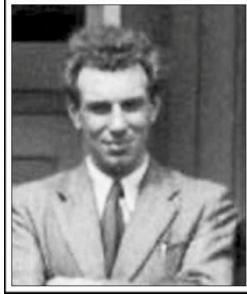


Fred Sumner

Art

1949-51



1949



c. 2010

I Am Old, and Wear my Trousers Rolled

Early this year [1999], my old friends from Derbyshire sent me a copy of an historic photograph they have preserved for some fifty years. It records but a split second in our young lives. We stand among a group of student teachers at Bretton Hall (Music, Art and Drama), then but a month old as a specialist College for the Arts, but a great mansion, formerly the property of Lord Allendale.



'Historic Photograph' 1949

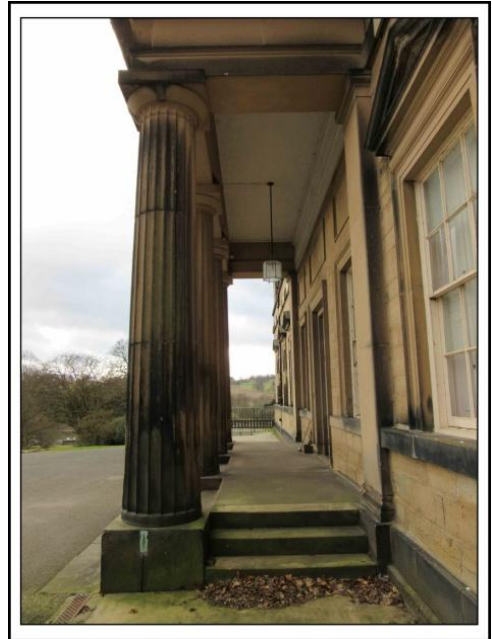
Bretton, an ancient country seat par excellence, was purchased and then adapted by the late West Riding County Council in 1949; this due to the foresight and innovatory ways of Sir Alec Clegg – Chief Education Officer – and the support of the Minister of Education, Miss Ellen Wilkinson. For Clegg's consummate administrative skills and benevolence we, and several generations of North Country folk, are extremely grateful, and I for one, sense a need to honour his good name.

Now that *'I am old and wear my trousers rolled'* (T. S. Elliot) I can see that from this one source all my principles and cultural wanderings began. Were it not for the greater perception of my dear old friends, I would perhaps not have recalled that the photograph had ever existed.

In growing up, forging a career and having insufficient time for living, I discarded my memory of a youthful past as an irrelevance. Were I to go back again and stand on those portico steps to look for that sense of faith, so evident in the photograph, would it have vanished?

At my friends' proposed reunion, to celebrate surviving our half-century, will the distractions caused by time and events have confused the remaining two dozen of us who are known to be alive out of the original entry of fifty-six?

It was on a satisfying early Autumn day, fifty years ago, that I dismounted from a green Pennine bus that had dawdled its way from clough to dale to set me down by the War Memorial in West Bretton, a village that rubs a friendly shoulder with the countryside around Holmfirth. My destination that fine day was only a mile away, downhill to a small valley where Bretton Hall lay secluded among groves and glades.



Avenue Lodge

The scene, as I passed through the lodge gates, in my worn demob suit, was more than an accident of nature, the natural folding of the land having been improved by man's creation of a Pleasure Garden.

It was evident that wild nature had once encroached into the Park itself from the adjacent woodland, even to the edges of the Carriage Drive upon which I walked.

Further down the drive, with its upland grassy areas on either side and everywhere clumps of trees, the Hall revealed itself.



Mansion Rooftops



18th century staircase with wrought-iron balustrade.

My arrival was recorded by a tutor – Charles W. Good – a short man with a winsome eye, who informed me that I was to be accommodated "in the Oak Room, up the wrought-iron staircase, past the murals and then two more flights of stairs."

This revealed itself as a panelled dormitory for eight, a snug roost fitted out with oatmeal curtains and neatly contrived unit furniture.

An earlier arrival – a laconic individual – showed no interest in my enquiries whatsoever, except to announce that he had served as a rear-gunner over Burma, and then worked in insurance.

After a pause of some length, he stated that he had mistaken Charles Good for a porter and slipped him a bob for carrying a lumpy suitcase! My estimation of his usefulness to our college society was immediately reassessed!

In those early days after our arrival we were informed that an important cultural role had been reserved for us in the post-war world. Seemingly, there was more to Education than examinations and competition; it was a lifelong process and it also involved the senses.



Charles W. Good

Many years later I stumbled across the expression:

'To look is not to see, and to see is not to understand',

and comprehended for the first time the essential reason for Observation Drawing. Furthermore, Education was not entirely confined to the classroom; we were to support the work of the Council of Industrial Design and the Arts Council and encourage adolescents to cultivate an aesthetic sense.

That first intake of fifty-six students included a number of brave young women with athletic minds and fresh faces, who had stepped right out of school. Most of us, however, had either experienced employment or served in H.M. Forces (some as tank drivers, wireless operators, sailors, orderly room clerks and aircraftmen). The elder brethren – those with crumpled features – were men and women of extensive talent and much experience (e.g. a miner with a complicated private life as a chapel organist; a typist who had taught violin after tea and toast, and those extraordinary colourful characters whose musical background encompassed performances in city halls, hotel ballrooms and an ocean-going liner).

