

Life as a volunteer archivist in Govan High School, Glasgow by Ian McCracken

In spring 2010 I accepted a voluntary retirement/redundancy as school librarian in Govan High School. 2010 also happened to be the Centenary of the school. As it seemed likely that the library would be closed for some considerable time, old school magazines, sundry newspaper cuttings and photos were transferred to another room. There they remained virtually untouched until I formally retired at the end of June 2010. In the interim, it had been agreed that there should be a centenary book, which of course need the embryo archives to be put in some sort of order. So I drifted in one day during the summer, ending up writing a chapter for the book, and helping former colleagues and former pupils with information and photographs for the rest of the book-which is over 100 pages long. I also liaised constantly with a teacher who had set up a complementary school centenary website www.ghs100.org.uk At the same time, other centenary events had raised the profile of the school considerably, and a steady flow of photos, information etc found their way to the still nameless room.

By now the one day had become two or three days a week- a situation I had not expected (my intention had been to seek a voluntary job with a charity). However, what I was doing became more and more interesting, as I met former pupils from as far back as the early 1930s, as stories emerged about the school's history and so on.

At the same time, from a small number of odd envelopes of photos and random cuttings, I had organised ten box files (one for each decade), each with certain sub-headings, such as newspaper cuttings, formal school information, school shows/events and so on. I also started to put the photos into some sort of order- I decided to have three separate files- prizegiving, non-prizegiving and audio-visual. I am glad that I made this decision, as two years on, there are more than three hundred separate sets of photos (in various format) in the non-prizegiving category alone.

The school desktop has an "Our school" folder which is accessible to all pupils and staff, so as far as possible, I place photos, scans -indeed all archival information - there so that it is available on open access for everyone. Keeping that organised and updated and ensuring that the back-up hard drives are identical is undoubtedly the most boring part of the job.

By contrast, the most interesting and enjoyable is trying to help follow up enquiries- these may come from former pupils visiting the school in person, via the website and from as far away as the USA, Canada and Australia. I do not get any payment for what I do, but there is more than adequate "payment" in seeing the delight in a former pupil as they find a long-lost recognition of an academic or sporting achievement in the school magazine, or that a photo with their entire class has been found.

Enquiries take many forms, and have ranged from people wanting to know when the school re-opened after the Second World War (despite pupils being evacuated on a couple of occasions, it never formally closed); why does the Dux Board only start in 1920 when the school opened in 1910 (before that there had been no set system of prizegiving); when did the fire that destroyed the original school building take place (June 1962 and extensively covered by papers such as the Daily Express, Evening Times, etc).

Some areas of research are of course generated by the school (whose Headteacher, Mr Iain White sees the great value of celebrating the school's history). A Memorial to those from the school killed in World War One is prominently displayed at the school entrance, but there is no equivalent for World War Two, so a major area of research (very much ongoing) is for me to try and find the names of FPs killed in the latter conflict-where do you start when there is no memorial and nothing in the school log books? A couple of former pupils have come forward whose relations (also FPs) were killed, and I have recently been studying the memorials in the local churches as a starting point. The local newspaper (the "Govan Press" is also available, but its format is daunting as it is often on a negative microfilm-hard on the eyes after a while!

Sometimes I meet a dead end due to the absence of records-I'm currently heading towards one in the case of Bella Moore-a Govan girl who at the age of 17 won an Olympic Gold Medal for swimming exactly a century ago. I've searched through many school's registers, even checked the minutes of Govan Parish School Board, contemporary newspapers to no avail-and what has been surprising is how little coverage the Olympics as a whole received at that time-local race meetings have longer columns than Olympic reports! Perhaps this an apposite juncture to say that perseverance and a flexible approach are key attributes for the amateur archivist!

The enquires exemplified above are what one might call the "bread and butter" of the job- the "jam" in the last couple of years have been two major archival projects-one is a Centenary Timeline. This incorporates photos and events from the school's history interposed with wider historical events. The completed timeline (originally conceived by a Faculty Head) had taken nearly two years of development, amendment, checking, rechecking and fine-tuning but has literally just gone on the walls-all seven metres of it!

Running parallel to this has been the development of a centenary gallery of frames representing the school's history. It has taken well over a year to select suitable images or existing frames (quite a few new ones have had to be created just for this), but over the summer, nearly all the fifty frames have been placed in a special gallery area-some technical issues prevented the final couple of frames being erected, but it should not take long now.

Continuing on the subject of frames, a couple of years ago, one of the former pupils to whom I was giving a conducted tour very kindly volunteered his own technical skills-honed in Rolls-Royce over many years. Every week, the unassuming but meticulous Jim Wright would come in, take down some frames, I would scan and annotate the photos and the frame would go back on the wall, now with the frame and each individual photo numbered. In this way, we worked on more than 150 frames and I would not like to imagine how many hundreds of photos-but now all that information is available and proving of fascination.

So what's next on the agenda? A conversation with a former pupil about a Castle Cup football competition in the 1970s led to the discovery of some unique cine-film of a farm (Hunter Farm) that a previous Headteacher had rented, and which had enabled many pupils to see and experience the countryside. There were a couple of photos, but to see actual moving film of the farm, and of a local Boys Brigade company, was

quite remarkable, so, with the help of Govan High's own radio station, work is being done to provide a commentary and see whether any broadcasters are interested.

In conclusion, I asked myself-what do I get out of doing this? I have met a lot of fascinating people with equally fascinating reminiscences, I have learnt many new skills (both in terms of research and technical), the work is appreciated by the school and by former pupils, I have no boss and no set hours, so all in all, while I may have started as an "accidental archivist", I would not change it!

PS- If you know of anyone with any Govan High stories, magazines etc-please point them in my direction!