

Games, Wars and Bacchanalia

For nine decades Slamannan-born John Murphy, former Director of Social Work for Stirling, has had close contact with Bridge of Allan. Here, in the first of two instalments, he tells Peter Meech about social life in the village from the 1920s.

Until 1927 Bridge of Allan for me was a Shangri-La spoken of by relatives. It was then as a 10-year-old that I came to visit a relative married to a ploughman on Easter Cornton Farm the weekend of the 'Brigallan Gemms'.

This was the great occasion of the year for country-folk and for many a main holiday. The masses flocked in from 'a' the airts', mainly by bus. Walter Alexander had not yet established his local monopoly, and the General Motor Company buses impressed my boyish mind with their massive engines fronted by great grills protruding ten feet from the drivers' high cabins.

Farm workers came on their bicycles and the more affluent on the new-fangled 'motor-cycles' - BSAs, Rudge-Whitworths or Triumphs. I have the receipts for the one bought by my Uncle Jimmy, a threshing mill man, who said it was a better re-mount than the Scots Greys' horse he had parted with in 1919.

There were lots of hoop-la stalls and shooting galleries, at which the young rustics showed off their skills, but no malodorous burger-bars. Folk were content with simple fish and chips and Barr's Irn-Bru.

Little did I think then that 80 years later my wife Margaret and I would be living alongside the Games Park, within hearing and smell of the great annual event.

Fast forward now to 1937/38 and the London Missionary Society conferences held at the Allanwater Hotel, then a famous hydro, which I attended thanks to a kind anonymous donor. I met the two brothers Moir, drapers in Edinburgh, who had gone out to join David Livingstone in response to his call for Christian traders. They were in their 90s and I was 20. The nonagenarian hand that now writes this shook hands with the hands that were taken in welcome by Livingstone in Nyasaland (now Malawi) in the 1860s.

What concerned us students and our elders, men of the First World War, was the savagery of the Spanish Civil War, the cruelty of mustard gas and dum-dum bullets inflicted by Mussolini on poor Abyssinian civilians. Two distinguished Scots, George McLeod and Archie Craig, both Moderators of the Kirk with Military Crosses, spoke of the horrors of war. They were by then



John Murphy

virtually pacifists. I know what they would have thought of our involvement in Iraq: incredulity, revulsion and disbelief.

After working for the Home Office (Children's Branch) for ten years in the north of England, I returned to Scotland in 1961 as one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Approved Schools. Margaret wrote to Ella McLean, author of *Bridge of Allan. The Rise of a Village*, asking where we should choose as a base. 'Come to Bridge of Allan,' she replied. 'I have found you a house to rent: Sherwood, 22 Keir Street.' And so began a residence here of almost 50 years.

Ella may be remembered for her close association with Sunday School activities and for the concerts, *kinderspiels* and plays she organised at Uplands in Claremont Drive, a school which prepared girls for domestic service.

At that time bank managers knew all the affairs of the village. One of them, John McAlpine, told us that the Scotts of Drumdrills, with fruit farming running down, wanted to sell a former raspberry field. We subsequently bought the plot overlooking the river and built a house, White Chalet, with the help of another Bridge of Allan great, Jack Arthur, manager of Ogilvie's.

Our first recreational activity was the Badminton Club held in the Museum Hall. Before any play was possible it was necessary to dig out the caretaker to produce the canvas matting to cover the dance floor. The players represented a range of Bridge of Allan society including the all-round athlete Mary Robertson Smith, the Lady Provost.

There were two decorous annual Balls, Ogilvie's in the Dunblane Hydro and the Rostrum Ball in the Allanwater.

Ogilvie's Ball was a lively, motley, lavish occasion with guests from plumber boy to county gentry, whom brothers Duncan and Jack, resplendent in kilts, welcomed personally. I remember them at half-time, the heat and the cheer having given them the ruddy cheeks of Games pipers.

The Rostrum Ball on the last Friday in November was the social occasion of the year. I particularly recall one after dinner speaker describing Bridge of Allan society as 'Up The Hill, Down The Hill, The Cork and Seal, and the Medicos'. We waltzed to *Edelweiss* or livened up with *Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen* to the strains of Andy Cairns' Band. Soup was served in cups before coaches arrived at 3am.

An even more lively activity was the Young Farmers' Saturday Night Dances. The *Stirling Journal* had announced: 'It will be welcome news for enthusiasts that the Museum Hall has been taken over for Saturday Night Dances'. Quite the reverse.

Mature farmers are not the quietest of men, and young farmers on a night out with their girlfriends and some alcohol could rival the football terraces. The din from amplified music and the shouts of merriment, not to mention the screams of their doxies being chased round the Memorial Park, pervaded the neighbourhood.

These bucolic bacchanalia disturbed the pre-Sabbath cerebrations and slumbers of the adjacent Logie Manse. The words of the Psalmist, 'Joy cometh in the morning', were of little consolation. The Young Farmers were evicted and the Manse was moved to a more peaceful place.

Part 2 of John's memories will appear in our November issue.