

## **Jane Frith, Rector 2009 - 2014**

My arrival at The Royal High School in 2009 happened with very little warning. It was the first day of the new school session in August and I was running the inservice days for staff in the school, Wester Hailes Education Centre, where I had worked for over 20 years.



My role on that day was senior depute, but immediately prior to this, I had been the acting head teacher for about 18 months. The substantive headteacher had been on secondment to another school and had just returned to resume his role. During the course of that first day, I took a phone call from the Head of Schools in CEC. He asked if I would consider going to The Royal High School to help out for a while; there had been a number of staff changes and it was felt I could be useful there. This took me completely by surprise, but as everyone in senior management had just left acting roles in Wester Hailes, it was actually quite an easy move to make; everyone else simply resumed their acting roles, but with Alex Wood as headteacher rather than me. That was how I found myself at The Royal High School twenty four hours later!

My role at that point was senior depute and David Simpson was the acting Rector, following the secondment of George Smuga to the Curriculum for Excellence team. George had resigned his post, but David had declined to apply

for the position, preferring to return to his post as senior depute. The post was advertised and I applied. A few weeks later, I was appointed and David and I swapped roles.

As the first female Rector in the history of the school, there was a certain amount of media interest in my appointment, although women headteachers were well represented across Edinburgh by this time. The long history of the school was something about which I was very mindful and I was fortunate to have the support of so many long-serving members of staff, not to mention The Royal High School Club, to guide me in maintaining the traditions and culture of the school.

It is memories associated with the traditions and the wonderful ethos of the school which stay with me most potently. I recall the Service of Remembrance which we held in the Assembly Hall each year, a very poignant event given the history of the school. The significance of the Memorial Doors and the Windows and the importance of the plaques commemorating the young people of the school who lost their lives in the conflicts of the twentieth century, are ingrained in my mind. I was proud to be a part of this service and found it very moving to witness current pupils laying wreaths, remembering their counterparts with such respect. Such is the nature of The Royal High School.

In a similar vein, high on my list of memorable events must be my meetings with former pupil Eric Brown. I first met Eric in London at the Former Pupils' Dinner and I was captivated by his speech in which he recounted some of his extraordinary experiences. Captain Eric Brown was a test pilot in the navy and holds world records for flying the most different types of aircraft and for conducting the most aircraft carrier landings. He had several near-death encounters in his career and was present at many key moments in the war. He was 92 at the time I first met him and he spoke for over half an hour without notes. He was witty, humorous and very entertaining. I was fortunate enough to be seated next to him at dinner and found him to be an engaging and very personable dinner companion. During the main course, however, I became aware that Eric was coughing and then he started to choke. He was struggling to breathe. The choking became more and more noticeable in the room, which fell silent. Someone went to summon medical help. I tried to pat him gently on the back. At 92 years of age I was worried about fragile bones, but after another half minute of this, his wife, Jean, just said "Hit him hard", so I did. Thankfully, this dislodged the food that had stuck in his throat and there was a huge sigh of relief in the room, not least from me.

Some time after this, I received a phone call from another former pupil who had agreed to deliver the former pupils' address at Prize-giving; unfortunately, circumstances had developed which meant he was no longer able to attend. Having organised this several months prior to the ceremony, I wondered what on earth I was going to do at such short notice. Eric's name came to mind. It would be fantastic if he would do it, but I did not really expect him to agree. He lived in London and it would be a huge imposition. I argued with myself for half an hour and then decided

he could only say no, so I acquired his phone number and made the call. Eric was as charming as ever and said yes immediately. I was amazed and delighted.

A few weeks later Eric held the hall captive with memories of school and stories of his extraordinary experiences throughout his long career. He also joked, with a twinkle in his eye, how I had saved his life at dinner some weeks earlier! His speech was truly inspirational. He received a standing ovation.

I met Eric on other occasions also and always enjoyed his company. I feel very privileged to have met this remarkable man, one of the few people who can truly be called a hero. I was saddened to learn of his death early in 2016.

