

# **Shelagh Johnson (née Allan)**

## **Art**

**1956-58**

### **LIFE BEGAN IN 1956.**

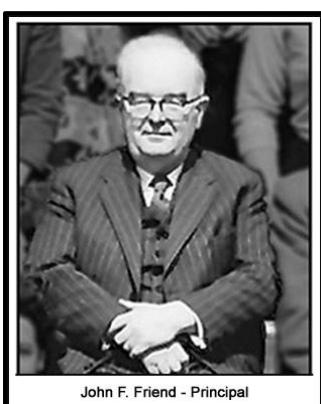
#### **An episode.**

In the fifties, photos were largely black and white. Much of life was utility grey or the ubiquitous green and cream of building interiors, but Bretton life was technicolour because I was in love with the building, the countryside and my fellow students.

Life began in 1956! I went to Bretton seven years after the College began. I knew only a little about Bretton as I was interviewed in Manchester, so I arrived on the bus from Huddersfield with little preconception of the Palladian mansion which was to become my home for two years.



We were a diverse set of students but all had a special interest in fine arts. There were mature students who already had NDDs or music qualifications. A number came from jobs, not straight from school as I did, and many of the men had completed two years' National Service. The mix was dynamic and 75 students were buzzing with anticipation. The other 75 had already experienced Bretton for a year and were suitably sophisticated and world weary. Music, Art or Drama at Secondary or Primary level were our main subjects, but we all covered English and various aspects of education.



The staff were memorable, even the ones who did not teach us. Mr. Friend, principal, taught the psychology of education to the whole year in the hall on a Saturday morning. The art lecturers were Theo Olive – he really looked the part, and Reg Hazell, who did not. The thrust was for realism, landscapes, natural object drawing and figure compositions - not really my style! Dr. Haeffner taught English and was interested in the Liverpool accent I was trying to eradicate. Miss Dunne conducted our music and movement sessions and lambasted me for leaving a bean-encrusted pan in the kitchen.

Accommodation was basic. I shared a large room, divided into curtained bays, with four other girls. However it was on the front of the hall with a view of the lake. The geese disturbed us, but not for long. I regretted the time wasted sleeping.

Meals were good, by our simple 1950s criteria – hard boiled eggs in cheese sauce and chips - a Friday favorite! We used two dining rooms in the mansion, had family service and rejoiced when there was an empty chair – more for the rest! The men always seemed to be hungry and trawled the tables for leftovers. It was believed that a couple of them tried to barbecue and eat one of the geese but found it a bit tough.

With the odd exception, we were a sober group. There was no alcohol on the site but very occasionally groups would walk up to High Hoyland to the pub, then called The Globe. Funds were tight, though many students smoked. Pipes were popular and tobacco was laced with 'herbs'. I felt very rich on my full grant, which was meant for books, but also provided clothes and entertainment.

The social life was simple. We had themed parties, often organized by the Art Society. I met my future husband at a 'Green Party' held on Hallowe'en in 1957 on the New Hall stage. The food and drink were green and I wore green tights, green leotard and a green wig. Bob, with his usual flair, wore a baggy green track suit. The details are unclear, but next day we were 'going out'.

The closest friends we made were those we roomed with, those in our subject group and then those in our subsidiary subject – in my case, drama. There were personalities who were known by everyone: Brian Baines who eventually read the news on Yorkshire BBC TV; Maurice Rubens, who painted a football mural in the students' club room; Ann Collins, a beautiful art student who played first violin in the orchestra, and Derek Walters, who was very creative with a balalaika and is now an expert in feng shui.



Shelagh & Bob - 1957



There was so much talent and charisma about that it was no surprise that Martial Rose should plan to present the first production of his translation of the Wakefield Mystery Cycle.

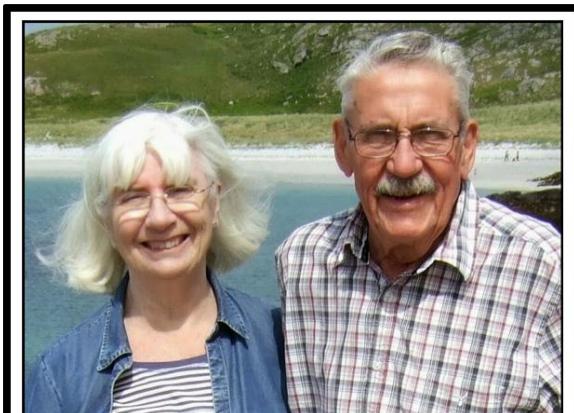
Martial Rose - 1958



Canoeing on the Lake

During our first year we got to know and assume ownership of the building and the grounds. I canoed on the lake, and on a very hot summer's day swam in it.

We drew the buildings, the trees and our friends. It was an exciting day when we were promised our first live model. It turned out she was moonlighting from the Alhambra Theatre Bradford, and did not really want to take her clothes off! We drew her in her black underwear in preparation for creating a concrete sculpture. My effort was so dire it was hurled off Kennel Block balcony. Others appeared on various lavatories in end-of-year tomfoolery. The model's employment was short. Brian Baines was the son of the manager of the Alhambra, which might have influenced her disappearance.



Shelagh & Bob - c. 2012