



Personal Reflections by Des Slade (1928-2012 (BHCHS 1940-44))

Article previously published in Old Buckwellians News Autumn 2011 edition

I NEVER cease to wonder at the dizzy heights to which many of our members have risen. I am not one of them (apart from being 6ft 2ins) but it's about time I put pen to paper before 'tis too late and either I or my memory go completely !

I was due to start at BHCHS in September 1939 but I was evacuated to Stowmarket where I attended their only Secondary School. As nothing happened raid-wise in the first six months of the war I, like many others, returned home just in time for the first air-raids of the blitz. As I had a bike I was asked to be a message runner for the "fire fighters" in our street - dads who dealt with minor problems such as incendiary bombs. One exciting time I recall was upstairs in a neighbour's house, standing on a man's shoulders pointing the hose at a burning incendiary in the loft while another man was rapidly working the stirrup pump on the landing below.

So I did not join the school until April 1940 and I still have the postcard that 'Spud' sent to my parents telling them that I should attend with my health certificate and gas mask. If I intended to have hot lunches I should also take two shillings for the week.



Age 15

I was not an academic at school - probably just above average. My favourite subjects were maths and French. From the second year I opted for German, but unfortunately our teacher was a German lady called Miss Gottschalk, and here we were at war with them ! It did not sit well with us and I confess that we gave her a rough time and often Spud would come to tell us not to be so cruel and to give her a chance.

I enjoyed football and most athletics, especially high jump. Because my memory is getting bad (I tell people that in each room at home I have a piece of paper with my wife's name on in case I need to call her, and when I call her I've forgotten what I wanted) I have found it necessary to refer back to the early school mags which tell me that (1) I was a member of the school debating society, (2) the land at the northern end of the school was turned into allotments. I was Secretary of this "dig for victory" scheme but I can't remember what we did with the produce! (3) I starred in a play called The Crimson Coconut and my co-star was my old friend Alan Willingale.

The play was a great success and was talked about for ages but has not been featured in OB News (4) I was the first 4th year boy to win an event against a 5th year opponent (Don Hines). My high jump set a school record which was equalled once but never beaten. And would you believe that the boy who equalled it - George Asser (1960) - did so on the very day that I was invited back to present the Sports Day prizes! (5) in the inter house games, the mags tell me that I won the high and long jumps and putting the shot, but as I am missing the 1944 copy I cannot say whether I achieved anything in my last year.



Representing the Med Fleet 1949

Looking back at what I've said it is becoming obvious that I was not too bad for brawn but I was a bit short on brains although in passing the GSC exams Geoff Hill and I were told that we were the only two boys in the London area who got distinctions in both the French and German Orals, in my case never to be used again ! We took the exams in the gym and several times we had to get under the desks because of approaching buzz bombs.

During the summer of 1944 Ron Bates and I acquired a ladder and some scrim and we started a window cleaning "business" in Barkingside. Many of the windows we cleaned were blown out within days. At the end of that summer Ron returned to join the 6th form and I looked for a proper job !

I joined Henry Hughes (engineering) at Hainault as a trainee. They specialised in nautical instruments such as compasses, sextants, and ultrasonic flaw detectors and were part of the Smiths Group. I passed various exams and was selected to go on a special course at Smiths' own college at Cheltenham, but whilst waiting for this, fate stepped in. In January 1946 six ex-army men who had been invalided out and I took an afternoon off, without permission, to go to a West Ham mid-week cup-tie and next morning we were all sacked !

By now I was nearing 18 and becoming due for national service call-up and was unemployable so I rashly went and volunteered for seven years active plus five years reserve in the secretariat branch of the Royal Navy. While awaiting joining instructions I managed to get a temporary job repairing bomb damage to roofs in my own road.

Meanwhile the engineering union were fighting the case for the ex-servicemen and included me in the court case. Hughes had to take us back and pay lost wages. The one good thing that came out of this shambles was that on returning to Hughes I had to report to the employment office where I met this beautiful young secretary called Mavis.



Des and Mavis

During the time between leaving school and joining the Navy I spent a lot of time trying to build up the membership of the recently formed Old Buckwellians Association. It must be remembered that contact was by letter, telephone where one existed and in many cases cold calling - visiting such addresses as we had and hoping to see the school leaver. But the work paid off and I see that in the 1946 issue of the Roding dear old Fred Scott paid tribute by saying that I had been the greatest pillar of strength in the Association during the past year (hurrah!). It is also only fair to say that Fred Scott was also a pillar of strength without whom I doubt that we would have survived. Many committee meetings were held at his home in Forest Edge.

