

Archie Davidson

Recollections of Incidents and Occasions from My Early Years at the Royal High School

August 2018



Archie at home with RHS Club President Ian Cowie, June 2018



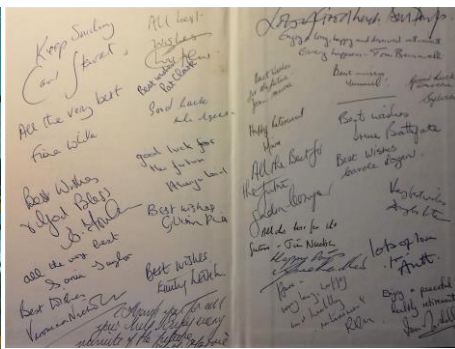
Anne Richards reckons that Archie inspired her to study Physics. Here is Archie presenting Anne with 'Stand-off at Aird Asiag', at the 50th dinner



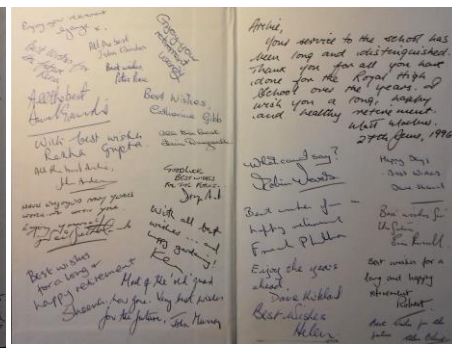
Archie hides his light under a bushel when it comes to painting, as can be seen from the 2003 'Binns Corner', in which both he and his wife feature



Archie with pupils - 21st March 1991



Archies 1996 leaving 'card' page 1



Archies 1996 leaving 'card' page 2

Regent Road

I came to teaching through the Government's Special Recruitment Scheme, a system designed to attract mature students into those subjects where a chronic shortage existed - Mathematics, Science, Languages – nothing changes! My industrial background was in the electronics industry.

I arrived at Regent Road from Moray House College in the Autumn Term of 1967/68, for a six week teaching experience under the tutelage of Mr Taylor (Physics) and Mr. Dingwall (Mathematics).

Mr. Taylor was assisted by Ron MacKay in his second probationary year. There was a laboratory technician, Ron Wright and a Laboratory assistant, Mrs. Mann, whose services were shared with the Chemistry (Lawson Smith) and Biology (Glen Peters) Departments.

I was installed in Mr Taylor's laboratory, a traditional lab with sets of long dark oak benches and windows high on the walls. A preparation and storage area had been created by the erection of a thin partition wall behind a desk which stood on a raised dais. This was disconcerting. Clearly Mr Taylor would be party to every utterance of a trainee, stumbling through those daunting first weeks before a class. However, he quickly proved to be very understanding of one's inevitable anxieties.

There was a moment of doubt initially when he said "we had a student from the Heriot-Watt a year ago – he was really very good!". He did not quite say 'surprisingly good' and it was not an intended slight; that was not Mr Taylor's style. This was when the Heriot-Watt Technical College had recently been elevated to University status, and was a largely unknown quantity among suspicious graduates from the established universities. I was much later to encounter colleagues whose derogatory comments were most certainly intentional.

Mr. Dingwall was equally helpful, although there was inevitably less contact with his Department.

Staff gathered in a common room for morning tea and biscuits, before a fireplace with a cheery coal fire in the grate, around which was an arrangement of chairs. There was a clear pecking order. The inner arc was the domain of senior members, while those of diminished status were confined to the nether regions. Some of that privileged group displayed a disappointing attitude to we students, gathered on the periphery, neither speaking to nor acknowledging our presence. Their aloof behaviour continued at Barnton. They would sweep along corridors, gowns trailing in their slipstream. Most had gone by the time the comprehensive conversion got fully underway.

The newly introduced Alternative Physics Syllabus *Radioactivity* section included a demonstration of the properties of the various emissions. This required a vital piece of equipment called a scaler, which converted the pulses from a Geiger-Muller tube into counts on a decatron display. Without its use the lessons would be reduced to 'chalk and talk'. Sadly, the scaler was found to be unserviceable. Fortunately, with Mr Taylor's permission, I was allowed to examine the device and effect a repair.

I think it was this happy outcome, rather than any latent teaching ability, which later resulted in a phone call to Moray House offering me a temporary teaching post towards the end of the summer term, which at that time extended to the end of July. I was encouraged by Mr. Taylor to apply for a permanent position from the start of the 1968/69 session, which application was successful.

I think Mr. Taylor thought that, while he was acquiring a teacher of uncertain qualities, he was also acquiring a technician who would be an asset among the array of electronic apparatus which the Alternative Syllabus demanded. He was correct on both counts.

Early Days at Barnton

When the school moved out to suburbia it did so with little goodwill from certain quarters. Labour Councillors with a Comprehensive urge would have it disband but were powerless in the face of a Progressive (Conservative) majority. An articulate group of Old Boys feared it would become just another local school without the prestige of its former setting. An odd-ball independent Councillor, John Kidd, was especially incensed. He claimed in *The Edinburgh Evening News* that some of the young toffs were arriving at school on horseback. He did not explain what stabling arrangements the school provided and the paper made no enquiry.

