

Old Derbyian Society – Where am I now?

Ronald Large – OD 1944-1949

Answer - sat in front of the computer in my study at the above address:

Summer 1949. . If it wasn't for that wayward bus though, life could have been so different

Exactly 70 years ago today, I held out my hand to stop the Derby Corporation 'petrol' (actually diesel but in those days that is what we called them) bus' whilst standing at a recognised bus stop on the Derby ring road. I had a good hour to get to Bemrose School where the English Literature exam had been re-scheduled & this bus would take me to within walking distance of the venue in good time. However, it was running late so I presume the driver considered it more important to make up time than picking up a mere school boy so accelerated past leaving me stranded. Two trolley buses & a good deal of walking got me to the examination room some 20 minutes late. The result – I was disqualified & as I hadn't passed enough subjects, no school certificate.

Autumn 1949. So I started work at 'The Carriage Side' as an apprentice electrician & signed up for evening classes so as to obtain some qualifications (National Certificate) for some sort of future.

1950. I discovered that one of my classmates Norman Barks happened to be a really good pianist & also lived close by in Alvaston. (He was himself classed as an engineering apprentice at 'The Loco') I still played my violin so we began to practice together and did in fact enter a talent competition where we came second!. A lot of our friends were into the then craze of American Square Dancing & had formed a club using records to dance to. Dancing wasn't for us so we played some reels for them that they liked & established ourselves as the nucleus of a band. We rehearsed in a back room of 'The Plough' in Weston-on-Trent and therefore given the American connotation, called ourselves 'The Westoners'.

1951. One day, Norman mentioned that there was a vacancy at 'The Loco' for an apprentice electrician that was considered to be superior to my present status. I applied for it and was successful. I straightaway found the environment there to be totally different and immediately felt completely at home. One of the other apprentices was none other than Roy Harrison who I had known since the first day we started school together way back in 1938 both aged 5. Roy was by now something of a legend. He was an excellent clarinet player who was probably the youngest member of the prestigious Derby Light Orchestra.

1952. The Westoners, just like Topsy had 'just grown' and boasted about a dozen players including one or two good fiddlers. Roy decided to join us & I mentioned to him that really, I would like to try to play another instrument. Things then moved at a considerable pace and in April he suggested the double bass. In June he told me that if I went to a rehearsal of the LMS (sic) orchestra in the Railway Institute on a certain evening, someone would be there who had one for sale. There was & with my mother's help, bought it. In July Roy said, "I've got you a teacher". He had - Bill Martin. Bill somewhat reluctantly took me on once I had obtained the tutor book he insisted upon. I eventually got the 'Simandl New Method for the Double Bass' & began lessons in September. After 5 lessons, I joined Derby Youth Orchestra. I had my lessons on one of Bill's basses at his home. One day he said that he wanted to see what I played on so came to my house. He sat down & listened to me playing for about 10 minutes then rose. As he departed, he said "You'll never need

another!" He was right, 67 years later I still have my 'Calow' double bass.

1953. Bill was a formidable teacher & I owe so much to him. I was the only Double Bassist in the next D.Y.O. concert. I was then personally invited to join the Light Orchestra by its conductor Alan Street. Haydn Lewis, the then Derbyshire Music adviser persuaded me to attend a week-end course in Buxton in the spring and the Summer School of Music at Rockside Hall Matlock in July.. I travelled to Matlock by train. I walked with the Double Bass over my right shoulder & large suitcase in my left hand all the way up Matlock Bank to Rockside Hall situated at the very top! I consider this to be my greatest ever physical achievement!! In the autumn, I sold my best bike & all my model railways, bought a car & obtained a provisional driving license.

1954-57. My car was a 1937 Singer 12 Sports Saloon reg. DNC 206. A bit of a rust bucket really but I did her up & passed my driving test in March 1954. The Westoners were still going strong & I had a permanent girl-friend (Jan) by now. I was getting lots of gigs & with the thought of National Service looming I auditioned successfully for a place in the Royal Artillery Band. This choice was influenced by the fact that they had a full symphony orchestra & welcomed string players. On August 3rd 1954, I commenced my army career.