In Peter Sharp's excellent history of the OBA (*OB News, November, 2010*) he referred to the athletics meeting at Bancrofts School in July 1945 when the name of Old Buckhurstians was hastily decided upon. As I hold a certificate in that name I claim to be the first member of the "named" OBA despite the fact that "Old Buckwellians" was eventually determined as the organisation's name. Our team won several other events that day, but we cannot find any mention of this in the Roding.

My service with the Royal Navy came to an end after five and a half years when I was invalided out with duodenal ulcers, no doubt partly caused by some of the alcoholic beverages I consumed between the UK and the Far East. I spent two years on *HMS Anson*, a 35,000 ton battleship in home waters and over two years on *HMS Triumph*, an aircraft carrier which started its commission in the Med but most of the time in the Far East where we finished up as the first ship in the Korean war soon to be joined by *HMS Belfast*. We were there for only a few months before limping back to the UK with a broken prop shaft. Whilst in the navy I kept up my high jumping and was chosen to represent the Med fleet at a meeting in Malta and the far East Fleet at a meeting in Tokyo. I was also a member of a concert party which used to go ashore and perform in Army and RAF sergeants' and officers' messes. Those of you who know me will not be surprised when I say that I was a stand-up comedian and, in fact, I had a five minute slot on Radio Hong Kong and another on Radio Japan.

The ship returned at the end of 1950, finished up at Rosyth to close down and in early 1951 I returned to Chatham barracks, married Mavis in April, returned from honeymoon to spend 10 weeks in RN Hospital, Chatham and invalided out officially in June. I hasten to add that this was nothing to do with the honeymoon.

After my discharge we managed to get a flat in Catford where we lived for three years, spending many weekends back in Barkingside so that I could pick up where I left off with the Old Bucks. Some of what follows has also been covered in Peter Sharp's articles. John Read had done well in building up the Dances and on his retirement I took over the organising and acting as MC. The sports sections were progressing quite well and membership was slowly increasing. Mavis and I moved back to Ilford in July 1954 and in October we had Beverley, the first of our quartet. The activities of the association continued satisfactorily and they obviously did in Ilford for our second child, Martin, was born in July 1957.

For some unknown reason interest in the Old Bucks started to wane during the second half of 1956 and in the following February I wrote to every member calling for support at a special AGM. The response was amazing - I received letters from many members who were unable to attend, several of them from chaps in Services abroad, and the attendance at the meeting was very pleasing. As Peter reported, a new committee was formed and the Association had an aim in life! We started to raise money by various means and in February 1960 I called another well supported meeting to consider the possibility of accepting the offer of a ground in Roding Lane and having our own pavilion. I cannot remember now at which point Trevor Lebenz became involved but what a blessing it was. He has spent the rest of his life working for the Association in various ways and has become known to all Old Bucks as a most deserving President.

Looking back over those early years the Association had its ups and downs but it was kept on course by a comparatively few dedicated people. Malcolm Beard is another who has been there doing his bit, year in and year out.

A bit more of my personal life. Our third child, Timothy, was born in July 1961 and the fourth and last, Sarah, in May 1966. Thanks to the four of them we now have 12 grandchildren. Careerwise, on leaving the Navy I worked for Kodak for a short while, then eight years for the Metal Box Company followed by four years for the Reed Paper Group, before becoming a shopkeeper in North Chingford in January 1964. I loved the life in retail, dealing with different people all of the time. For the first 17 years I had a partner and for a few years Jimmy Tredinnick (BHCHS 1939-44) worked for us.



Presenting prizes at the BHCHS Sports Day 1964

Then, as I had a heart attack my two sons Martin and Tim came into the business which gradually led to expansion. Unfortunately the heart attack was the start of other heart problems and perhaps I can set an Old Bucks record! I have also had a triple by-pass, a loo brush shoved up my carotid artery as it was blocked giving me some mini strokes and I recently had a further three by-passes and my 9th stent inserted. But I'm still here. In April we celebrated our Diamond Anniversary and I hope to attend the Annual Dinner as usual to see many of my old friends.

Finally I am delighted to see that the Association is very healthy due to having a continuous good committee.



Visiting Jack Taylor 1995