

Two Perspectives of Helensburgh

An illustrated talk by Malcolm Baird for the Helensburgh Heritage Trust, April 4 2006 .

First may I thank the Trust for their friendly welcome and for the opportunity to give this talk.

It is nearly 50 years since I lived in Helensburgh and I also live at a distance of 3000 miles. Therefore I cannot claim that this talk is a comprehensive treatise. It should rather be taken in the spirit of Robert Burns's lines:

*Would some pow'r the gift to gie us
 to see ourselves as others see us.*

Before I give my own recollections of Helensburgh 50 years ago, I should like to lengthen the perspective to 100 years ago, by drawing on the recollections of my father John Logie Baird who spent his early life in the town, and his older sister Annie who lived in Helensburgh for her long lifetime, from 1883 to 1971.

Helensburgh 1900

We start with the perspective from 1900. What would it be like to travel back to Helensburgh on a time machine in the style of H.G.Wells? At a first impression we would quickly recognise the major features of the town, with its uneven frontage of shops facing out to the Firth of Clyde. As we move up Sinclair Street, the gradient steepens and the view opens out. Most of the large stone houses, or villas, have already been built by 1900 and the gardens are larger than they are now, because the lots have not yet been broken up to take smaller houses. The gardens are well tended, as every big house has a squad of servants including a gardener. As we move up the hill, the big difference from today would be the almost total absence of motor traffic and the lack of petrol exhaust fumes. However there would usually be some coal smoke in the air from domestic fireplaces and of course from the railway station, from which there is a frequent service of steam trains to Glasgow on the North British Railway. Near the top of the hill we find the "Upper Station" on the West Highland line which was opened a few years earlier, in 1894. Beyond that the road leads onwards and upwards, to Loch Lomond and the highlands.

My father was born in Helensburgh in 1888 at "The Lodge" which still stands on the corner of West Argyle Street and Suffolk Street, just a few minutes walk from where we are now. One of his earliest interests was photography and he took this picture of the house with one of his school friends standing at the gate. [1] . In 1941 he wrote detailed reminiscences of his early life here, for example the opening chapter of his memoirs which were republished recently under the title of "Television and Me" (Mercat Press, Edinburgh, 2004). [2] Rather than quoting him from this book, I have chosen a less well known source, an article that he wrote in 1936 for a magazine called "Scotland".

“I remember, I remember, the place where I was born...”

It was known as Helensburgh with a capital H to the aristocrats and the county, Elensburgh with a capital E to the middle classes, and eelensburgh with two small es to the working classes. I lived sometimes in Helensburgh and sometimes in Elensburgh, hovering between the two, Helensburgh at school, which considered itself aristocratic and county, and Elensburgh at home.

...I have been away from Helensburgh for many years and things have, I expect, changed as they have all over the world. One thing about the place, however, remains, and that is the extreme and amazing beauty of its surroundings. Those who live in the town have probably become blinded by custom to its beauty and charm, but revisiting it after many years spent in London, it came as quite a revelation to me.

My father attended Larchfield School and this picture [3] shows him in the school uniform. Unfortunately it cannot be said that the school was a happy experience for him, rather the reverse. He suffered constantly from chills and colds and we can see that he carries a large handkerchief in his side pocket.

I remember ... Larchfield school and at that time it was run on public school lines. The masters were of the outdoor, strong-minded, loud-voiced, sporty type, known nowadays as “hearties” and they did their best to make the boys into hearties also. Like all the others I went through the compulsory games, and to this day shudder when I remember churning about in a muddy field, the thin cold rain falling, frozen to the bone, and worst of all having to appear as if I was enjoying every minute of it. ... However, [this] may have done good to the more robust members of the school, and the exceptions should not grumble.

No science was taught at Larchfield but instead my father got his inspiration from reading the popular scientific writings of the day and in particular the works of H.G.Wells. He also had a circle of school friends who shared his interests in science including photography, and the telephone. He set up a local and unofficial phone system in which The Lodge was linked by wires across Argyle Street to the houses of nearby teenage friends.

