



Whitehill F.P.s' Club Newsletter

Issue XXX November, 2023

Dreich, dreich (what a great word that is) November. However, the festive season is just around the corner and we can look forward to some cheer. The Newsletter is a bit of a mixed bag, covering the recent autumn lunch, and letters from Australia and New Zealand and a separate attachment with a story from author and former pupil Tom McNab. We hope you enjoy them.

Autumn Lunch

The autumn lunch was held at the Marriott on 26th October, attended by 26 FPs and their partners. Although attendance at events continues to decline, the lunch was judged by all to have been a success. Headteacher Ruth McConnachie updated us on the recent successes of pupils in debating, sport and academic accomplishments. Whitehill School continues to punch above its weight and achieves the goal of seeking higher things.

Letter from New Zealand



In response to the note we sent out about Gordon Caskie being interviewed by Ben Fogle on the BBC's "Scotland's Sacred Islands" programme, Irene Rutter wrote the following message to me with memories of her stays on Islay, probably in the 1940's (although she didn't give me any dates).

"When I was a little girl, our neighbour used to return "home" at the Glasgow fair fortnight, on her only holiday from work in Glasgow. Home for her was a wee cottage by the beach in Portnahaven, Islay, and I went too. We sailed from the Broomielaw and watched at the rail in great excitement as the island came into view...lots of people went back to the islands in those days, to help the old folk bring in the peats for the winter and have precious family time, of course. Once on the island, we boarded the bus which went from one village to another, where families came out, waiting to greet the travellers. There was the peat fire on which the cooking was done, kerosene lamps, water fetched in a bucket from a good trickle at the foot of the hill. Best of all, was the cow who lived "ben the hoose", which was the byre, accessed directly through the kitchen door. She lived outside in summer but was brought into the byre for milking.

How I loved her smell! The hens were outside but came into the byre at night and laid their eggs...my job to find them...everybody under the same roof...Memories!

Irene Rutter (nee Gourlay), New Zealand"

Letters from Australia

We received another letter from the antipodes, this time from Fraser Tonner. His stories remind me of Alistair Cook's "Letters from America". There will be more from Fraser in future Newsletters.

The Great Plughole Debate

I" currently abide in Western Australia [WA], the biggest state in Australia [2.5million km²], population 2.6 million and same number of Kangaroos. The capital city is Perth, population 2 million so you can imagine how empty the rest of the state is.

I live in Quinns Rocks 50km north of Perth, really nice little place. Nice beaches and quite quiet. I was determined in 1981 to confirm the fact that when water goes down the plughole in Scotland, it goes one way and in Australia, it goes the other way. Unfortunately, by the time I got here, I couldn't remember what way it went in Scotland in the first place. Whole exercise has been a complete waste of time".

Driving



"WA prides its self in having the worst drivers in the Southern Hemisphere exceeded only by Romania that isn't even in the same hemisphere. Driving is relatively safe here unless you sally forth outside the city at dusk or dawn. Kangaroos jump on your car and wreck it and so do Emu. An Emu is like a giant 60kg chicken with a giraffe's neck and a brain the size of a walnut. Of course this is an exaggeration, same as everything else in Australia. Its brain is more like a lentil. Further out you can get ripped to shreds by wild pigs or run into a wild bull. Wild bulls are very black and big and weigh about a tonne. The retina in their eyes does not reflect light so you can't see them in the headlights. The only way you know you have hit one is when your relatives read about it in the local paper. Further up north there are Buffalo. They are bigger than bulls and best if you don't annoy them.

I don't even want to discuss spiders and snakes".

My thanks to Irene and Fraser for their contributions. It would be good to have some letters from our members in Canada, U.S.A. or elsewhere.

Tom McNab

Tom McNab, Author and Sport Coach (amongst other things) sent me the following *true story*, no doubt with a twist and some fiction added. It is a great read.

BACK IN 1850

I have travelled back to the year of 1850 - I even won my first competition in that year. Let me now try to explain, in a way which salvages what may now remain of my reputation.

In 1950, at the age of sixteen, I travelled with a cohort of my classmates down into the depths of the Scottish borders.

We travelled there from Glasgow to "howk" potatoes from the unforgiving southern soil. It was common practice in those days, a way of avoiding school for a couple of summer weeks.

But what, you may well ask, does the word "howk" mean? It means eight hours a day of back-breaking labour in fields of potatoes, digging them from the ground, for the princely wage of £1 a week. It gave me a lifelong respect for those poor souls who spent their working lives in agricultural labour. But help was at hand. In the second day of my howking I secured a local newspaper, which contained some fascinating information. It was that in a few days there would be an athletics meeting a few miles away at Kirkowan, with prizes of £1 per event. None of my friends showed much interest in it, but that Saturday I departed on a bus for Kirkowan.

