

Chapter 32
1950 – 1957
Cambusbarron / Stirling

Home, School and Play – 1953-57 (ii)

In common with most other Senior Secondary schools in Scotland in the 1950s, our high school session comprised three terms – late August until Christmas, early January until Easter and thereafter until the end of June. The target for those who opted to stay on at school, instead of leaving to seek employment at the end of the Third Year, became gaining over five terms within Years Four and Five, the requisite number of Higher Leaving Certificate passes to qualify for entrance to one of the four Scottish universities, Glasgow, Edinburgh, St. Andrews or Aberdeen, in the faculty and subjects of their choice.

Four Highers and one Lower, or three Highers and two Loweres were the minimal standards, but, in addition, passes in Higher English and Lower Arithmetic were prerequisite. For the rest of the minimum of six subjects to be studied, limited choice at school in either the Arts or the Sciences was also provided. To qualify for the more competitive degree areas, like for instance, Medicine and Dentistry, Latin and Science were known to be required, as were high percentage marks in all papers sat by such candidates. Arts faculty prerequisites were at least a pass in one Higher foreign language, and for Pure Science and Engineering, Higher Mathematics plus Higher Science (Physics and Chemistry) passes were almost always needed.

I opted to study, English, Mathematics, Science and French at the Higher level, and Arithmetic and Geography at the Lower level. Thus I left my options open to do either an Arts or Science degree, if my examination performances allowed me to complete the courses and then succeed in the final nationally set examinations in March and April, 1956. But I struggled with English and French in particular, and eventually ‘dropped’ down to Lower French in the latter two terms. I was good at Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry without having to concentrate too hard and long on them, and thus spent a lot of time on English, and in particular on improving my limited vocabulary that often made my interpretational understanding of unseen passages extremely weak. My poor knowledge and application of vocabulary and non-existent sentence construction variations, also made my essay writing appear fairly immature. There is little doubt that my spending more time on sports fields than in reading books and newspapers lay at the heart of my problems. But, bless him, my much respected teacher, Mr Strachan’s discovery of my ability to be more convincing when tackling descriptive types of compositions, brought me nearer the pass line in that area. I must admit too, that my good level of success in the Literature section of Higher English

really boiled down to my having a good short-term memory [*and something else – see below*] rather than subtle appreciation of the impacts of some of Shakespeare’s plays, classical poem and nineteenth century novels.

The ‘clincher’ {in more ways than one!} in my eventual success in Higher English, came from my spending a month’s holiday in Crail, Fife in July, 1955. There, as a relatively shy newly turned sixteen-year-old, I enjoyed my first ‘real’ whirlwind romance with an eighteen year old lass from Glasgow who had just successfully passed her English Higher! The story of our meeting, subsequent rapport, and shared interest in Juke Box music, as well as our names, makes me think, as I have often thought after similar instances of good fortune blessing me over the years, that God does work in wonderful ways!

Anyway, first morning in Crail, I stroll along to the local tennis club ready to join any other willing players. On arrival I see that only two girls and a boy, all who look about my vintage, are knocking-up on court. I wander in and inquire if they would like me to make up the foursome. They are delighted. Then, before starting to play, we introduce ourselves. “I’m John Henderson”, says I boldly. “I’m John Henderson too”, responds a grinning namesake. “These are my two sisters.” The younger girl I say hello too without fuss. But the older girl makes me blush a bit as I stammer out a hello to her. But I am no end of pleased when she blushes too.

From that moment on, we, and the rest of the Glasgow teenagers in their group that month, become an ‘item’ with many ‘couple sub-items among us’, including me with Miss Henderson Snr., as we all tennis, café, juke-box, beach burn, swim and evening dance the month away ingenuously romancing in a ‘safety in numbers’ context. And in due course, between other extra-curricular activities (!), Miss Henderson Snr. promises to send me all her Higher English Notebooks. In the event, she, and her brother John, visit us in Cambusbarron However, as often happens with holiday relationships, we quite quickly drift apart. Although, about two years later, while I was a student at Glasgow University, I am invited to, and attend, Miss Henderson Snr.’s wedding celebrations to another. However, I suppose, although a wee bit disappointed, I am content to see an ‘old flame’ so happy.



Henderson Friends made in Crail Summer 1955
John and Marian Henderson of Dumbreck, Glasgow
Hillman Minx! John, Elizabeth, Marian, John, JNK