

Fifty Years On

Reflections on the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society (RSCDS) Summer School at St. Andrews, by **Alastair MacFadyen**

My first sight of St. Andrews was from the train as it approached the town in August 1955. The reason for this first visit to Fife was to attend the Summer School of the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society. Still in my teens, I had embarked on this adventure with some apprehension. I need not have worried because it soon became clear to me that the seasoned members of the School were keen to welcome newcomers and to ensure that they had no reason to feel excluded. Fifty years on, I remain tremendously grateful for the reception I was given and for the friends I made then, many of whom, like me, are still Summer School devotees.

By 1955, the Summer School was already a well established annual event, having taken place for the first time in 1927, four years after the formation of the Scottish Country Dance Society in Glasgow. The co-founders, Ysobel Stewart and Jean C. Milligan, were sufficiently confident about the success of their Society to contemplate a first Summer School. Their choice of St. Andrews as its venue has had a very happy outcome. Apart from one year in Edinburgh and the six years of World War 2, a Summer School, based at University Hall, has been held every year in St. Andrews since 1927. It's for this reason that, as the Society has expanded into a worldwide organisation, many members of its international family have come to regard St. Andrews as their Mecca.

When I made my first acquaintance with it, the Summer School was presided over by Miss Milligan, who was Director from 1927 until her death in 1978. As a newcomer, I soon became familiar with the rules and rituals of the School. Before the addition of the Lumsden Wing, University Hall was reserved entirely for ladies during the School and the upper floors of the building were out of bounds to all but the most daring of the male population. The early locking of all outer doors was also a problem for the younger female residents of University Hall when they wished to participate in our jaunts into the town for a late-night snack at Peter's Cafe, a Lammas Fair expedition and, occasionally, a midnight swim. Pre-arranged points of re-entry into the Hall overcame this particular inconvenience. Fortunately, conditions were more relaxed in the accommodation allocated to the men and other ladies, at St. Regulus and Hepburn Halls, for example. What fun we had! All very innocent, of course! Much time and effort was spent in preparing for the weekly ceilidh. I remember we were given full use of the St. Regulus kitchen to prepare our refreshments and, meanwhile, a lady in our company, especially skilled with words, was sent off to take a bath where, we were assured, she would compose her best ceilidh sketches.

The mornings of the School were taken up with our programme of classes. We were very fortunate to have the benefit of some able teachers and I certainly learned a great deal from them. Miss Milligan managed a large class in the Younger Hall with the greatest of ease and her all-seeing eye missed nothing. She was

always ready with a friendly, but pointed, quip for those whose response to her instruction was rather blunted by their previous night's frivolities.

In the 1950s, the highlight for the men attending the Summer School was the second session of the morning when they were taught Highland step dancing by the celebrated dancer and teacher, Bobby Watson of Aberdeen. His lessons were always very entertaining, but he also worked us very hard. The combination of an hour of non-stop dancing with the sun beating down on us through the glazed roof of the Drill Hall left us all bathed in perspiration but, nevertheless, very satisfied with our morning's work. Some refreshment at Kate's Bar was a necessary diversion before heading off for lunch!

Fifty years ago, regardless of weather, the afternoons were spent on the beach. Large numbers congregated at a pre-arranged spot and, invariably, at some point during the afternoon, the pipes were tuned up to accompany an Eightsome Reel. As a young and fairly fit new boy, I was required to take my turn to run (there were few cars available then) up to the Hall to collect the afternoon tea, which was still the traditional feast of sandwiches, scones and cakes. Liquid refreshment was provided by the large pots of tea purchased at the beach kiosk.

A vivid memory of my second Summer School visit in 1956 was the invitation to take part in a sequence for the film 'Scotland Dances' (now an archival relic). This was a collaborative project between the RSCDS and Films of Scotland. Miss Milligan directed the filming on the University playing fields. In the autumn, I was present at the first showing of the film in an Edinburgh cinema, surrounded by family and friends eager to witness my screen debut. Imagine their disappointment, and mine, when it transpired, as the film progressed, that my sequence had ended up on the cutting room floor!

Apart from one or two absences, I have been a regular participant in the Summer School since 1955. Eventually, I was invited to join the teaching staff and for a period of four years, I held the position of Director. I am very grateful to the Summer School for the opportunities it has given me and for the lasting friendships it has afforded me. Inevitably, over the years new ideas and changes have been introduced into the School to satisfy the requirements of those attending. I am delighted to note that there will be a good attendance again this year – almost 800 dancers from 33 different countries.

I wish the Summer School well for the future and trust that its long and happy association with St. Andrews will continue for many more years to come.



Summer School: dancing at the Bow Butts in the 1950s