I had from the outset realized that this was a "professional" meeting, one of the last remnants of the culture from which modern athletics had derived. It was essentially a Border version of the Highland Games, lacking any throws, but no matter. Professional at £1 an event, surely hardly a profession? But in those dark days, merely to enter such an event, even if you won absolutely nothing, served to immediately make you a "professional". No matter that amateur athletics had virtually no existence in rural areas, giving you no real choice, no matter what your ability, the Olympic Games were not for you. So it was all right if an athlete's income in a Soviet bloc nation derived from the government, perfectly fair that in the USA your athletic ability would give you three years of free university education. But God help you if you crossed the line to pick up a few quid in a Border Games, that automatically made you a despised "professional".

I decided to go for broke, to compete under my own name, entered what appeared to be a farmer's field, and handed over three sixpences to enter for long jump, high jump and hop step and jump. It did not take me long to see that this WAS indeed a farmer's field, albeit one bustling with about a thousand spectators. Because I could now see only a bumpy grass arena, with a pegged six laps to the mile track. In the distance there were what appeared to be pole vault and high jump stands, and in the middle of the field there was a tent. I was directed towards the long jump, where stood an ancient mustachiod official, holding a clip-board.

"Aye?" he growled, as I reached him. "I'd like to enter for the long jump.. sir" I said.

"Yer name?" "Tom McNab", I replied.

I looked around me at the bumpy grass.

"Where's the pit, sir?" I asked.

He scowled. "There's nae pit aroond here, son," he replied.

"And the take-off board, sir?"

He looked at me with something approaching pity. "You jist try tae take off somewhere aroond me," was his response.

My first impulse was to ask him what to do if he decided to move, but I decided against it, and laid a pair of socks near him as he was now surrounded by other competitors. These were what we Glasgow toffs labelled "choochters", farm labourers, all a few years older than me. For those were the days before the car and television, and for those who lived in far-off Glasgow, as I did, rural life was as far from us as the planet Mars.

For me, this was a big gamble, for I was not even the best athlete in my street, let alone in my class at Whitehill Senior Secondary School. And though I had done a vast amount of running and jumping, my experience of ground to ground jumping had been confined to high jump, which was surprisingly safe.

In contrast, ground to ground long-jumping, that was an entirely different matter, for I would be jumping at full speed, without the leverage of a board, and landing on hard, slippery grass. Thus, for the first time in my athletics life, I was afraid.

But, after the first six "choochters" had jumped, I began to feel a little better, for none seemed to have done themselves any obvious damage, even though a couple of them were jumping in bare feet. Equally important, none of them had gone much further than fifteen feet. So I focused on my pair of socks as my take-off area, bounded in, jumped and landed safely in the rough grass.

"Sixteen feet, one inch," croaked the judge. I was now in the lead, and two jumps later I went close to seventeen feet, to win the first competition in my life, and a glorious £1 prize. Then it was on to the high jump, where I scissored to five feet and another first prize.

Then I travelled back to the hop step and jump, an event in which I had never before competed. Here my main decision related to choice of take-off foot, because I long jumped off my right and high jumped off my left. I decided on the right leg, and took the event easily, with a jump of nearly thirty nine feet, around twelve metres in today's currency.

Now £3 the richer, I decided to take a wee look at some of the other events. The pole vault was like the other three events, ground to ground, no take-off box, with a crowned bamboo pole, and was won with around nine feet. The tug of war event was composed of volunteers from the crowd, urged on by their wives and children.

But out on the track I soon identified several runners of national class in the middle distances, outstanding runners capable of well inside four and a half minutes for the mile, medal-winning in the amateur athletics of those days. But this would never ever be, for these Kirkowan "Choochters" were in the wrong place at the wrong time, denied the possibility of ever achieving their potential, simply by accident of birth. And I reflected that for the afternoon I had truly been back in 1850, because the Games in which I had competed had changed not a whit in a hundred years. And that I had just won three pounds."

Robert Kernohan

Was born in Glasgow in 1931, and educated at Whitehill Senior Secondary School. He was dux of the school in 1949 and school captain. Robert graduated from Glasgow University and achieved a first in Modern History at Balliol College, Oxford. He sought election as an MP, standing for the Conservative and Unionist Party in the General Elections of 1955, 1959 and 1964 narrowly losing out to Labour candidates. He did national service with the Royal Air Force before going into journalism. He was assistant editor and then London editor of "the Glasgow Herald". Robert was the editor of the Church of Scotland's magazine "Life and Work" from 1972 till 1990. He has also been a regular radio broadcaster and was an elder at Cramond Kirk, Edinburgh. Robert enjoyed his collection of stamps, European river cruises and having played rugby in his youth, was a regular at Murrayfield.

Robert Kernohan died at Edinburgh on 31st October, 2023.

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