



Old Boys' Association Newsletter

October 2016

THE PRESIDENT 2016-17 ROBB FLETCHER

Robb Fletcher attended Belfast Royal Academy between 1958 and 1965. His twin sister Amy and younger brother Richard also attended BRA. He describes his academic abilities as reasonably competent (except for French) and his school sporting career as very much second division.

Robb was a keen member of the scout movement and went on to be a leader for some years.

On leaving school Robb went on to Queens to study civil engineering graduating in 1969.

Robb embarked on a career in Public Service Engineering initially with Antrim County Council and later with NICS initially in Roads and later Water Service from which he retired some ten years ago.

On the sporting front after school Robb joined BRAFP, which later became Academy Sports Club, and played rugby at senior level and cricket at very much less than senior level. Robb was Hon. Treasurer of the club for many years and still maintains a keen interest. He is currently a Trustee of the Club.

Robb married his wife Heather (nee Hadden), a BRA old girl, in 1973 and both their children Ian and Caroline attended Ben Madigan and BRA before going on to university where they also graduated in engineering and are well settled in their respective careers.



Golf News

Picken Cup at Malone G.C. Thursday 16th June 2016 – Winner: Alan Russell with an excellent 38 points.

James Beattie's Captain's Day at Royal Belfast G.C. Friday 11th September 2016 – Winner: Stewart Beattie

Ferguson Cup for best aggregate score over two outings – Winner: Alan Russell

Provisional dates for 2017 competitions are:

Thursday 22nd June 2017 at Malone GC and Friday 8th September 2017 at Royal Belfast GC

To book your place, please contact Ken Knox: e-mail ken@cd-group.com or Iain Knox: iainknox@cd-group.com



Major General Sir Eric Stanley Girdwood KBE CB CMG

Eric Girdwood was born on 14th October 1876 at Strandtown, East Belfast. He was educated at Belfast Royal Academy and was probably the most distinguished military officer of the 20th century to have attended the School.

He was commissioned into the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) in 1899. He served as Transport Officer for his Regiment during the Second South African War and was mentioned in dispatches.

His battalion saw action at the battle of Spion Kop. Following this Girdwood and the Scottish Rifles were

stationed at Greylingstad Kopje, South East of Johannesburg, where they left their mark "SR" set out in stone on the hillside: this monument remains there to this day.

The photo above shows Lieutenant Girdwood at Greylingstad on 11th February 1901. He was appointed Brigade Major with the Scottish Rifles Brigade in 1911 and fought with his regiment in the Gallipoli Campaign in the Great War and also in Egypt and Palestine in 1916.



He was made General Officer Commanding 74th (Yeomanry) Division in Palestine and later in France towards the end of 1916 where they remained until the armistice in 1918. He was awarded the Croix de Guerre and was mentioned in dispatches nine times. After the armistice he remained in France and was appointed commander of the 9th Infantry Brigade and then GOC 3rd Division in 1919.

After the war he held a number of commands in the Middle East and was appointed Commander of Military Forces in Iraq in 1924 and GOC Bombay, India in 1926. He was appointed Commandant of the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in 1927, one of the cadets who passed through Sandhurst during his time there was the actor David Niven and Sir Eric gets a mention in his autobiography "The Moon's a Balloon".

Sir Eric was posted "home" to Northern Ireland as General Officer Commanding in 1931 until his retirement in 1935.

He was "Chief Gold Staff Officer" at the coronation of King George VI in 1937. He was Colonel of the Cameronians from 1927 to 1945.

He was the second President of the Belfast Royal Academy Old Boys' Association from 1933 to 1935.

He married Flora Matheson in 1907, his wife died in 1916 and three years later he married her sister Hilda. He had one son from each marriage.

Sir Eric died in 1963 at Towcester, Northamptonshire.

Old Boys' News

- At the AGM in April Martin Blake was elected Senior Vice-President. He will succeed the current President at the AGM in April 2017
- Robin Reid co-ordinates monthly lunches which are hosted by different members in Golf Clubs in the Greater Belfast area. Around 50 members regularly attend these lunches
- The Old Boys' website – www.belfastroyalacademyoldboysassociation.com – continues to attract a lot of interest from younger and older members alike. A sub-committee has been set up to review this website. Keep checking it from time-to-time!
- Follow the Old Boys on Twitter @TheBRAoldboys

Des Simon: 100 years old

Academy's oldest living Old Boy, Mr Des Simon, recently celebrated his 100th birthday with a splendid party at Belfast Castle. Friends and family members were in attendance and along with the many messages of congratulation and cards that Des received there were, as is now the custom for centenarians in Northern Ireland, letters from the Queen and the President of Ireland Mr Michael D Higgins.

The family of Des has very strong connections with the Academy and at present there are four generations of the family who have attended or are attending the School. Following Des there was his son Geoff, currently a member of the Board of Governors, his daughter Shirley, who was also a member of staff for 38 years, and his son-in-law David Haslett. The third generation to attend was his grandchildren, Jonathan Simon, Nicholas Simon, Rachel Haslett and Michael Haslett. Nicholas's wife Kirsty is also a former pupil and their children, Alex and Sophia, are currently attending Ben Madigan and make up the fourth generation.

Des was born on 20th September 1916 and entered the Belfast Royal Academy Preparatory Department in 1921, which at that time was located in the Crombie Building. The Headmaster was Mr T R Collier and there were 300 pupils at the School. At Senior School Des was a good all-rounder, proficient in his studies, a choir member who also sang at local festivals, and a keen sportsman who was vice-captain of the 1st XI cricket team. On leaving School in 1934, Des went to work for Batchelors Foods Ltd in England. He returned to Northern Ireland in 1939 where continued to work for Batchelors for a further 38 years. It was when working in England that Des met his wife to be, May Woolfenden, and they were married in Manchester in April 1941. After a short honeymoon they returned to Belfast only for Des to be given the dreadful news that his parents and his brother, Geoffrey, had been killed only two days after the wedding when the family home was bombed during the Easter Blitz of Belfast.

