to a passer-by not very interesting.

As a result of some hinting, I was given a Sony digital camera for Christmas. This was a world away from my old box Brownie and I realised that even a technical incompetent like me might be able to take adequate close-up images with it.

However, identifying the flowers was something else. While I can recognise two hundred or more European birds, I had a picture in my head of perhaps only two dozen wildflowers.

What I did have, though, was Marjorie Blamey and Christopher Grey-Wilson's *Wild Flowers of Britain and Northern Europe* which has entries on more than 2400 species. Armed with this I hoped to be able to put names to the flowers I might find and photograph.

The only other issue was where to set the geographical limits of the book. In June 2010 we were going to spend a week on Öland, the long narrow island off the south-east coast of Sweden. I knew it was famous for its wildflowers, including several species of orchid – which were in bloom in their hundreds of thousands

though I took a lot of photographs, I decided that the focus of the book had to be local, based on the eight square miles or so that I could walk from my home in Comins Coch, near Aberystwyth.

That may sound unnecessarily limiting, but the area from the Dyfi estuary in the north to Allt-wen just south of Aberystwyth, and inland to the village of Banc-y-Darren, encompasses dunes, cliffs, rock, pebble and sandy shorelines, woods, fields, hedgerows by the mile, river banks, and semi-cultivated moorland – such a diversity of habitat in fact that when you start looking closely, you find new flowers at almost every step. In the end I photographed about two hundred species, and there are undoubtedly many more that I failed to find, or failed to tell apart – like the almost identical species of Hawkweed.

I began writing poems about flowers I knew well in January and February before they appeared, and then to photograph the flowers of early Spring as they succeeded each other in the hedgerows. This gave me time to experiment with the camera, finding out how to get the best effects in close-up, and discovering in the process that it is difficult to get a clear, crisp image of flowers that are yellow or white – light seems to refract off the petals in a way that distorts the electronic image, masking fine detail unless you are very careful. It meant that I sometimes had to go back and re-photograph a particular flower several times until I discovered that yellow and white were best photographed in a raking light. Pink and red, on the other hand, photographed well.

As the weather improved I went further afield, taking a bus to the dunes at Ynys-las, or walking the cliffs from Aberystwyth to Borth. The dunes are a nature reserve of national importance where I was able to photograph several species of orchid, including two species of Marsh Orchid, the Pyramidal Orchid and the Marsh Helleborine.



Hound's-Tongue

*They say you can hear
breathing and padding paws
in the dunes, as the moon*

*silvers the waves; I can
believe it; have you seen
these flowers' cupolas,*

*the coagulation of the
blood through which you
look at light, darkly.*

The dunes contain other rarities too, such as Hound's-tongue which is found nowhere else in the county. Looked at casually it is not a memorable plant with its grey-green hairy leaves and clusters of small flowers. In close-up, however, the petals have a magnificent blood-red colour. And that's the thing about wildflowers. We are so used to the large, showy blooms of the florists and garden centres that wildflowers can seem disappointingly by comparison. But that is because we don't look closely enough. Take time to examine a wildflower closely and the beauty of its colouring and symmetry becomes apparent. Photographing it is a good way of discovering this, enlarging an image on screen at home until every detail is revealed. Next time you see the flower in its habitat you find yourself looking at it in a different way, *seeing* it perhaps for the first time.

Something else I discovered is that knowing the names of things helps you see them too. A small pink flower in the hedgerow is a small pink flower. But when you know that one is Red Campion and another is Herb Robert, and a third is Pink Purslane, they become categorised in the mind in a way that makes you look at them differently from then on. Rather like getting up a foreign language when at first all you hear is a meaningless babble until you master the grammar and learn to distinguish word boundaries in speech. In the same way the blur of pink and white and yellow becomes a grammar of colour and form as more and more flowers are identified by their names. No wonder European explorers named prominent features of the landscape as they sailed along a coast or hacked their way through a rain forest, creating an identifiable world as they went.

One further advantage of the digital camera, as I soon learned, is that it enables you to take any number of shots which you can upload onto the computer, after which you can select the best images and delete everything else. I would often take ten or twenty pictures of a flower, knowing that if I was lucky one or two might come out right. In this way I took several thousand photographs over the summer, ending up with about three hundred that I thought worth keeping. The expense would have made that impossible had I used a film camera.

On screen I soon discovered that almost all the photographs I took needed editing to create the kind of image I had in mind for the book. It was then that I discovered Photoshop and had a lot of fun editing the images, cropping them, blowing them up, honing in on detail, making slight changes to the intensity of light or colour. This was important because I didn't want the images to be mere illustrations of the poems – or the poems to be straightforward descriptions of what you see in the images. So the photographs in the book are almost always close-ups, sometimes taken from unfamiliar angles, in order to make the reader look closely at flowers he or she perhaps takes for granted, while the

poems reflect my own response to them in images that are deliberately non-realistic.

I have been involved in publishing since I joined the staff of the magazine *Planet* in the mid-1980s, and it is astonishing how quickly developments in computer technology have shifted the balance between publisher and printer. Twenty-five years ago, photographs had to be sent to the printer to be scanned, cropped as indicated by us, and dropped into their appropriate slot in the magazine. Now all that is done in-house and the magazine is sent to the printers electronically so that the publisher's control over the finished product is almost total.

Unless you are self-publishing, though, this is not true for the author. The process of turning a finished typescript into a book is very much a collaboration between the author and the publisher's editor and designer.