The Royal High continued as before, a selective boys' establishment, albeit in a less regal setting and in a building which quickly qualified for the description 'run down and in need of repair'.

A welcome face at the start of the Session was that of Eric Brown who had taken up a post in the Biology Department. We had gone through Moray House together. Eric had the distinction of being their oldest ever student. Previously he had taught in Bathgate Academy as an 'uncertified' teacher but the newly formed General Teaching Council had decreed that only those registered with it could teach in Scottish schools. Henceforth all Scottish teachers could claim to have been 'certified'.

Previously Eric had recovered from serious injury in the family quarry when he went forward to inspect a charge which had failed to detonate. He had also been an independent Councillor in West Lothian. During the war he served as a wireless operator in the Merchant Navy and survived the trauma which resulted when his ship was torpedoed. Quite a life! He was a wonderful colleague with an endless fund of stories.

There were many other staff at that time who had endured military service, some with wartime experience. Among the latter were Lawson Smith (Chemistry) Royal Navy; Donald MacDonald (Geography) Parachute Regiment; James Taylor (Physics) POW, captured on the retreat to Dunkirk. They made my own contribution to Britain's military might feel distinctly insignificant. All were reluctant to talk about their wartime service.

Mr Taylor decided that I should present an evening class on 'Electronic Design', for the benefit of Principal Teachers with limited knowledge of the subject. This was a daunting prospect for a first-year probationer. The course consisted of theory and practice, and I was astonished when many of these older men removed their jackets to reveal a J&J Dick's Lochgelly Heavy nestling under braces between shoulder and armpit. They clearly needed to be quick on the draw in their schools

Mr. Taylor did not stay long at Barnton, moving in 1969 to be Headteacher at Tynecastle High School. He was a man of deep religious conviction and caused a stir on arrival when he banned Sunday outings. However, his inherent sense of decency and fairness overcame any early misgivings.

Sadly, he died within months of retiring.

John Pearson replaced Mr Taylor but he too did not stay long. John was a man of ambition. He moved quickly to Jordanhill College as a tutor, then to Ayrshire as Science Advisor and latterly to a post in Strathclyde's Education Department. I was appointed PT Physics from the start of the 1971/72 Session.

The Illegal Teacher

In 1972, during one of those recurring staff shortages which the Special Recruitment Scheme had failed to remedy, the Council's Personnel Department sent us a personable young man to fill the gap. We were not given an opportunity to interview him, so had only the information provided to us. He had a Physics degree and, we were told, had completed his Moray House training.

He took over a range of classes from S1 Science to S5 Physics.

After some weeks I received a phone call from Personnel asking that he should forward his GTC Registration details which they had omitted to check at the time of his employment. Several similar requests followed, each with an increasing urgency.

The last occasion occurred as the bell was ringing for the morning interval. As his class left I confronted him, at which point he became tearful and admitted that, while he had enrolled at the College, he had never completed the course.

A phone call to Alex Hall (Farquhar Macintosh was out of school) brought the response that he should 'clear his desk and report downstairs forthwith'. I never saw him again.

The class returned from break to find themselves without a teacher and asking some awkward questions. It meant for a while conducting some classes across two laboratories, an unsatisfactory arrangement. This happened occasionally, although without the drama which the uncertificated teacher provided.

The Council and the school had a lucky escape. Had an accident occurred while he was in charge of a class there would have been some very difficult legal questions asked and some equally unwelcome publicity.

Some Random Notes

The Principal Teacher's Dinner

It was a 'black tie' event, held in 1972 at The Scottish Art Club premises in Rutland Square, thanks to Nigel MacIsaac's connections there. It was presided over by Deputy Rector Alex Hall. Baillie Ruthven had left by then but made an appearance. Farquhar Macintosh had yet to be installed.

It commenced formally with The Loyal Toast. Everyone stood: "Gentlemen – The Queen!" As the evening progressed, wine flowed, tongues wagged and a jolly time ensued. A highlight of the occasion was ex-Paratrooper MacDonald's retelling of *The Tale of the Wee Sheet Metal Worker*. For anyone unfamiliar with this epic it is perhaps best not to ask.

By 1973 female Principal Teachers were being appointed in numbers. The format of the Dinner was deemed to be inappropriate, and so a High School occasion was abandoned.

That Man Brown Again!

Mother Duck

Eric famously became Mother Duck to a clutch of ducklings hatched in the Biology Department. They followed him everywhere, line astern, along corridors and up and down stairs, appearing on demand in classrooms to a previously arranged request programme. They were eventually rehoused in the Borders where his daughter and husband farmed.

