

2025 RHS CLUB DINNER
Toast to the Royal High School and RHS Club
David Robb

(Optional) Thank you for that generous welcome. I canny wait to hear myself!

Rector (sorry Pauline, I know we're supposed to call you Head Teacher now, but you'll always be Rector to me), former pupils of the Royal High School, (pupils of the Royal High School), honoured guests ...

Before I embark on the memories and jokes, I'd like to start with a bit of an overview of our world when we were schoolboys in the late 1950s and the 1960s.

It was a very different world. Britain was still an imperial power, albeit one in decline. It was a patriarchal society run almost exclusively by men whose wives would serve as mothers, carers and auxiliary support. I don't recall any of my contemporaries having a mother with a career.

This was the world us baby boomers – the blessed generation – were born into. The first beneficiaries of the newly created

National Health Service, we mostly walked to school, unmolested, through traffic-free streets. As we grew it seemed that every medical advance and breakthrough benefited us, from the eradication of TB and polio to the Pill becoming universally available just as we reached sexual maturity. Later in life, medical procedures which would have been pure science fiction to our parents have become readily available – knee and hip replacements, organ transplants – and now medicine to give us the illusion of youth regained – perhaps even the reality of youth should one so desire! And through it all – and I may be pushing my luck here – we haven't had to fight a war for national survival.

I have a confession to make before I continue – I was born in London. (I feel so much better for getting that off my chest!)

Offspring of a Scots Dad and an English Mum, home was a terraced house shared with my parents, grandparents and Jock the dog, within walking distance of the Wimbledon tennis courts. Every year we used to come up to Scotland by train, me in my little kilt and tweed jacket, to visit my paternal grandparents who lived in Bellshill, in those days still a small mining town to the south of Glasgow. Quite a culture shock, that, and I never got used to the chamber pot under the bed routine, or worse, the walk of embarrassment across the yard to the outside lavatory of a morning. I hated that loo; it was always freezing, even in summer, and there were spiders!



In 1959 my English grandparents died within three months of each other and my Dad concerned about my mother's emotional state, applied for a transfer north of the border and we moved up to Edinburgh in the spring of 1960.

Joining a new school two thirds of the way through the school year is clearly unsatisfactory and I struggled in that summer term. I remember almost nothing about it except turning up on my first day wearing the school cap, an item of uniform only required to be worn at the Junior School down at Jock's Lodge.

The ridicule was humbling. I wouldn't say I was bullied but I was "the other" and didn't sound like the rest of the boys. The way to integrate was to become a Scottish laddie asap, something I managed in record time and by the start of the new session in the following September I had bedded in.

The teaching staff at the old Royal High were, of course, products of their time, and many had had active war careers; notably Big Mac, Mr McDougall, who had been a Royal Marine Commando and had dispensed death to the enemy at close quarters, and the remarkable Hector Maciver, who had served in the Royal Navy on Russian convoys. I marvel now at their ability to revert to a normal life after enduring such intense and disturbing experiences when they were so young.

There were only three full-time female members of staff, Fanny, Flossie and Fifi. I don't know who the compulsive alliterator was but that was how they were universally known. Fanny taught Biology, Fifi French and Flossie Duncan was a Maths teacher, so I had a prolonged period of being in her class because it took me three attempts to pass 'O' Level Maths. Having to resit for the second time when I was a prefect is without doubt the uncoolest moment of my sixth year.

Flossie was a sweet natured woman who possessed a retrusive R – her Rs would sound like Ws – like Jonathan Ross. One day she pounced on the class clown who wasn't paying attention, one Allan Aithie, and demanded:

"Aithie, define a pawawewogwam."

We all thought the same thing – surely he wouldn't – but he did:

"A PAWAWEWOGWAM IS A QUADWIWATEWAL WITH OPPOSITE SIDES EQUAW AND PAWAWEW."

I think even Flossie thought it mildly amusing and the odd thing is I can still remember the definition of parallelogram.