DANDELION

*Shield bosses for
warriors of the sun
laid out in the fields;*

*a camp at full stretch while the
day blazes;*

*when I looked again,
worlds in collision,
seeds escaping*

*downwind in a drift
of parachutes.*





Dog Rose

Not so much of the
'dog'; you might like
the primping kisses

of hothouse stuff
from a florist's, but
we're the real

thing, floating our dreaming faces
in the heavy summer
ease of the hedgerow.

By October of last year I had written the poems and selected the images that were to accompany them – forty-eight poems faced by forty-eight photographs of flowers, most of which are common, though some, like Hound's-tongue, Sea Holly and Sea Sandwort are comparatively rare. I put this together and submitted it to Gomer, the publishers based at Llandysul who have published most of my books. But then began the process of collaboration and to some extent of compromise. My typescript had 96 pages plus eight pages of 'preliminaries' – title page, contents page, acknowledgements etc. From the publisher's point of view, however, 96 pages was the optimum number due to reasons of economy. So out had to come four pages of poems and four images.

Design, too, was in the publisher's hands. It was my editor at Gomer, Ceri Wyn Jones who decided on the font, as well as what the size of the page should be, and what weight and quality of paper would bring out the best in the images. It was Ceri's idea too to have the flower names in English, Welsh and Latin in a small typeface under the images – which helps balance the double spreads visually, but which I would never have thought of by myself. An out-of-house designer was commissioned to design the

cover. Its central motif of a dandelion seed head with tiny seeds floating away across a brown autumnal background, suggests the ephemeral nature of a flower's existence, but also its potential for growth and renewal in the year to come. Again I would never have thought of this myself, but it is just right for the book and has become an integral part of its meaning.

Writing is a solitary activity – you sit at a desk day after day, and there is nothing but you and a pencil and paper, or the blank screen of a computer. It is perhaps why some writers can be prickly when an editor suggests changes or cuts; it is 'their' book, and they resent any interference from outsiders. At times, though, you can be too close to your work to see it clearly, and collaboration with a good editor and designer can both help realise the book the author had in his mind, and enhance it in ways he would not have come up with if left to himself. This has certainly been my experience while working on *A Year of Flowers*. Now comes the hardest part – getting it in the shops and persuading people to buy it!

A Year of Flowers, published by Gomer,
ISBN 978-1-84851-3907, £9.99

Pale Toadflax

After the first cutting
of the hedge banks, up
we pop; I expect you couldn't

see us before in our
silky pyjamas delicately
striped, peeling off a yawn,

taking things easy,
while humans hurtle
past in their cars.



THE GRASS ISN'T ALWAYS GREENER

Haydn Gear (KHGS 1950 – 57) reflects on a life of teaching in London and elsewhere, and the pleasure of returning home to Abergavenny at the end of it all.

It may be remembered by those who used to listen to the radio programme “Down Your Way” which was presented by Franklin Engelman that the BBC once sent its outside broadcast unit to Abergavenny.

It may also be remembered that Alderman William Horsington, three times mayor of Abergavenny during the 50s, was asked to describe how he viewed his home town. He famously replied “As far as I am concerned, Abergavenny is the hub of the universe”.

This response caused some amusement, but with the benefit of hindsight and life experience it became evident that there was more than a grain of truth in what he must have had in mind. I too was born in the town and having attended Castle Street Infants, Hereford Road Boys’ and King Henry VIII Grammar School I began to feel that the grass might be greener on the other side of the fence. Many people in this and numerous other towns and cities have felt the same urge to break away in order to exploit the wider world. Ideas germinated and decisions were made and in due course I made my way to Monmouth Road Station, as it was then called, clutching a tatty brown suitcase. At 2.30pm on that momentous day I had passed my driving test and I was feeling relieved and pleased with myself. Not long after 4pm I boarded the train and the landscape I knew so well disappeared from view as I headed for pastures new.

Fast-forwarding through time and having spent five years as a student in Bristol and London, I found myself teaching in a large comprehensive school in the east end of the capital city of England. The place was Stepney Green, home to gentlemen such as the Krays and their ilk. It was certainly not greener on that side of the fence, not that there was much greenery at all. This was a drab concrete jungle of buildings built in the aftermath of the second world war. In 1964, the Legoland high-rise flats mushroomed so rapidly that the east London skyline seemed to change by the day. However, some things changed hardly at all, notably the fortunes of the local population. There were many poor people who were increasing in number as more and more immigrants from far flung countries arrived. It was no surprise that the Barnardo’s Children’s Home sprang up just off the Commercial Road in Stepney or that William Booth’s Salvation Army struggled to help people in dire straits affected by demon drink in nearby Whitechapel. Even today in 2011 the attractively named Tower Hamlets belies the fact that it is still an impoverished place despite being hemmed in by the redeveloped dockland whose high finance rules and that the extravagant construction for the 2012 Olympics are nearing completion. Down and outs still sleep in cardboard boxes in doorways though. And so it was that areas such as Bow, Bethnal Green, Hackney and Whitechapel became familiar to me.

People belonging to the Jewish community were beginning to move out as they prospered only to be replaced by new waves of people. The one time Anglican church in Spitalfields had morphed into a synagogue only to then become a mosque. One can only wonder what it will become sometime in the future.