We were instructed to explore our medium and to extend our art, but in addition we also studied modern English Literature, participated in Movement, Dance and Drama and attended lectures in Art and Music History. The 'Arts in Education' was also introduced as a comprehensive package, and associated with this was an obligation to engage in an additional branch of the Fine Arts.



Movement, Dance & Drama

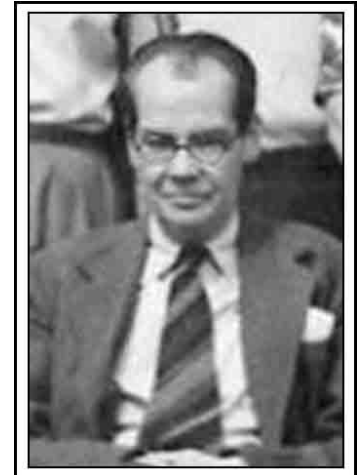
In this new environment, and feeling insecure, I muddled along – at times much disinclined to dive head first into the unknown. Others took to it like ducks to a garden pond. A submariner friend kept company with the musicians. When the day's work was done he lined up with the choristers and chaste sopranos – some of whom were not long out of tunics and black stockings – and he with the voice of a land-locked seagull, but nevertheless singing the 'Polovtsian Dances' by Borodin. Another old friend, a former 'Bevin Boy' from Sussex, showed an abundant desire for *all* the arts. This muscular pianist, of the expansive gesture and big heart, turned violinist overnight and played the twiddly bit in concerts.



John F. Friend

John F. Friend, the Principal, was a senior educationist with extensive experience. He had the ability to assess the expansive ideas of others, to disentangle them and then disseminate them as pearls of wisdom. More importantly, he believed in himself, then in Bretton and community life and then in those callow youths whose hearts and minds he had penetrated. He was that kind of man who left you with the impression that he had given you the opportunity to allow him to have his own way.

Time has taught me to admire *all* those who instructed us at Bretton – a visiting lecturer, Basil Rocke, for one. He was formerly a London painter, a pupil of Pasmore's and Cizek's (he lodged in Vienna with C.P. Snow), at times dour, even acerbic, but, without exception, influential and entirely beneficial.



Basil Rock



Gerald Whitehead

Of special significance for me was the benign influence of Gerald Whitehead, who in his younger days trod the same path as W.H. Auden and Cecil Day Lewis. His personality, which included an urbane and self-effacing manner was apparent in an imposing presence, made the more attractive by a fine face and physique.

In marked contrast, Miss Margaret Dunn, the senior lecturer in Movement, a forerunner in her specialism, had gravitas. She kept her cards close to her chest and protected a public image by hiding a secret love for fun and good fellowship. Without doubt she was a powerful moderating force. My unsympathetic attitude to Dance was treated with a wintry smile.



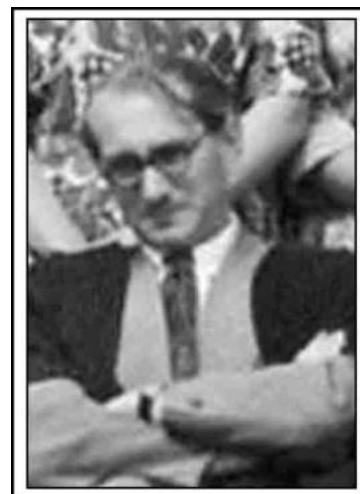
Margaret Dunn



Daphne Bird

Both members of the music staff were loved and respected. Miss Daphne Bird is remembered for an encyclopaedic mind, her speed of communication and her commitment to Solfa. She was, of course, eccentric, delightfully Cambridge in fact, having once taught at the Girls' High School in Long Road when it possessed a national reputation for choral singing.

Raymond Roberts, who later became a Staff H.M.I., was admired by those older talented musicians of that first 1949 intake. He had a considerable love for music, and on occasion his lectures were scintillating, when his flashes of brilliance could surprise and astound. Earlier in his teaching career, which was shortened by war service at sea, he had trained and conducted 'The Revenge' for Stanford.



Raymond Roberts

That Roberts was exceptional, was known to those who witnessed his celebrated impromptu piano performance of an orchestral work, heard earlier, that same evening; and on another occasion, after his return from the cinema, his rendition of 'The Third Man' theme. I remember him for his straightforward approach, and as someone with a polished style of teaching.



Seonaid Robertson

The senior lecturer in Art, Miss Seonaid Robertson, whose book on 'Creative Crafts' should be compulsory reading for all, and whose service to education is in every way distinguished, influenced me greatly.

Seonaid Robertson encouraged a love for old country crafts and things formed by nature. Additionally, she and her colleagues persuaded a number of celebrities in the arts to stay over at college and to speak to us in enriching and informal drawing-room conditions.

Education is a mystery!

Discouraged from self-indulgence by that Bretton course: *'The Arts in Education'* – a continuing refrain of which was *'Awareness in Living'* – we were carried away by some message which could not be identified elsewhere.

Little did I realise in 1951, when I qualified, that in the space of five more years I should discover my *real* self and embark on a serious and extensive study of art history, social history and all things antiquarian.

Thankfully, our Bretton Hall tutors had inspired, influenced and corrected by precept and example. It was most fortunate that those eminent educationists saw fit to liberate us in some unaccountable way from our respective numbered mental situations, and propelled us in the directions wherein our real abilities lay.

Fred Sumner

1999



Bretton Hall