In November 1963 President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. It was a Friday and news travelled much slower back then. Through that evening and over the weekend the details of this seismic event dominated the two TV channels and the Home Service on the radio. All of us who were alive then would remember for the rest of our days where we were when we heard that Kennedy had been shot.

On the Monday morning it was a school day as usual but that day was never going to be normal. Over the years, the school had expanded beyond the original Thomas Hamilton building, now being so lovingly restored, into numbers 1, 2 and 4 Regent Terrace. Number 3 Regent Terrace was, and still is, the American Consulate in Edinburgh. As I cut through by the Café Royal onto the east end of Princes Street on that Monday, it was immediately clear that something was up. There were police everywhere and a vast queue was inching up

Waterloo Place towards the old school. These were people who had come to sign the Book of Condolence in the US Consulate. The police were fast tracking all of us wearing black blazers up the opposite pavement, past the Calton graveyard and St Andrews House, and then shunting batches of us across Regent Road and in to school.

The morning assembly was extraordinary. The Rector, David Imrie, who was to die in harness less than one year later, gave a moving address, telling us of the significance of Kennedy's murder and reminding us that Number 3 Regent Terrace was American soil, and that we should conduct ourselves with dignity and decorum. I can honestly say that I never saw any horseplay or boisterous behaviour that day. It was a profound experience to feel that we were, albeit peripherally, part of a tragic and memorable world event – and when we left school at the end of the day, the queue was still snaking down Waterloo Place and across the top of Leith Walk.

By the end of 1963 those of us in our impressionable teenage years began to sense something in the air, a change – it manifested in comedy, fashion, design and, of course, music. Now we call it "The Sixties" but what we came to recognise later as a social revolution seemed at the time to just be a spontaneous burst of irreverent fun; but the old order – deference, unquestioning obedience, respect for the church and politics – was being undermined by a breaking down of social barriers. Edinburgh, with its annual International Festival, played its part as the Fringe came into existence and bright young Oxbridge types – Alan Bennett, Jonathan Miller, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore – tore up the comedy rule book. A weekly late night TV show called "That was the week that was" honed satire to an art form, lampooned Harold Macmillan, the sitting Prime Minister, and made a star of David Frost.

And accompanying this joyous new wave, pop music enjoyed its own revolution as British groups (never called bands, then) appeared, fully formed and proceeded to sell Rock 'n Roll and the Blues back to the Americans, whose music it was in the first place.

I was chatting to, I think, a Gen Zee person recently who said, "Oh yeah, the Beatles – they were the boy band of their day, weren't they..."

I suppose to really understand and appreciate the significance of the Beatles you need to be old enough to remember how bland and unoriginal pop music was before them. As Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones said in a rare moment of sobriety, "The Beatles kicked down the door and we walked in". Nobody was immune to these changes, even elderly folk who might've shaken their heads in puzzlement, but were powerless to stop it.

In 1964 the Royal High School acquired a new Rector following the sudden death of Dr Imrie. Baillie T Ruthven was a considerably younger man and it fell to him to adapt and accommodate the changes that were happening in society. He made a good job of it and by the summer of 1966, when I left school, he'd instituted a less traditional regime while keeping the essence, and some of the quirks, that made the school unique.

By now I had gravitated to the dramatic society as my preferred after school activity. Hector Maciver, head of the English department, had directed some remarkably high calibre school plays and in the summer of '64 he had the nerve to put on a production of "Othello".

Nowadays this would be out of the question, because sensibilities have changed, but there was no offence intended when Brian Lang, the personification of Aryan good looks,

(reference Brian?) blacked up as the Moor of Venice and smothered Roger Sadler's Desdemona every evening for a week. I was playing Cassio and was required to play a drunk scene – God alone knows what that was like as I had yet to experience my first hangover. I think it was at this time that I started to contemplate the possibility of a career as an actor. I was encouraged in this by the emergence of a new generation of young actors making names for themselves – Albert Finney, Peter O'Toole, Alan Bates – none of them grand theatrical types like Olivier or Gielgud – and therefore more relatable.