My six years teaching in Stepney were amongst the most interesting and sometimes disturbing of my career. Amazingly, the school doctor was a brother to the Canon M E Davies, vicar of St Mary’s in Abergavenny. Dr Davies was equally surprised when I told him that his brother had christened me!

It was not unusual to have pupils in a class who were Irish, Chinese, West Indian, African, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot. The Greeks and the Turks would fight at the slightest provocation. The local indigenous whites with skinhead haircuts and Doc Marten boots were usually the most troublesome, since their tendency was to taunt Pakistanis and Bangladeshis.

For a small town boy like me it was quite shocking and intriguing to see criminality so close to the surface and sometimes openly displayed. A fairly regular occurrence involved youngsters waving to dark blue prison vans transporting fathers and brothers to Brixton and Wandsworth. They always knew when the vans would be passing the school but I never managed to discover how they knew.

Whilst at Stepney I was offered an evening class job by the Inner London Education Authority at what was laughingly called a Recreational Institute in Lambeth on the south side of the Thames. It turned out to be like Daniel in the lions’ den, no more than a meeting point for up and coming villains aged fifteen to eighteen. Robbing people, stealing cars and getting into gang fights seemed to be par for the course. It was clear that there was a very strong gang loyalty which probably provided a sense of belonging and security. Fortunately, I gained a comfortable rapport with those young criminals and after I had won their trust they confided spine chilling details about their backgrounds and lifestyles. Tony D___, a really pleasant young man (to me!) specialised in persuading people to part with expensive wristwatches with the aid of a flick knife. He said to me “It’s easy Sir, they never argue. All they want to do is get home safe”. I believed him. Aldo A___, another one of Italian descent, smoked a lot of cannabis. He also slashed people with Stanley knives. One evening, I looked around to see him holding a black handgun close to my head. I went cold inside but managed to say “Stop messing about Aldo and put it away”. He laughed and duly obliged. “Just joking Sir” he said. I didn’t see the joke, especially when I found out that it was loaded. It was time to move on!

Having escaped from London and spending thirty years living in West Yorkshire, I came home in 2002. Yorkshire was great, but I needed to see places of my childhood and youth. I’d been to some of the peripheral places, those hotspots spinning in wobbly orbits, and I knew it was time to return to “the hub of the universe”. Alderman Horsington had not been wrong. He had recognised that there is no place like home, and he knew it without bothering to find out if the grass was greener on the other side of the fence.

Rather like holidays, it’s always nice to go away, but nicer to return home to what is familiar and precious.

PICTURE GALLERY

Stuart Rogers (KHGS 1955 - 60) is a keen amateur photographer who often takes his camera with him as he walks the countryside near his native Llanellen and farther afield. Here is a small selection of some of his favourite photographs.



St Helen's at Dawn

It snowed again, and heavily during the night of 11th January 2010. Although the sky was still overcast and grey with more snow threatening, I went out just before dawn to take some photographs of St. Helen's Church in Llanellen before the picturesque snow was disturbed by a rising wind, snow melt or hungry birds. At 8am the only other footprints were of the milkman, with all other traffic at a standstill, even on the main road. My reward was a series of photographs some of which will be used to publish fund-raising Christmas cards for our church.

I have resisted the temptation to make cosmetic changes (eg enhancing the sky to blue) by using Adobe Photoshop Elements. That would change the mood of the photograph and not be a true reflection of the prevailing harsh conditions which had though brought with them a certain peace and quiet not frequently found these days. The branches of the trees and the heavy snow contrasting with the church of St. Helen standing tall and proud as it has done for the last 600 years.

Two days later this photograph was published in the Western Mail under the title of 'A Postcard from Wales'.

A Delicious Edible Mushroom.... (Possibly!)

Is this Amanita Muscaria? If so it is poisonous (but rarely fatal!). It was growing in Goytre Wood, near the Wharf, and was one of nearly a dozen different fungi present in this small woodland. The area around the Blorengie is well known for having a large variety of fungi, due to the range of ancient native deciduous trees and the more recent evergreen trees, soil conditions and regular rainfall. Accordingly, the area is a designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest.

This photograph was taken in evening sunlight during the autumn last year, and as Linda and I were wandering past the woodland sculptures we met someone who was collecting a variety of fungi which he intended to take to France the next day. He explained that whilst *he* also did not know which were edible and which were poisonous, fortunately the chef in the restaurant for whom he was collecting them *would know!*





Severn Bridge (M48)

Although this iconic structure was officially opened by the Queen as long ago as 8th September 1966 and I had driven over it many times in the ensuing 45 years, I had never actually *walked* over it. So on the 13th May last year I set out to do just that, and by public transport being mindful of carbon footprint !

I caught the 8.37 Arriva Train service via Newport to Chepstow (£10.60 return) and then walked via the Portwall to the bridge. There is a wide path added to both east and west carriageways, although strictly speaking pedestrians should use the downstream route with the upstream route designated for cyclists and small motor-cycles limited to 50cc.

The first point of note as you rise up to walk alongside the road deck is the way that the bridge arches up in front of you and that you can see that the structure is in fact two conjoined bridges. One over the river Wye (and railway line) followed by a massive span of 3240 feet across the river Severn. The views of the Severn Estuary and of the new, and very graceful Second Severn Crossing open out as you walk up the slope towards the high point of the suspended deck, with the tall white suspension towers, cables and fittings framed against a clear blue sky. However, there is a rude awakening from this idyllic scene as a passing heavy goods vehicle causes the decking to vibrate and 'bounce' under my feet ! Towards the eastern shoreline can be seen the remains of the old river ferry and my thoughts return to trips on the Severn Princess from Aust to Beachley across the difficult mile of water.