At Woolwich I was taught trombone & tuba for parade purposes & I received subsidised lessons on the double bass from one of the world's finest double bass teachers – Eugene Cruft. Subsidised yes, but my contribution took virtually all of my disposable income! There were quite a few professional musicians in the RAB including Julian Bream the world famous guitarist. When I was living in barracks, there were several occasions when I fell asleep in late evening whilst he sat on the end of my bed as he practiced his guitar or lute! People paid considerable sums for tickets to his recitals in later life. I said, "Shut up Julian, I want to go to sleep!" There were lots of concerts I could mention but the one that had the greatest impression on me was when we played for Winston Churchill's 80th birthday in the Royal Albert Hall. In September 1955 Jan & I married but were soon parted as in February 1956 I was transferred to the R.A (Portsmouth) band known as the 'Rhine Army Band' in Oldenburg N.W Germany. Although not from a personal situation, this was good as I was now needed for virtually everything the band did. Parades where as the BBb Tuba player I set the pace for marching, live broadcasts as bass player with the 'Big Band' on the American & British Forces networks, lots of orchestral concerts and tours all over Western Germany with a seven piece group playing mostly for high ranking officers at various NATO headquarters. I met Roy Harrison again on one of our travels. He was in one of the Royal Hussar bands & a few weeks before I was due to leave, Leon Coates the son of our revered science teacher arrived to do his National Service with the RA Band after completing his university degree. I left the army one sunny day in early July 1957 and went to stay with my parents who now lived in Alsager as my father had a senior position with British Railways at Crewe. I went for an interview at Alsager College of Education about the possibilities of becoming a teacher. I was told in no uncertain terms that I was unsuitable.

1958-62. So back to the railway where I became the Derby district maintenance electrician of the Outdoor Machinery Dept. It wasn't a bad job really as I had a footplate pass so lots of riding on steam engines. I lie! Standing on top of Hasland coaling plant at 2.00 a.m. in a howling gale with just the sulphurous fumes from an impatient 8F heavy freight engine to keep me warm whilst I tried to find why the plant had broken down wasn't much fun! However, I did lots of 'gigs' & on the invitation of one of my ex RAB friends joined the Midland Youth Orchestra. I was now 24 but looked a lot younger! I played for the Derby School production of Britten's opera for children - Noyes Fludde where I made acquaintance with my old maths teacher Mr Gillard who was one of the hand-bell ringers. Later, David Newbold the music master told me about a boy at Derby School who wanted to learn to play the double bass. His home conditions were such that he said the school would pay for his lessons. I took him on as my first pupil & using the knowledge gained from my

two teachers as my guide, began to give him lessons. He was slow at first but after about 6 months, suddenly began to blossom. In fact he began to develop at a remarkable rate and within a year I introduced him to the Midland Youth Orchestra. He went on to replace me as its principal double-bassist & in 1969 was chosen to play on the front desk of what was to all intents and purposes a world youth orchestra selected from the gathering in Switzerland of youth orchestras from all over the globe. It was conducted by Leopold Stokowski famous amongst other things as the conductor of the orchestra in the Disney film 'Fantasia'. Oh yes, the pupils name - David Walker posthumously very much revered and his name now honoured with a series of lectures. One of the first concerts where we played alongside each other was at the University of Frankfurt in 1962. We often played together in concerts & over the year became life-long friends. I miss him very much.

Back in 1959, I did quite a few auditions for permanent playing positions and was in fact offered a trial with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. However, my experience with David convinced me that my destiny was as a teacher. I wrote to several local authorities and received replies from two of them - Nottingham City & Staffordshire who invited me for interview. Both said the same thing – "Get a diploma from a recognised college of music and we will give you a job."

I left the railway and got full-time work at Foulds music shop in Irongate. David Newbold taught me harmony & gave me aural help and I practised in what spare time I had. In December 1961, I passed the final stage of the examination & became a Licentiate of the Trinity College of Music London. My accompanist was my old friend Leon Coates. I started work as a general bowed string teacher on April 30th, 1962. I chose Staffordshire as teaching in schools was restricted to 4 days per week. The 5th day was for concert playing or tutoring youth orchestras. Later, Leon joined the Staffordshire Music Service & we worked together on a special project of group teaching.

As soon as Raymond Thorpe the new music adviser for Derbyshire knew of my appointment, he offered me work as string tutor at the week-end courses in Buxton and the summer school of music at Rockside Hall. This time, I travelled all the way by car!

