

ABERDEEN MEDICAL CLASS 1964-70 REUNIONS

Murdoch and Jenny Shirreffs – Organisers

The Aberdeen University Medical Class of 1964 didn't fully realise the implications of the new curriculum being introduced that year. Some 130 youthful souls began their studies as unwitting guinea pigs and proceeded to the joys of learning Anatomy *inter alia* in the following academic year.



Prior to this, medical students had several chances to pass this subject and re-sits were common; under the new regulations, it was one re-sit only and then you were out – and out they went in their droves!. As a result only some 68 of the original class graduated in 1970, but these survivors spent a total of six years living in each other's pockets as their studies progressed, and close bonds and life-long friendships were established during this time.

On graduation, the Class vowed to keep in touch and, as we were to be based in Aberdeen, we volunteered to facilitate this for as long as possible. Forty years later, we are still in touch with virtually all the surviving Class members and organise regular Reunions to which at least two thirds of the Class come every time.

Over the years, a format has evolved for these five yearly Reunions and this has been honed to the current arrangements of a three day event in Aberdeen over a long weekend in September followed by a special bespoke holiday for those who wish to extend their time together.

The Reunion starts with an informal supper at our house on the Thursday night, where the first checks that no-one is looking any older are made and events of the past five years are caught up on. Friday morning sees a bus tour of medical and civic developments and visits to old haunts. Over the years, the Class has been to the new David Anderson Building for GMED out of hours services, the Institute of Medical Sciences and the Suttie Training Centre, while memories of the past have been stirred by a revisit to the old Anatomy Department and its unforgettable aroma as well as to the Kirkgate Barr and Ma Cameron's. These



mornings ended in earlier years with a barbeque at the home of Peter and Margaret Duffus where all the children could be fed and watered as well, though in later years, without small persons being around, a more middle aged (and weather-prudent) arrangement of soup and sandwiches inside has been the order of the day.

Friday nights see a meal being taken in various venues ranging from a Chinese Banquet and a Theatre visit with dinner to last year's take-over of Poldino's Restaurant where the company was entertained by operatic arias between courses.

Reunions should not be over-organised and so Saturday daytime is left free for attendees to do as they will. In the evening, a formal dinner is held – for the last three Reunions in the splendour of the Royal Northern and

University Club - with group pictures of class members and partners being taken beforehand. Distinguished medical luminaries have been the invited speakers over the years including Professor Neva Haites, Professor Sir Graeme Catto and last year Professor James Hutchison. The evenings could be described as being somewhat boisterous, but the invitees have always risen to the occasion; it is not often that a practising doctor (and member of the class) gets a chance to squirt the President of the General Medical Council with water! Any transgressions do not go unpunished; fines are levied by chairwoman Jenny for even the most minor infraction and each Reunion substantial sums are thereby raised to contribute to various University developments. Even wearing new shoes with the price still adhering to the soles did not go unpunished....

After two or three days recovery time, some members of the class and their significant others will then head off on a special holiday which has been organised for them – at most there have been some 32 persons on these trips.

A specialist tour company tailors the holiday to our wishes and thus organisation for ourselves is largely confined to establishing numbers who wish to travel. A Reunion many years ago saw us at Coylumbridge with an evening dinner on the Strathspey railway, and so the idea was born that subsequent holidays should always feature a railway trip.

As a result, the party went on the Orient Express to Venice for the 1995 Reunion, to South Africa in 2000 including a trip on the restored Rovos Rail luxury train and the steam train along the Garden Route while five years ago, a visit to Peru, Ecuador and the Galapagos incorporated a hairy trip along the Devil's Nose railway as well as a high altitude journey over the Altiplano to Lake Titicaca and also to Macchu Pichu. Alas, last year, a promised trip on the Chilean wine train was negated by earthquake related damage, but the sights of Buenos Aires, Patagonia, Santiago, Valparaiso, the Atacama Desert, Easter Island and the Iguazu Falls more than made up for this disappointment. Adventurous activities are also including such as white water rafting on the Sacred River in Peru and on the Zambezi at Victoria Falls.