At the Beachley end, the footway crosses over the toll booths to link with the returning cycle way, and the service area. My photograph is taken from the viewpoint on the headland.

The American Locomotive No. 2.

This magnificent 4-6-2 train weighing some 47 tons was built by Baldwin of Philadelphia in 1930 and originally worked hauling limestone in South Africa. It was rescued from the scrap yard and rebuilt by the Brecon Mountain Railway, running tourist trains since 1997 on their narrow gauge line from Pant Station, Merthyr to the far end of Taf Frechan Reservoir, a round trip of some 65 minutes.

Eventually it is intended to extend the trip further into the Brecon Beacons, and the line has already been re-laid, continuing along the bed of the former Brecon & Merthyr Railway which had closed in 1964. The railway will then be 5.5 miles long, climbing steeply to terminate at the Torpantau Tunnel, which at 1313 ft above sea level is the highest railway tunnel in Great Britain.

In the summer months trains leave Pant Station five times daily, starting at 11 am, there is a service every weekend throughout the year, and a reduced service in autumn and winter, with an opportunity to alight on your trip to enjoy teas and spectacular views at the Pontsticill halt on the return leg of your trip.

This photo was taken as the train passed through Pontsticill station in September last year, 1/125 sec.

(It is also possible to walk close to the line for most of the route for additional photo opportunities)





Don't come any closer!

This is my favourite photograph taken some two years ago, when I first had my present camera, a Panasonic Lumix DMC -FZ18. My previous cameras could not have captured this special moment, and certainly not my original Kodak 'Box Brownie' Flash 2 camera, which I still have in the attic! However, although I enjoy photographing birds and motor sport, I will not be investing in any camera which has a 6" lens or a body 2ft long, and always needs a tripod. I will stick with my utilitarian Lumix which already has an 18 times optical zoom and a Leica lens, and is an excellent all-round camera.

This magnificent Bald Eagle, as you can see from the photograph, is not bald at all – the word bald originally meant “white

headed”. He is the national bird and symbol of the United States of America, and resides at Banham Wildlife Park in Norfolk. He was not at all bothered as I edged closer for a clearer photograph. Perhaps he knew that as a sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) he was a protected species. (Most likely with his beak and talons only the foolhardy would get too close!)

Celtic Warrior

This fine carving stands, or rather sits, on a footpath on the outskirts of Caerleon, in a quiet backwater known as the 'old village', close to the Bell Inn (an early 17th century coaching inn) and near the junction with Bulmore Road. The top of his head-dress stands some 4 feet high and is formed from the tree roots of this ancient oak. A fitting final use after so many years for the fallen giant.

The sculpture, aptly named 'Celtic Warrior', was carved in 2005 by David Lloyd of Kidwelly as part of the 2005 Caerleon Symposium, and now forms an interesting attraction soon after the start of the scenic 48 mile (77km) Usk Valley Walk, which is not as flat as you may think. I know!



ALL AT SEA - MY EARLY LIFE

David Ball was a pupil at King Henry VIII Grammar School from 1951 to 1956. In 1973 he emigrated to Oakville Ontario with his wife Carole-Anne and three young children, and is now a Canadian citizen. His oldest son Stephen holds an MA in Middle Eastern Studies, a BA in English and a B.Ed., and lives in Oman where he is head of the English Department at the University. His other son Jamie is a Police Sergeant with the Ontario Provincial Police Service and lives in Thunder Bay Ontario with his wife Lisa and two children. David's daughter Justina lives in Burlington Ontario and is a Police Detective with the Toronto Police Service. Justina has a BA degree in Communication and Social Science. Her husband David is also a Police Officer and they have two daughters. David has been retired since 2000 after serving almost 40 years in the police service and 5 years in the British Merchant Navy as a Navigation Officer.

As a new "Old Boy" of KHGS I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to the Gobannian. I am a little disappointed that I was unaware of the Association much earlier in my life but I am here now and hopefully I shall be able to write about interesting experiences that I have had during my lifetime. I think this article will only involve my life up to the age of 21 years old, and will include my childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.

For the first 16 years of my life I lived in Abergavenny, at 'Melba' 40 Park Crescent a short distance from KHGS at Penypound. I went to Castle Street School (now a parking lot) first of all and then Hereford Road School. They were happy times for me but I have few memories of detail. I walked to school in those days and I probably got into a little mischief (for example picking flowers from the Cottage Hospital gardens to take home to my Mum) but nothing too serious. My father, F R Ball was a businessman in the town and he would most certainly find out if I strayed out-of-line.

We had a telephone at home (WOW)!! and I recall many of the neighbours knocking on our front door to ask to use it. My dad had placed a little jar close to the telephone and there was an expectation that pennies, sixpences or even shillings would sometimes be left in the jar, although he never insisted.



At KHGS
aged 15/16

I recall my dad had a Ford 8 car and the licence plate number was BWO 495. After Sunday school he would take the family to the canal at Llangynidr and buy us a lemonade from the Coach and Horses. Perhaps it was an excuse for him to consume another kind of beverage, even though it was Sunday closing – he knew the Landlord!