A moment of Panic

Eric came back to see me long after he retired. We leaned on a bench by the window in R35, reminiscing while my 5th Year got on with their work. I suddenly became aware that he was slowly sliding downwards, just in time to catch him and lay him out on the floor. While a pupil went off to call an ambulance I was inundated with conflicting advice from others who clearly had more first-aid instruction than I. I had visions of a brass plate marking the spot where a High School worthy met his demise. Fortunately it was a false alarm, he made a full recovery, and lived for many years afterward

Big Guns

Glen Peters (PT Biology) had held a short-term commission in the Royal Artillery. He had enjoyed his military service, spent mainly on The Rock. He had a way of expressing educational events in military terms. We occasionally called him 'Captain Peters' and I think he was quietly pleased with this. He introduced us to the army term GAMFU. I'll not translate, other than to say it refers to a military blunder of extreme proportions. He often identified its educational equivalent, a GAEFU presumably.

Lawson Smith (PT Chemistry) was a High School FP. He never quite came to terms with the transformation to suburban comprehensive and he left after a year or two to become a Moray House tutor. He and Glen would argue over the merits of the big guns – artillery field pieces versus the might of the naval broadside. I don't expect there are many discussions of this sort in today's staff room.

Ron Wright:

Ron Wright was Edinburgh's first school science technician, thanks to an initiative pursued by Jim Taylor. He came to the school without formal training, but unlike some of his successors he was keen to extend his skills, expressing a particular interest in TV repairs. He produced a TV or two and proved to be a willing and able learner, so much so that soon we were receiving ailing sets from around the school and beyond. The repairs were done as an obligation, no money or other gratuities were involved. Things were getting out of hand, the workshop was coming to resemble a TV repair shop, and eyebrows were being raised. One morning Baillie Ruthven appeared at the door. He had not come to reprimand but to seek help with his own set which he had in the back of his car. The repair was duly performed but after this we wound down the business. Ron had gained a lot of confidence and a range of new skills. Shortly afterwards he applied for and secured employment with Nuclear Enterprises at Sighthill which offered greater financial reward and promotional opportunities.

Academic Snobberies

An unpleasant trait exhibited by a pair of younger teachers was a peculiar interest in qualifications. They would sit with the *Annual Report* perusing the staff list while making derogatory remarks whenever they deemed a qualification to be of less value than their own. Years on the Heriot-Watt was still 'not a proper university'. I wondered at their ability to offer any meaningful career advice. It seemed that their own path from school to university and back again left them unqualified to do so. In other respects they were likeable colleagues.

Physics is Fun (Possibly)

The Alternative O Grade course was based on a 'learning by discovery' model, its driving force being Jim Jardine, author of *Physics is Fun Vol 1-4*, and later the snappily titled Higher textbook *Nat Phil*.

Chalk and Talk was out and Experiment was in. He said on one occasion (and I don't think he was joking) that the best way for a pupil to learn about electricity was to hand him or her a box of wires, bulbs and batteries and to 'let them get on with it'. I don't know what sort of pupils Jim had at George Watsons, but I think such an unstructured approach would have a predictable outcome of burnt-out bulbs, flat batteries, a tangle of wires and not much understanding. The Alternative course allowed time to deviate from the syllabus occasionally, and explore topics such as Soldering, Wiring a Plug, or Lissajous Figures. We could transmit music around the top floor on a low

power medium wave transmitter connected to a cassette player. Pupils would tune in using what they called their 'trannies' – transistor radios. The power of superheated steam was demonstrated by Fred Steele, a Londoner who joined us as a supply teacher during one of those periodic staff shortages. As the invisible gas emerged from the end of a copper tube he would, with a flourish, set alight any sheet of paper held in its vicinity.

Standard Grade

A valid criticism of the O Grade course was that it had no provision for the less able. The only recourse to certification was by adopting an English Exam Board's CSE. It was a problem not fully addressed until the introduction of Standard Grades.

The Discovery Model was out and in was The Worksheet - piles of them. Now it was *Read, Collect, Do*. It was said that on the third Monday in October all S4 Physics pupils across Scotland would be engaged with worksheet 7 of the *Health Physics* topic. Perhaps an exaggeration.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma

Farquhar Macintosh was an educational visionary. The Council offered him an opportunity to find a 'special role' for The High School. How sincere the offer was is questionable, but his response demonstrated that breadth of vision. He proposed that the school should integrate the IB into the school structure. Residential provision was part of that structure.

Over the ensuing years promoted staff were sent to Atlantic College in South Wales to observe the IB in action. I recall sitting in on a lesson on photoelectricity when a class of students from around Europe and beyond were taught by a gentleman with a heavy Eastern European accent. It is truly a prestigious international college! This is what Farquhar sought to bring to Scotland.

Unfortunately, there were those within the school who did not share his enthusiasm. Some staff saw the IB as a distraction from the task of converting a selective boy's school into a successful comprehensive. Some had less honourable objections. They worked against, rather than with the project, sometimes in an underhand way. The latitude permitted was disappointing; the Barons of Industry would have been less accommodating. Political opposition increased and a bold plan foundered. One can only speculate over what might have been. Perhaps a centre of international academic excellence in that magnificent vacant building on Regent Road - who can say?

Conclusions

These are some recollections of my time in The High School. A few of the incidents or occasions recalled were of little consequence, but the idiosyncrasies of the brain cause memories of them to persist. Others were more important at the time. Now all are of no significance and most of the characters involved are long dead. If there is anything among them worthy of inclusion in The Archive, I will be delighted - and surprised.

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