This next picture [4] was also taken by my father in Argyle Street, just outside “The Lodge”. My grandfather, the Rev. John Baird, B.D. was aged about 60 at this time and he is ready for his dignified afternoon walk through the town in full ministerial regalia, with his umbrella at the ready for the occasional rainshower. The boy on his left is in the Larchfield uniform, playing the fool, but not noticed by Mr. Baird who is concentrating on his pose for the camera. The boy is Jack Buchanan, who was a year or so younger than my father and a near neighbour. Jack later tried for a career as a music hall comedian at Pickard’s Panopticon in Glasgow, but he was very badly received. Eventually he successfully reinvented himself in the London theatres as an upper class English song-

and-dance man [5], with the Scottish connection more or less erased from his public image. But this was all in the future.

In 1906 my father reached the age of 18 and he enrolled in the Electrical Engineering course at what was then known as the Glasgow and West of Scotland Technical College. Later it underwent several name changes and today it is the University of Strathclyde. During his studies in Glasgow my father was still based at “The Lodge” and still doing technical things, for example he became the owner of a Humber Olympic tricar, a sort of motorised tricycle with one wheel at the back and two wheels at the front, and a top speed of 18 m.p.h.. Here he is, with his female passenger already strapped into the front seat. [6]

The passenger is so muffled up that I have not been able to identify her, but it may have been my father’s older sister Annie (born 1883) or their cousin Jeannie Coates who lived nearby. Jeannie Coates went out to Australia a few years later but Annie Baird stayed on at “The Lodge” until her death in 1971 and in later years I got to know her very well.

In 1902 Annie Baird [7] had come to the end of her schooling at the Ministers Daughters College in Edinburgh, and she was considering the possibility of a career in nursing. She started a diary and although it was rather sketchy, some of the entries give us an impression of what it was like to live in Helensburgh 100 years ago.

January 4 1902

At the beginning of the year I determined to keep a diary. The reason I did not begin it before today was, that all the shops are shut for the New Year holidays, and so I could not get a book to write in.

Today I was in three shops trying to get a book without lines, but I did not succeed, and had to take this one. Today was spent as most of my days just now, are. I get up in the morning as late as possible (about 9), hurry down and make the breakfast, after breakfast I go upstairs, tidy my room, then I do the same with the dining room and the drawing-room, then make the dinner. In the afternoon I often go to meet J.Coates, as I did today, and at night I go to bed about ten.

Today I met Jeanie and Wyuna Coates, we went down town as Jeanie had some messages. As it was my turn I went up with her for my tea. We both wrote letters to hospitals to ask about training for nurses, but I doubt they will ever be answered (let alone sent). At supper I was entertained by stories of girls who were chased while going home alone in the dark, so in much fear and trembling I departed and set out on the lonely road, and in spite of fears reached home safely.

To get up earlier in the morning is most urgent.

The diary goes on, with the trivial day-to-day happenings, a little local gossip, and the excitement of the arrival of the Strand Magazine with the latest episode of Conan Doyle’s

“The Hound of the Baskervilles”. Helensburgh seems to have been a pleasant little backwater in the last years of the Victorian era, with no indication of what was to come.

Later, in the 1914-18 war, Annie saw active service as a nursing sister in charge of casualty clearing stations in France, just behind the front line and under occasional artillery fire. She was twice mentioned in dispatches and she was awarded the Royal Red Cross in 1919. I still have her notebooks with the names of the men who died at the clearing stations, sometimes only within hours of being admitted. The books include the addresses of the next of kin, to whom Annie had to write. After nearly a century it is still a deeply moving experience to read those notebooks.