Attending King Henry VIII Grammar School was certainly a privilege for me. Perhaps it was a privilege that I did not deserve, as I did not live up to expectations, nor did I take advantage of the opportunities available to me. I was a 'below average student' and was never going to achieve Sixth Form status. However, I now realize the education I did receive, and which I absorbed as best I could, has always been useful during my life. It moulded my values, furthered my education later on in my life, established my respect for others, and gave me well-developed people skills.

I have very happy memories of some of my teachers who had a very good influence on my character.

Mr Binding (*Basher*), who taught English Language and English Literature. He was a superb teacher, strict but helpful and understanding. The trip to Stratford was wonderful.

Mr. Thomas (*Fuzzy*), Woodwork and Music. He was a great teacher and I always looked forward to his lessons.

Mr. Ben Jones, Geography. He was decent, thoughtful and amusing. I still have my exercise book about the Welland Canal in Ontario Canada and I now live 30 miles from that Canal, close to Niagara Falls.

Mrs. Fanny Jones, Biology. A great person who was very thoughtful and caring.

Head Master Mr Harry Newcombe: A gentleman. I loved watching him arrive at school on his BSA Bantam motorcycle.

Finally, Head Master Edwards. An exception to the rule, I thought he was a horrible man. He was arrogant and he failed to connect with his students. A perfect example on how not to deliver a positive influence to young people.

I was truly a square peg in a round hole. I left grammar school with 3 'O' Levels – disappointing to say the least. But I must say that I had great friends at school and we had wonderful times together. I remember playing table tennis with Monty Arkell in the Village Hall in Llanfoist, also going to the Punch Bowl on the Blorenge a few times and lighting small fires. Camping in St. Mary's Vale with a host of school

mates, climbing the Sugar Loaf, the Deri and the Rholben. Playing tennis in Bailey Park (the courts are now sadly a disgrace), swimming at the local pool (now abandoned), bicycling with Norman Ward, Melvin Bunker, and sometimes Haydn Gear. Simple pleasures: no drinking, no drugs, no vandalism, just pure fun.

Early in my KHGS life, I became good friends with John Barnie. I understand he is now a respected retired academic from Aberystwyth University. Of course, in those days when we were friends 'sweets' were still rationed but John's Dad owned *Barnie's Sweet Shop* in the town. Any time I was at John's house and his Dad came home, lots of free sweets came our way! John was clearly a scholarly boy in those days – we gradually drifted apart over the years. However, I recently purchased his book entitled *Tales of the Shopocracy* about his Dad's life in Abergavenny. A fantastic read and it mirrored much of my life growing up. I telephoned John recently from Canada and congratulated him on the success of his book. I had not spoken to him in 56 years and we had a very pleasant conversation. I understand he is a regular contributor to *The Gobannian*.

I was also involved with Cubs and Scouts and that influenced my desire for the outdoor life, camping, hiking, and cycling. One of the greatest experiences of my early life occurred during this time. I was invited to join Monmouth Public School Scout Group and travelled to Switzerland on a two-week mountaineering adventure. We travelled to Bern and then took an electric train to Kandersteg in the Bernese Alps. We stayed in a Scout Hostel and spent two wonderful weeks climbing mountains, walking across glaciers with ice axes and roped together for safety, and swimming in Lake Thun. We cooked our own meals at the Hostel. However, I was banned from the kitchen after I cooked fish in batter using custard powder rather than flour. It lost me my cooking badge, but I have since improved. The beauty of Switzerland took my breath away.

My father involved me in the Abergavenny Amateur Operatic Society. He was the Musical Director, and my sister Joan was the Pianist. I sang in the chorus, had a lot of fun with make-up and costumes and was expertly guided by the "local professionals". Performing on stage in front of an audience was a great boost to my self-confidence.

In 1956 I left Grammar School and in January of 1957 I became a Cadet at the Reardon Smith Nautical College, Cardiff. Here I found the ability and eagerness to study that had eluded me at KHGS. I was training to become a Navigation Officer in the British Merchant Navy. Success at this College led to a 4 year Apprenticeship offer with a reputable British shipping company. The College accommodated students from the United Kingdom as well as others from different parts of the world. I was immersed into strict self-discipline, impeccable uniforms and scrubs, equally impeccable manners and behaviour, the rigours of scholarly learning, an expectation of excellence in practical training, punctuality and enthusiasm to learn, team work and camaraderie. The twelve months I spent at this College moulded my life to this day. The Naval Instructors were strict but fair and encouraged me to develop as an adult and



1957 at Reardon Smith Nautical College, Cardiff

instilled self-esteem. I graduated top of my Watch at College and received the Book Prize. This was most encouraging for me and of course satisfied my anxious parents who suffered through my dismal performance while in grammar school. I went from adolescence to adulthood in short order.

During my time at Naval College, I was selected to travel on a Merchant Ship, the SS Grelmarion, where I was to be a temporary Apprentice. We travelled to New Orleans, loaded grain and returned to Aarhus in Denmark two months later. It was exciting but hard work and the expectations of becoming a Naval Officer really came home to me. I learned how to splice ropes, read a compass, understand a chronometer, use a sextant, and steer an 8,000 ton ship. I was able to put this experience to good use upon my return to College.

Thomas & Jno Brocklebank was a well-established merchant shipping company with a long history. It was the senior company of the Cunard Group, the other companies being Port Line and Cunard Line. Brocklebank's sailed predominantly to the Middle East, North East Africa, East India, Ceylon (Sri Lanka), East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and the Southern USA.