Other memories of my time in The Royal High School abound. The ethos of the school is underpinned by the many shows, performances and charity fundraising events, which take place throughout the year. The fringe performance of *Hairspray*, initiated and orchestrated by Tom Baciarelli and Gary Snedden and supported by many other members of staff, was an absolute highlight. The school Assembly Hall became a fringe venue and the standard of the performance was superb, one member of the public commenting that it was better than the version she had seen on Broadway!

The many Dress Down/Dress up days for charity and the sponsored walks in which the entire school took part, also loom large in my memory. There was always a wonderful atmosphere in school. I enjoyed dressing as a witch for the Harry Potter themed day, but perhaps most memorable was abseiling from the roof of C block for Habitat for Humanity. The rope became jammed in the carabiner clip as I went over the edge, leaving me dangling for several minutes until we managed to free it. Someone suggested the headline: Head suspended from top Edinburgh school! We raised a lot of money for the nominated charities at these events and participation was phenomenal.

The finale of each year, of course is Prize-giving and Commemoration, a ceremony the like of which is not seen in other schools and it is valued enormously by our leavers. This, rightly, remained unchanged, but, in line with the new curriculum, was supplemented in recent years by an additional event to celebrate Wider Achievement in the school. This was a great addition to the school calendar and provided an evening of celebration, which was enjoyed by all.

Fond memories of my time at The Royal High School are many, but it was also a time of significant change and there were many challenges. Not least among these was the re-structure of management following budget restraints imposed by CEC. Principal Teacher positions were replaced by Curricular Leaders and specialist subject departments became multi-disciplinary faculties. A reduction in the number of Guidance Teachers, re-named as Support for Pupils Teachers, also meant that we had to re-structure the way we supported young people in school. This was a difficult time for all, not least because it took place at a time in which Curriculum for Excellence was being introduced. This was a substantial change, not just to the structure and content of the curriculum we were delivering at every level, but also to the methodology. New courses had to be developed and materials created to support them. In addition, Standard Grade was replaced by the new Nationals, with the new Higher set to be introduced the following year. All in all, it was a stressful time for everyone, but staff in The Royal High School were incredibly hard-working and professional throughout.

Other changes during this time included the enhancement of technology across the school by the introduction of ipads to classrooms. This changed the way students learned. Initially, sets of ipods were distributed to departments to use and familiarity with them in a learning environment developed. Shortly before I left the school, we distributed ipads to every student in S3 (who were about to go into S4). This was the start of a programme which has since continued.

Another challenge I clearly recall was the day I was informed that the entire PE block had to be closed and evacuated immediately as a wall was in danger of collapsing. Apparently, a maintenance worker had been on the roof and witnessed it waving in the wind. With no changing rooms, swimming pool or gym facilities, this caused major upheaval and involved bussing pupils to other schools for some activities for a period of a few months. As usual the staff rose to the occasion and managed this wonderfully, despite the huge disruption. In the light of what happened a couple of years after I left, when half the school campus had to be closed because more structural defects were discovered, I am thankful that the disruption was managed so well and relieved that no one was hurt.

Another change which took place during this time was the introduction of an Activities Week in the summer; this also supported Curriculum for Excellence. The S1 camp was moved to the summer and the whole year group went en masse to Dounans rather than in Nation Groups; S3 excursions, already well established, were extended to include visits to Rome and southern Italy, as well as France and London; S2 students and some S3 engaged in a whole raft of in-school activities or day excursions. In due course, as the Nationals replaced Standard Grade, some S4 students who were not on exam leave also joined in a programme of activities. This was a fabulous week of suspended timetable, which allowed young people to experience a range of new activities, but it could not have happened without the goodwill and expertise of staff.

As I write this piece, I find that more memories are triggered and flood in. It is tempting to keep writing, but I shall refrain. Being Rector of The Royal High School was the highlight of my career. It is a wonderful school. I shall always look back upon this time with great fondness.