1963-70. In the autumn of '64, my daughter Tracie Ann was born & Jan said that I should get a better job as she couldn't work & we needed more money. I moved to Northamptonshire at the beginning of 1965 but hated it. They offered us a house that was vermin infested & as our Eccleshall house had been sold prematurely we lived in a caravan at Lubenham, Jan developed severe asthma & found it difficult & sometimes impossible to look after the new baby. Many times I arrived back at the caravan & found Tracie still in her cot with a nappy that should have been changed hours ago. Raymond Thorpe came to our rescue with the offer of a job for me as music teacher at Clay Cross Secondary Modern School. We moved to a nice bungalow & things settled down once I had got used to handling classes of 40+ teen-age pupils. I wrote a couple of musical comedies here 'Up the Pole' & 'Down the Hole'. Apparently, these were the first public performances given by the school since the 2nd world war! I met the renowned singer Colin Wheatley & we co-founded Chesterfield Philharmonic Society.

There were now lots of opportunities to conduct so I went to London on a regular basis for lessons from a pupil of Nicolai Malko who was professor of conducting at Moscow Conservatory. One of the concerts I conducted hit the 'Dailies' front pages for the wrong reasons – our cannon for 1812 was considered a fire risk!

In September 1968, I became head of music at the Herbert Strutt Grammar School Belper. I had done some A level work at Clay Cross but here I had to prepare candidates for Oxbridge. In early 1969, Jan & I went our separate ways & divorced. I was told that to remain a qualified teacher I needed what is now called a post graduate certificate of education so applied for and was accepted on a one year course at Bretton Hall part of the education department of the University of Leeds.

1971-79. I enjoyed the year there as it was my only experience of being a student since I left school. It was also here that I got to know Carole who was a music student & also a Derbyshire girl.

I left fully qualified in the summer of 1971 & took up my appointment as head of music at Glossop School in September.

This was a massive job. Over 200 pupils played instruments the majority of them taught at school. The previous headmaster had ensured that many members of staff had musical ability before he employed them so: The head of woodwork ran the brass band. The head of geography ran the baroque orchestra. The head of physics was the chorus master of the local music society & played timpani for the school orchestra. Dr Hewitt head of the science dept was of concert standard as a pianist & helped out with accompanying. I could go on. Several other members of staff sang in the choirs or generally helped out. In addition, it was my job to hire & fire instrumental teachers. This involved trading my assistant teachers' hours into other subjects to raise revenue. We also had a massive amount of help from parents who raised money through discos etc. I ran the main orchestra the show band & conducted some of the concerts as well as most of the curricular work.. The concerts themselves also raised money. Meanwhile, Carole had been appointed head of music at the nearby Hadfield School and we fulfilled a pre-arranged joint trip to Norway. In July 1974 we married in the United Reform chapel in Whaley Bridge. As the chapel had no regular minister, I asked Reg. Dean if he would officiate for us. Reg was an ordained Anglican & United Reform Church minister who was head of R.E. at Struts, and a good singer who sang the name part of Mr Noye in the production of the Britten children's opera I directed there. Reg died a few years ago officially acclaimed as the oldest man in England. I think he made it to his 111th year!

This was the time of my most active musical activity. As well as all the curricular work, I organised lots of concerts including several seasons of 'promenade concerts' with the usual traditional 'last nights' Also another production of 'Noyes Fludde' in which Carole was one of the gossips! The legacy though was Carmina Burana a combined school & community enterprise: A choir of over 200, an orchestra of 100+ and some breath taking dancing choreographed by Carole. It is still mentioned to this day on Facebook!

One day, a boy aged 15 called Graham who was a trombone player, regularly in the music dept. & often helping me set up stands etc. for rehearsals came to me & said. "I would like a career in music, but my parents said that I must leave school now. My father is caretaker at Hadfield School & my mother is very ill & can't work. What should I do?" This reminded me of how I felt when I realised that I had to leave school and get a job – any job. After some thought I suggested that he might try the army. I used to help out with the R.A. Young Musicians (or band boys) as they were known at Woolwich & knew that they could enlist at 15, were given a good training and were well looked after. He thought this was a good idea, so I wrote him a testimonial & sent him off with this to the nearest army recruiting office. In short, he was accepted & off he went.

Another Graham came to work part time as my assistant. He had a music degree he obtained in the USA that unfortunately wasn't recognised in England. He was obviously very talented and a good teacher so the deputy head & myself looked into this and finally after a lot of persuasion, managed to get him on a course that saw him officially qualified & allowed him to pursue his career in education.

In addition to all of this, I found myself acting as musical director of four different amateur operatic societies and a local orchestra. After a final performance of 'Show Boat' in Buxton Opera House, I discovered that it was in danger of demolition. The letter that I wrote to the local paper created a stir that resulted in a massive effort to get it restored. For my efforts, I became a director for a time but was finding all of this becoming very stressful.