In January 1958 I signed my Apprenticeship papers with Brocklebank's witnessed in writing by my father and Mr William Shackelton. (In those days a well-known pharmacist in Abergavenny I believe!) I sailed from Birkenhead on 6 January 1958 on a ship called the SS Malakand. I was a junior apprentice and the senior apprentice was one Donald Warwick (his father was the staff captain on the Queen Mary – the Warwick family have an interesting history as mariners).

Outward-bound we travelled through the Suez Canal to Saudi Arabia, then on to North East Africa, Aden, Calcutta India and East Pakistan, then we loaded cargo to be delivered to the USA. mainly jute and tea. Our journey took us through the Suez Canal before re-fuelling in Spanish Morocco then onwards across the Southern Atlantic to Savannah Georgia, our first stop in the USA. Thereafter, we visited New Orleans and Pensacola Florida before returning to Liverpool six months after leaving Birkenhead. What a first trip! After just two weeks shore leave we were back to sea again.

Basically, that was my life for the next four years. I went to many other places including the Seychelles Islands and the Maldives. These were two of the most beautiful places I have ever seen.

After two years I was promoted to Fourth Officer, which was a boost to my confidence, but more importantly a substantial increase in salary! No more a poor apprentice. It was an exhilarating experience to be on watch and in control of a 10,000 ton merchant ship in circumstances such as navigating the Red Sea which sometimes is the naval equivalent of the M25 at rush hour (I was always under the watchful eye of the skipper). Nowadays that area of the world is frequently plundered by pirates.

One of the saddest times I experienced during my time in the Navy was visiting the Polish port of Gdynia in the Baltic Sea. Here no-one on the ship was allowed to go ashore and we were constantly guarded by Russian

soldiers. One could easily sense and feel the brutal effects of communism. Unhappy people, afraid to talk, limited lighting at night, very few vehicles evident except military vehicles. Clear evidence of a subordinated society. The Polish people eventually overcame this misery but at a terrible cost.

In 1961 I decided to leave the Merchant Navy and seek another career, much to the chagrin of my parents. I had achieved Fourth Mate status, passed half of my Second Mate certification and travelled to many parts of the world. I had met many interesting people, witnessed absolute wealth and abject poverty, experienced beautiful sunsets and sunrises, awe-inspiring landscapes, water spouts, and lightning shows. However, the one issue which constantly plagued me was a sense of loneliness. I had sailed on ten different ships in my short career and had made many friends, but was conscious that these were isolated spells of six months at a time. I never did meet any of these friends again in my lifetime. I found that an extremely difficult situation to deal with. Thus, my decision to leave the Merchant Navy. I suspect most people will understand the fear of loneliness, and I did not want to deal with that issue for the rest of my life.

Here endeth my first contribution to The Gobannian. Twenty-one years of my life. My life on land was to be just as wonderful as the first twenty-one years, but very much different, a forty year police career, marriage, family, and emigration to another beautiful country, Canada.



20 years old and recently promoted to Fourth Mate, In the South Atlantic en route from India to the USA

A DIP INTO THE ARCHIVES

The Association's archivist Bryn Seabourne was leafing through the records recently and came across two interesting items from 1964.

Montgomery of Alamein, KG, GCB, DSO

In the summer of 1964 the Old Boys heard that Viscount Montgomery of Alamein was planning to visit Abergavenny in November, which seemed too good an opportunity to miss. Dinner Secretary A J Denbury wrote to the World War II veteran at his Hampshire home with an invitation to attend the annual dinner as principal guest speaker.

In his letter A J Denbury reminded the general that he had made a war-time visit to Abergavenny. He pointed out that the newly constructed Welsh Brigade Depot at Cwrt-y-Gollen was just four miles from the Borough, and many Old Boys had served with the South Wales Borderers, the Monmouthshire Territorial Army and many other branches of the Armed Services.

Despite being offered a night's hospitality at the Angel Montgomery declined the invitation. It is a great pity that Old Boys were denied the opportunity to hear this great Field Marshal's tales of his war-time exploits, but at least we have his signature tucked into our archives, scribbled on the back of his invitation letter.

*Thank you for your kind invitation.
I regret it is not possible for me to accept.*

*Montgomery of Alamein
F.M.*

15-7-64

The message reads

*"Thank you for your kind invitation.
I regret it is not possible for me to accept."
Montgomery of Alamein, F.M.*

15-7-64

Marcel Mostade

Monsieur Mostade was a 14 year old Belgian boy when he was evacuated to Abergavenny in 1914 at the outbreak of the Great War. He stayed for three years before his parents decided to move to London, where they stayed until the Armistice, when they returned home. Young Marcel never forgot the happy time he spent in Abergavenny and his education in King Henry VIII Grammar School, and he vowed to return. Something always stood in the way of this promise to himself, until 48 years later he finally made a "sentimental journey" back to his one-time home in Wales.

He came to the town with some trepidation after all these years. His family advised against the trip, fearing he would know no-one and that his memories of the town would prove false. As it turned out he received a warm welcome and all his memories of Abergavenny and its landscape exceeded his expectations. He met several teachers and former school friends, and agreed to write a report of his trip for The Gobannian. The following story is a slightly edited version of his article that appeared in the 1964 edition.