There is always a medical component built into these holidays (it helped those from abroad who could claim against tax!). Visits during the trips have encompassed a tour of Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town, the British Hospital in Buenos Aires as well as the local hospital on Easter Island (2000 miles to the nearest specialist!), a large clinic in Soweto and a rural clinic in the Peruvian Andes. Donations are always made to the poorer clinics as the work they do is in the face of great odds and any help from us has always been much appreciated. We also donated a set of football strips to our South Africa bus driver's shanty town football team and supported a local school at Victoria Falls who were in desperate need of the basics for their education. Such encounters do make us count our blessings for our easy life in Britain and for the blessings of the NHS.

Is the organisation of these Reunions onerous? – not really. E-mail and computer generated letters facilitate contact with class members. Our local knowledge allows us to make preparations for Aberdeen-based activities easily and with awareness of new local developments or places of entertainment, each Reunion has a freshness to its arrangements. Organising medical reunions is perhaps easier than with other faculties as medical registers facilitate tracking down people, and if someone disappears off the radar, one usually knows who they were friendly with at University so they can help re-establish contact.

In any case, there is great satisfaction from keeping everyone together and in touch over the

decades and seeing old friends again from all over the world – from New Zealand, Australia, Nigeria, the US and Canada and Norway. As well as having so much fun together, it is a privilege to spend time again with people we have known for a large part of our lives. Having been closeted together for six years during our time at Aberdeen University, it is striking how one so easily picks up the threads of friendships on meeting again, as if it is one big happy family – and judging from the laughter, it is. Class members are always delighted to see the new city and University developments and it is fun for us to show them these.

Reunions create many memorable moments and these range from the sublime to the ridiculous. Sandcastle building competitions have been held in South Africa on the shores of the Indian Ocean, under the shadow of an Easter Island Maori statue on a beautiful beach there and also on a glorious sweep of sand as the sun set on one of the Galapagos Islands. The judge for this last competition was a large sea lion who knocked down one sandcastle after another – the last remaining one was declared the winner.

One of our party was unable to travel to South Africa at the last minute because of serious illness. Best wishes were sent by an unusual method to her. At a penguin sanctuary on a beach, one class member who shall remain nameless (but was an ex-President of the Union) leapt from the raised walkway down onto the sands (strictly prohibited!) and drew a large get well message thereon, which was duly transmitted by photograph back to Blighty. It must have had the desired effect, as the ailing member recovered! Our tolerant guide looked away.....



Later that trip, and still concerned about her health, it seemed reasonable to contact her by phone to check on her progress. This thought came along while feasting in the palatial dining room of the Victoria Falls Hotel where the use of mobile phones was not permitted. Suffice to say, the waiting staff were somewhat nonplussed by the appearance of a dinner jacketed alumnus appearing from below the table, telephone in hand, to report on the clinical situation.

Birthday celebrations have been held while on a reed boat trip on Lake Titicaca where the crew sang to the passengers and the passengers sang back, with probably the first performance of the “Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen” on that renowned stretch of water. Other performances have included a rendition from “Kiss Me Kate” on the platform in Verona [“We open in Venice, the next night Verona...”] and instruction of startled aging Americans in the moves of the Gay Gordons to a band in the foyer of the five star Danielli Hotel in Venice. The manager wanted us to come back again – “the place is usually so dull”, quoth he.

While in Cuenca, the class supported the Ecuador football team in their decisive qualifying tie for the World Cup by all buying Ecuador football shirts and cheering with the locals around a television. Celebratory dinner later that night included roast guinea pig, which is a less than exciting meal – they are too full of bones!

Tips for organising successful reunions include these points. If possible, an Aberdeen-based person should collect contact details from classmates as soon as possible after graduation and keep a computer database of this information (data protection notwithstanding). Ample warning of planned reunions is vital, especially if class members are coming from abroad, and lack of response to initial letters or e-mails needs to be chased up – some people reply by return while

others are always at the last minute, though the organiser gets to know individual foibles as the years go by. Lack of response may indicate the need to check on addresses via known friends or professional registers, and, for the future, Facebook could be a great help.

With ever longer life spans these days, we know our task is not yet nearing its end, but we look forward to a few more five year meetings yet, even if we have to summon Saga Tours to take us to parts as yet unvisited!. It has been our pleasure – and a great privilege –to keep our medical guinea pigs together for the past forty years – and we are not finished yet!