By the beginning of the 1965-66 school session, my last school year, I had decided to pursue a career in the theatre, though my Dad still hoped I was “passing through a phase” and that the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, and hopefully a commission in the Scots Guards, would be the sensible option. It never happened – and it's a little bit late in the day to change my mind now!

I recall my last year at the Royal High School as being rather agreeable, largely because of my elevation to the prefectship. The obvious candidates for prefect were the academically gifted and the sporting Gods. Since I didn't feature under either of those headings, I suspect I had Hector Maciver to thank for the recommendation.

There were 25 of us, headed by the school captain – Billy Seath in my year – and we operated as the NCOs of the school, the staff being the officers. The old building was a mass of nooks and crannies where various forms of misbehavior could – and did – occur, so there was a prefect's patrol during the lunch break, to ensure there were no fights occurring in the front playground and that the smoking club down by the dungeons was dispersed and fags confiscated.

The prefects' room resembled a scruffy gentleman's club with ancient armchairs with broken springs, a coffee table with confiscated pin-up mags scattered upon it and a kettle and a Baby Belling stove and toaster in the corner. We had a transistor radio permanently tuned to the pirate station Radio Forth and we felt there was a palpable sense of entitlement among those who wore the silver badge and the black tie. Even members of staff were expected to knock before entering the room.

Most extraordinary of all – we were permitted to administer a gym shoe, delivered with some velocity, to the rear end of any boy deemed to have deserved it. My recollection is that this punishment was very rarely dished out and when it was, it was intended to humiliate, not inflict pain. I have though occasionally mused that I had more power as an 18 year old schoolboy than I've ever held since. Heaven forfend that I should sound nostalgic for this regime, I simply say it was so.

We didn't just loll around channeling *Brideshead Revisited*; as well as ongoing studies, prefects had routine duties – the aforementioned patrol at lunchtime, policing the queue for the Grubby and reading the lesson at morning assembly. I did quite a lot of that, so you can see the way things were going.

We were also used, in rare circumstances, to maintain some semblance of order if there was unexpected illness among the staff and before cover could be provided. I well recall John McNicol and I running a couple of English classes when Hector Maciver was taken ill during the autumn term. We weren't teaching of course, just keeping order and the boys engaged, but it certainly concentrated the mind!

Hector was still in hospital when we broke up for Christmas and Hogmany and a couple of us went to visit him at the old infirmary on New Year's Eve. We took him a bottle of malt whisky which was immediately seized by the nurses. I don't think we'd put two and two together that Hector was suffering from liver disease and that we'd brought him a bottle of poison.

He died very nearly 59 years ago in the spring of 1966 and was buried on 3rd of May in Crichton Churchyard in Temple, Midlothian, where he lived. All the prefects attended, together with a huge contingent of FPs, friends and colleagues. He would've been especially proud that among them was his old commanding officer from the Royal Navy ...

So then the summer arrived, rather a good one, weather-wise, as I recall. Exams were over, the school play was done and dusted and those of us who had celebrated our 18th birthdays were marking time until Prize Day and our last day at school.

I know the essence of the leaving ceremony has been preserved at Barnton and I think that's a brilliant thing. The act of literally leaving one's childhood by passing through the Memorial Day into adulthood is so simple but so profound. If the weather was kind – and it was in 1966 – it added an extra element as one walked through the blinding rays of the sun pouring into the Great Hall, like a Hollywood special effect, and onto the portico above the Old Town looking due south towards Arthur's Seat.

It moved me then and it did so again a few weeks ago when I was asked to do some publicity for the restoration project of the old school. The science block and the Grubby are no more but the Great Hall, those rooms where we spent so much of our teenage years and the nooks and crannies are still there and as I stood once more on the portico drinking in that fabulous view, so are the memories ... which I treasure.

This has been an honour, thank you for listening.

VIVAS SCHOLA REGIA.

@david robb, 2025