I had hitherto travelled very little in my native country and had never been abroad. I was all the more impressed when I came to South Wales and saw mountains for the first time. I very soon got to love Abergavenny and the whole landscape around it. But my dearest memories are linked with the King Henry VIII Grammar School and with everything and everybody connected with it: the school staff, the pals, the sports and games, the good jokes and even the little fights.

From the beginning, very good bonds of comradeship and even friendship were established. Therefore I experienced a severe shock when my parents suddenly decided, in 1917, to leave Abergavenny in order to go and live in London. I had no alternative but to follow them, much to my grief.

However, I harboured in my bosom the staunch determination to return some day, and the sooner the better. But then came the Armistice. I returned to Belgium with my parents, which meant that my life took another turning and I had to adapt myself again to new conditions. Fate drew me in a whirlpool of events and years passed quickly with different fortunes, good and bad. How many scenes are recorded on the film of these past years! My leaving school, professional ventures, then marriage, children, new jobs, travels, then the second World War, the prisoner's camp, then another Peace and my return to new activities.

In spite of the happenings of all these long years I have never forgotten Abergavenny and have always entertained the desire and the hope of going back there some day to see "that dear old place" again. At times I was literally obsessed by memories of the past; I very often dreamed that I was actually back there, my chief concern in these dreams being to find the Sugarloaf and the building of the KHGS!

How often have I reviewed in mind the scenes of my enchanted stay? How many times have I, in conversation with members of my family, brought the conversation to the topic of the good old Abergavenny days, and expressed my purpose to travel thither as soon as a suitable occasion would spring up. However, after my marriage, I occasionally took my vacation on the Continent and my quest to South Wales got postponed from year to year.

Then, when I was over 62 years of age, I decided to take the trip despite the fact that some 48 years had elapsed since I had last set a foot on English soil. So, one fine morning in April 1963 I left my home town in Brussels and set out on this "sentimental journey". After a very good trip via Ostend, Dover, London and Newport, after dark I landed at Abergavenny, feeling very elated and anticipating a wonderful time. I easily found my way to the Angel Hotel which was to be my fixed residence during my week's stay.

There was, of course, the risk of being disappointed by the fact that, during the years of my long absence, my imagination might have played tricks on me and made me see the town and the surrounding countryside in an unreal light and exaggeratedly beautiful. But in reality my renewed contact did not deceive me in the least. I felt as if I had left just a few months ago. Abergavenny was just as I knew it, a clean, pleasant, busy and picturesque town, and so colourful. Apart from a good number of new or modernised shops, the main streets were practically the same as when, as a boy of fifteen, I strolled through them. Every building, every corner, every crossroad had its story to tell, from the Public Market, the Town Hall where I used to attend concerts, the fish and chip shop (still there!), the old Cinema, the narrow street where I once had a fight, Russell Williams' saddler's shop where a gang of boys I belonged to used to gather after school hours and revel in piquant jokes, the house front I bumped into with my bicycle in a desperate attempt to avoid being run over by a car – so many memories.

I was very much more taken in by the beauty of the Usk Valley and the mountains than I ever was when I was a youngster. As a schoolboy, although nature appealed to me in a certain way, I just took its beauty for granted, whereas now as an adult I saw things with different eyes, with the eyes of one who has learned to see and appreciate things. How very beautiful this Usk Valley looked to me! And the river herself, with her clear, swift and sparkling stream - how I loved to look at it from the bridge and from the road leading to the cemetery. I once went under the bridge across the blocks of rock to the bank and thrust my hands in the cool fast-running water, feeling that this was bracing me up as if I had taken a tonic.

What to say of the mountains? Here again I must say that, far from being disappointed, I found them to be much higher and more impressive than what my poor memory had given me to expect. How I gazed at them with vivid remembrances of past climbs. That dear old Sugarloaf: how often had I been to the top where, telescope clasped to the eye, I scrutinised the whole surrounding country. But the Blorenge seemed to me now particularly imposing, looming formidably across the valley, as if menacing to overpower the town.

But the real "romance of my "sentimental journey" was yet to come – my search for the KHGS, my visits to both the old and the new premises, and the incredibly wonderful "connections" which resulted.

I may, of course, be wrong, but I think it quite natural that a man should be drawn sentimentally and for the sake of "good old times" to the spots where he spent happy days as a schoolboy, the impressions of early youth having deeply affected his conscious and subconscious self.

When I got to the gate of what I called "my school" – ie the old building and premises of the KHGS, I felt as if H G Wells' time-machine had turned the handle back 48 years. I went into the playground towards the school in a daze, as if wondering if I were not just day-dreaming. The gate, the yard, the gravel, the whole building, every stone of it, seemed to speak to me, and scenes of the past came back to my memory as if I were just looking at some film on which they had been recorded. I could see myself a young boy of fifteen, in short trousers and wearing my school cap, playing football during the intervals. There I was, charging Ted Morgan, or stopping Arthur Hunt, or dribbling the ball past a stockily-built lad by the name of Bush. Then the other visions came; I could see the playground in the winter, all covered with a thick layer of snow, and the epic snowball battles which went on even after school hours.

I was wandering about the grounds like a sleepwalker when a gentleman came out of the school and enquired about my presence there. When I explained that I was an old scholar he introduced himself as Mr Mann, headmaster of the Grofield Secondary Modern School and told me that KHGS had been removed to a new and modern building on the outskirts of the town. However, when he heard of my "sentimental journey" Mr Mann very obligingly offered to show me around the class-rooms of my old school, an invitation which I of course gladly and gratefully accepted.