Outside of family and career Des's main interest in life was sport and he was a virtual life-long member of the Cliftonville Club where he played both cricket and hockey. On retirement from playing hockey he took up umpiring and was so successful that he became an international umpire, being awarded his Federation of International Hockey Badge in 1965.

As a hockey administrator Des has a renowned reputation but only a few of his positions and achievements can be mentioned here. Des was a long-time Chairman of the Cliftonville Club, Honorary Secretary of the Ulster Branch, an Ulster selector, and President of the Ulster Branch in 1965-66. At Irish level Des was a member of the Executive Committee for 21 years, an Irish selector for 13 years, being chairman for 9 years, and had the honour of being President of the Irish Hockey Union in 1974-75. At the conclusion of his administrative involvement Des was made an Honorary Life Member of both the Ulster Branch and the Irish Hockey Union. In his retirement years Des has remained very active, playing golf and going on holidays as often as possible, particularly cruises! Until the last year or two he attended local cricket and hockey matches almost weekly in the respective summer and winter seasons and also attended at least one England cricket Test match every year



Mr Simon with the President, David Haslett and Geoff Simon at lunch in the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club, Cultra.



Mr Simon, along with the Headmaster, Geoff Simon and Shirley Haslett, unveiling the plaque marking the Founding of the Belfast Academy

until 2014. Never one to rest on his laurels Des intends to keep on enjoying life. Indeed, two days after his birthday celebrations he attended one of the Old Boys' monthly lunches at the Royal North of Ireland Yacht Club, Cultra, where he was guest of honour!

The Old Boys' Association congratulates their Honorary Vice-President, Mr Des Simon, on achieving this very special century!

Colin McBride: B.R.A.1972-1979

It is hard to believe that I left Belfast Royal Academy some 37 years ago. In 1972, I went from being a big fish in a small pond at Hillman Primary School, just half a mile away from the Academy, to being a minnow in a huge ocean that would be my life for the next 7 years. I was fortunate to have teachers who not only taught their subject well but also made it both interesting and challenging. I think of Mr. Reid and Miss Mackintosh (both Chemistry), Mr. Moore (Physics) and Mr. McKenna (Mathematics) – these teachers played a significant part in shaping my future. They all had nicknames, but I will refrain from putting them on paper (you will almost certainly know them). I was captain of the 1st XI cricket team in 1979, and captain of the 3rd XV rugby team (even though a McBride, I was not in the same league as Willie John, or my cousin Dennis who was also an Irish International). Looking back now, I also think of Mr. Hawtin, Mr. Sillery and Mr. Lord – they all contributed to my development and provided me with great opportunities during my time at school.

When I left BRA, I studied Chemical Engineering at Queen's University in Belfast. I lived at home for those 3 years – I guess the thought of not having to cook food or wash clothes was just too attractive for me. At the end of my second year at Queen's, I applied to numerous companies for work experience in the chemical industry, and was somewhat surprised when I eventually got an offer of summer employment with a platinum mining company in South Africa. Up until that time, I had only been outside the UK once. This was the start of an adventure that has taken me all over the world.

After my summer in South Africa, I returned to Belfast for my final year at university, with the intent of getting work in the UK chemical industry, perhaps even in Northern Ireland. When I started Queen's in 1979, the Chemical Engineering graduates each had their choice of jobs in the UK. When I graduated in 1982, of the 23 graduates in my class, not one of us got relevant work in the UK. I went back to South Africa, and spent 4 years there, working as a chemical engineer, with Rustenburg Platinum Mines (near Johannesburg) and SA Tioxide (close to Durban).

In 1986, I had an opportunity to come back to Queen's University and conduct research in lignite (brown coal) leading to a PhD. The possibility of work in Northern Ireland in a future lignite industry versus settling in South Africa presented me with one of the biggest decisions of my life. I chose to come back. Three years later, I had my PhD but the likelihood of a lignite industry had evaporated.



I was on the verge of going back to South Africa again, when I learned that DuPont in Londonderry were hiring chemical engineers. I applied, was offered a job in the Kevlar® Manufacturing Plant, and I have been with DuPont for 27 years now, and have spent 6 of those years living and working abroad (including the USA and Spain). I even managed to fit an MBA in about 15 years ago. My roles in DuPont have covered Operations, Technical, New Product Development, Safety and Environment, across a number of DuPont products and businesses. I also spent 2 years in the 1990s with Conoco (DuPont's oil division) in Aberdeen, and I continue to travel widely in Europe, China, Japan, the Middle-East, and the USA, as a DuPont Process Safety Consultant and Auditor.

I have been very fortunate in life. I enjoy what I do, and I love to mentor and coach others. It is all a far cry from growing up in North Belfast in the 1970s. I have never forgotten where I came from, and I am a great believer in treating others as you would like them to treat you. My mother and father provided great support to me in my early years, and were determined to provide me with the opportunities in education that they did not have. Undoubtedly my time at Belfast Royal Academy was a key component in making that happen.

Forthcoming Events:

Annual Dinner: Wellington Park Hotel
Saturday 26th November 2016

London Dinner: Royal Air Force Club, 128 Picadilly
Friday 24th February 2017

Edinburgh Dinner: New Club, 86 Princes Street
Friday 28th April 2017