Various factors contributed to the stress that built up in me that resulted in me leaving Glossop School on medical advice. I was suffering from severe headaches & tested for the possibility of having a brain tumour. Eventually the consultant said. "If you don't leave that job soon, you won't live long enough to draw your pension." I met an old friend one day who was a supervisor in the

Staffordshire music service who told me that they had a vacancy for a double bass teacher and that was enough for me. I applied, got it and resolved to spend the rest of my career doing specialist teaching. I moved back to Staffordshire on April 30th, 1979 to the day, exactly 17 years after taking up my first teaching post in the same place.

1980-98. I was given carte blanche to develop the double bass situation & built up a round of teaching that involved about forty schools that I visited on a fortnightly rota. In addition, I tutored the County Youth Orchestra and conducted one of the area orchestras. In 1983, I arranged as part of the Lichfield music festival a parade followed by a performance of a hundred & one double bassists outside the west front of the cathedral. It involved a live elephant, was featured on BBC Midlands To-day & at the time was a world record! These were happy days and I considered myself so fortunate to have access to so many enthusiastic & talented pupils. There was one season where 4 of the 14 double bass players in the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain were my pupils – three from Staffordshire & one from Derbyshire.

In 1987 the politicians introduced a new education act allowing local authorities & state schools to charge for music instrumental lessons. The ‘golden age’ of instrumental teaching in state schools was over. At the end of 1992, I was offered a redundancy package & left full time service on March 1st, 1993. I was soon offered part-time work with neighbouring Shropshire & found some very able youngsters awaiting tuition. This lasted until 1998 when I reached the age of 65 & said that I did not want to teach in schools anymore.

1999-Present. However, like the bassoon, oboe & horn the double bass was now classified as an endangered species. The government made funds available to try & remedy this & I was called back to do some teaching for Staffordshire. This lasted right through until last year.

I now look back on all this and realise how fortunate I have been to encounter so many wonderful & talented people. It seems that every move I have made has led me to meet one or more students just waiting for me to pass on what I have been taught particularly by the two aforementioned double bass teachers. Some have now retired themselves after long and illustrious careers at the top of the music profession including at one time or another, the principal or guest principal double bassists of all of the main London orchestras as well as several of the provincial ones.

Postscript. . It seems that if I do have a particular gift, it is the ability to point people in the right direction.

The tale of two Grahams:

1. The 15 year old Graham who on my advice & encouragement joined the Royal Artillery Young Musicians Unit to start his musical career:

In the autumn of 2013, I received an invitation for Carole and myself to attend as special guests a retirement concert in the Cadogan Hall London. It was for Lieutenant Colonel Graham Jones C.B.E. Musical Director of the Coldstream Guards & senior musical director of the British Army! (A few days before, I had seen him on TV officiating at the Cenotaph in charge of all of the music for Armistice Day.) I felt really fulfilled when during the concert, he asked me to stand for an ovation from the capacity audience in recognition of the help & advice I had given him.

2. A Gnosall girl who Carole & I had given music lessons to some years ago was a student at Manchester Metropolitan University. Due to illness, she had not done too well in the first year course & wished to repeat it. She asked me if I would contact the education department and speak to them about this on her behalf. This I successfully did. The education department was at Alsager College & the head of music wasGraham! (the other one!)

This ‘unsuitable person for teaching’ is signing off!

Ron Large 1944-49.



Amber Valley – 2nd form pupils 1944-5.



Above. The 'Westoners' Christmas 1954.

Roy on Clarinet. He later established himself as a flute player.

In recent years, his group called The Champagne Flutes combined with my Serenata Ensemble to provide seasonal music for the Christmas Tree Festival held annually at St Mary's Collegiate Church Stafford. (This has continued since Roy passed away).

Amber Valley.

Looking at the picture - Roy is on 2nd row from the top on the extreme left' I am on the front row 4th from the right.

Colour Photos:

Top.

This was taken in our garden on the occasion of my 80th birthday. Carole (is in pink next to David Walker) & me (in the blue shirt), are surrounded by double bass players. They include the principal & co-principal of the Royal Philharmonic, the Principal of the Royal Opera House Orchestra & the young lady next to me (on my left) does most of the bass work for the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Bottom.

101 double basses posing in the grounds of the Old Friary, Lichfield in July 1983. (At the time I think it was a world record.) Later we played Saint-Saens's L'Elephant to an elephant (& a crowd) outside the west front of the cathedral. The man with the covered instrument is Rodney Slatford who ran a master class for me on the day. He was then head of strings at the R.N.C.M.



