

# Concerts, Protests and Social Changes

In a second instalment 92-year-old John Murphy, former Director of Social Work for Stirling, reminisces to Peter Meech about the village.

Many people are aware that the Beatles appeared at the Museum Hall in 1963. But what is less well-known today is that the hall already enjoyed a firmly established reputation as a musical venue.

In the 1920s the Bridge of Allan Public Interests Association launched a series of concerts in the Museum Hall which attracted European celebrities not usually heard outside of London, Glasgow or Edinburgh. For a village the range of musicians that included Pablo Casals, Elisabeth Schumann, Myra Hess and Arthur Rubinstein was quite incredible. Maurice Ravel performed his own piano compositions here in February 1926.

After the War the Association was revived as the Bridge of Allan Music Club, for which Kathleen Ferrier sang twice in the Fifties, accompanied by Gerald Moore. Peter Pears and Benjamin Britten appeared on the Museum Hall stage too, as did Janet Baker, Elisabeth Söderström, Solomon and John Ogdon.

In their heyday the concerts were glittering occasions, patronised by well-fed, well-read, well-dressed society from far and near. For the earlier concerts evening dress and fine furs were the order of the day, and the smell of camphor mothballs was all-pervasive.

There were plenty of buses right to the hall door for those not deposited by car. The moving spirits and authors of all this were Neil Reid, retired county medical officer, and William Kitching, music teacher, composer and critic.

In 1972 the Music Club moved from the Museum Hall to the MacRobert Centre on the University campus, where Peter Katin, Victoria de los Angeles and the Beaux Arts Trio appeared.

If this wasn't enough, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf sang (and wept) here. 1985 saw the end of the Club, killed by a lack of leaders, the MacRobert, or a less attuned local public.

The Seventies were a decade of protest. First there was the proposal to turn the Eagleton, now the Royal Lodge, into a casino. The good-living people of the village did not like it. They were led by the minister of Chalmers Church, the Rev. Willie MacDonald, who was strongly against gambling and drink. Upper Bridge of Allan residents rushed to hide their gin and tonics

as he approached to visit. The casino project was short-lived.

The next great issue was Longleys meat plant near Lecropt. Opposition to this was based on the fear of noxious smells being borne by prevailing winds towards the village or the danger of cattle trucks turning off and onto the main road. Far from disadvantages Longleys has provided the benefits of considerable employment, and one is scarcely aware of it unless travelling by car close behind a cattle wagon.



John Murphy

There was also the ongoing movement to save the Museum Hall, for which there was no longer a role. Dances were now held in hotels, concerts in the MacRobert, and the Community Centre catered for sport and minor meetings.

The third of these protests - all held in the Museum Hall and all causing much debate and fury - was the proposal to replace the old swing gates by the barriers at the Cornton Road railway crossing. Again, the threatened disasters have not occurred, and traffic flows more freely - although there are reports of motorists taking risks.

1972 saw the great student demonstration on the occasion of the Queen's visit to the University. It had opened five years previously with great local pride and expectation. The campus itself retains its beauty, and much employment has been

provided, along with entertainment at the MacRobert and sports facilities at the Gannochy. But I wonder if the University's overall impact has been quite as beneficial in the local community as anticipated.

There was little protest about the arrival of the new women's prison at Cornton Vale in 1975, probably because public relations were well handled in advance and the community was taken into confidence. It brought up-to-date an old Scottish custom of banging up too many women as well as men. Built for 200, it now contains over 400. We heard of the suicides, but we do not hear that we have on our doorstep a progressive prison struggling, more or less successfully, to treat a population most of whom should be in mental hospitals, drug clinics or at home with supervision and appropriate treatment.

The fires of protest have crackled on since the Seventies, firstly over the Park of Keir question, where large-scale developments threaten to impinge on Bridge of Allan, and now over the proposal for pylons to stride across the land.

The last quarter of a century has been one of change and development. The Museum Hall is being converted into flats, as is Chalmers Church after the amalgamation of its congregation with Holy Trinity. The railway station, closed in the Sixties, was reopened in the Eighties, with regular trains to Stirling, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Competition has spurred old and new restaurants to greater variety and higher standards. Café culture has caught on, with two patronised outdoors even in winter. A range of high-class shops now caters for local needs, attracting shoppers also from adjacent areas. Henderson Street has quite become the Bond Street of Stirlingshire.

The population has changed in the last 40 years and is now rather cosmopolitan with a substantial proportion coming from England, Glasgow, Europe and the rest of the world, but with still a few natives. It is weighted heavily on the elderly side, but balanced by a very young population - see the prams on the pavements outside the Primary School at 9 and 3 o'clock.

Bridge of Allan remains a fine place for families and of course for the active, sporty middle-aged, not to mention the elderly.