Here again, the sight of these rooms brought back to my mind a real flood of souvenirs. I remembered the room where Miss Webb taught us the rudiments of French, and where we sang The Minstrel Boy, D'ye Ken John Peel and Auld Lang Syne. In the same room Mr Ralphs told the story of how the French had been licked at Agincourt and taught us how to recite Tennyson's poems. And then there was Miss Marlowe, pale and slender, doing her best to acquaint us with the arcane arts of mathematics. In the adjoining classroom Mr Hilton, loud-voiced and luminous, hammered physics into our unwilling brains and performed some chemical experiments which have

nothing to do with the making of perfumes. Last but not least, was the Headmaster Mr Sifton, who more than once summoned me to his office but who never gave me the cane in spite of the fact that I really deserved it. I can clearly recollect the speech delivered by Mr Sifton to a large audience when, after my first year at school, I came out first in English composition, an event which caused quite a commotion among the boys. I was very sorry to hear that Mr Sifton and all those masters were no longer alive. So I wondered what had become of some of the boys whose names came readily to my mind: William Greene, Arthur Pavord, Hubert Pugh, Billy Shackleton, Leeks, Foster and many others.

When Mr Mann ushered me into his office, I asked him how I could get some information about the fate and whereabouts of these old school comrades. He then advised me to go and see Mr William Powell whom he thought would provide useful information about the Old Boys. Mr Mann could not have given me better advice. Indeed, from that moment on, the events took a swift and wonderful turning. William Powell gave me a most hearty welcome.

Although I had come to these people as a complete stranger, they gave me the impression of being among friends. Mr Powell was all the more interested by my quest as I brought him news from my Uncle who had been in service at Powell's Garage during the first World War.

From the very moment of this meeting I was no longer a lonely souvenir-seeker, as, thanks to Mr Powell, KHGS was informed of my presence. This led to spontaneous results for, on the next day I received an invitation to attend a concert which would be given in the building of the new KHGS and this I most gladly accepted.

The evening of that concert can be ranked among my best souvenirs. I shall never forget the very kind welcome I received at the hands of Headmaster Dr Isaac and Mr Sharpe, Assistant-Headmaster. I was introduced to some of the masters and they all expressed their appreciation of my faithfulness to the memory of my schooldays at the KHGS and the will to come back to see the school again, even after such a long absence. Indeed, I was treated as a guest of honour when, led into the large and beautiful concert hall, I was given a seat in the front row, right next to the Governors. The concert itself proved to be of a high standard from the artistic point of view and was most enjoyable. The electric organ recital was especially outstanding. Ultimately the whole audience was invited to visit the school classrooms which made me realise the huge progress made in modern education.

This wonderful evening held another surprise for me when Mr Sharpe invited me to visit his home. He introduced me to his charming wife, a Frenchwoman by birth, with whom I had a pleasant chat in my native tongue. As we were talking, in came a gentleman who I recognised as Arthur Pavord, one of the "Old Boys" of my schooldays. It was a real treat to see him again and we had a long and pleasant talk, evoking a

great number of little incidents in which we and some of our comrades of the past had been involved. This meeting led to more visits on the following day with other old acquaintances.

On the next day the school governors invited me to lunch at the school. Dr Isaac also introduced me to all the teachers I had not met on my previous visit – they welcomed me as if I were a brother just come back from abroad.

When lunch-time came, I was led into the huge hall where some 300 pupils took their daily lunch. I was seated at the masters table, next to Mr. Sharpe who served me himself. I noticed how well everything was organised, and also how good behaviour and discipline was observed by all these boys and girls, as compared to the unruly youth of my country.

As the meal was nearing its end, Mr Isaac surprised me by standing up and addressed the pupils, informing them about my presence as a guest, and asked me to say a few words about my visit. I got up rather shyly, and made a very short and very poor little speech. However, it was indeed with regret that I took leave of my hosts an hour later.

The rest of my stay in Abergavenny was marked by two more outstanding features. The first was a most enjoyable evening passed on the eve of my departure with William Powell at which we became very firm friends. The second occurred as I stood at Abergavenny station at 6am waiting for the train which was to take me to Newport on the first leg of my homeward journey. Despite the most dreadful weather and the early hour, one of the influential members of the KHGS School Board came to bid me farewell. I have never been treated with such kindness and consideration.

Thanks to the very hearty welcome I met on all sides, my "sentimental journey" was a success which outdid the best of my expectations. So, one may easily understand that, as the train moved out, I felt very grateful towards all these people who had contributed to make my stay so enjoyable, just as I felt a little sad when realizing that the enchantment had now come to an end. Looking out of the carriage window, I took a last look at the town and at the Blorenges and I hopefully said "Au revoir".

My story would have ended here, had not my renewed relations with the KHGS been crowned after I got back home. Great was my elation indeed when the mail brought me a large envelope containing a letter from Mr Richard Downes, Honorary Secretary of the KHGS Old Boys Association stating that the Committee had enrolled me a Life Member of the Association. Annexed were my membership card and a blazer badge. In order to give a little in return for what I received on that trip I made it a point to write these few lines to be published in the next issue of The Gobannian so as to assure all the members of the Association, past and present, that the man who once was the little Belgian boy, refugee of the first World War, had left a large part of his soul and heart amongst them.