Helensburgh 1950

We now move forward in time, to the year 1950. Again, we can imagine ourselves in a time machine, getting an overall impression of the town. We notice only a few changes in its appearance over the previous 50 years. The shops on Clyde Street and the large houses up the hill are the same as they were, though the gardens are less well kept than before due to the shortage of labour. There are a few new houses on Sinclair Street above the Upper station, and at the top end of the town there is the Skating Pond which is also used in the summer for model yacht shows [8].

The many churches of the town are still in use as such, although attendance is beginning to fall away. The streets are still lit by gas, as they were in 1900. There is more motor traffic than in 1900, but still only a small fraction of today's levels. A photo of Princes Street [9] shows the light traffic, and the gas streetlamps. Helensburgh boasted one traffic light, at the intersection of Princes St. and Sinclair St.

In 1950 most of the passenger travel between Helensburgh and Glasgow is by rail. Every weekday morning, business commuters wearing bowler hats and dark suits, arrive at the station on bicycles. They store their bikes under cover in a special room assigned for the purpose, with a space rental charge of a few shillings a month per bike. The steam locomotives and the carriages have not changed much since 1900, neither has the timetable. In 1950 there is still a special businessman's express that leaves Helensburgh at 8:30 and arrives at Queen Street at 9:05.

In 1950 the trains are facing competition from buses. The Central SMT Co. runs a service of red double-deckers every 20 minutes to Glasgow from the terminus at the corner of Glasgow Street, next to the present site of the Commodore Hotel. The buses are more convenient and cheaper than the train, but they stop frequently and the trip to the centre of Glasgow takes an hour and a quarter. On Sundays there are no trains, but the bus service is increased in the summer months to bring in large numbers of day trippers from Glasgow. The trippers, often with young families, spend their time walking up and down the front street, breathing in the clear air which is in total contrast to the smog of Glasgow. The shops stay resolutely closed on Sundays, but a few cafes and ice cream shops are open by special dispensation.

Although the Helensburgh of 1950 is largely unchanged from that of 1900, there has been an important change just a few miles up the coast. The deep sea port at Faslane had been built hastily at the outbreak of World War II and by 1950 it has been converted to a shipbreakers yard, operated by Metal Industries Ltd. In that year, one of the breakups was the great liner *Aquitania* on which my father had sailed over to the USA in 1931, on his first and only visit. Many of the older residents of Helensburgh, including my aunt Annie and her friends, looked back sadly on the demise of the Gareloch as a scenic spot for tourists. There had been a steamer service up the Gareloch in 1900 but by 1950 it had stopped, and the small pier at Shandon was derelict.

My sister Diana and my mother and I arrived in Helensburgh in April 1947, a year or so after my father's death. I was 11 years old at the time. We were made welcome by my Aunt Annie who lived at "The Lodge", where there were several spare rooms. [10] The house and furnishings had changed very little since 1900 and my father's old H.G.Wells books were still on the shelves. Electricity had been put into the house in the late 1930s and the heating was mainly provided by small electric fires which were never to be left on when the room was unoccupied. The key member of the household was Aunt Annie's faithful housekeeper Margaret Scott, a living example of the cliché that talks about a gruff exterior and a heart of gold. Not least, she was a brilliant cook and because of her skill we were hardly aware of the difficulties that existed with food rationing, which was still in full force.

Very soon after arrival, I was taken into Larchfield as a day boy. The school had changed a good deal since my father's day as it no longer aspired to be an English style public school. It was now a preparatory school and it only took boys up to age 14. The miseries of the muddy football games and the cold showers that my father recalled from 1900 had been abolished, and instead there was a fairly humane atmosphere in the school. The headmaster was William M.Clark, known among us as "Nobby".

Why is the nickname Nobby so frequently attached to Clark? One possible explanation is that during the Industrial Revolution, many common people became wealthy and in order to identify with their new status they had the spelling of their names changed. Smith became Smythe, Brown became Browne and Clark became Clarke. They disowned their country cousins who resented their stuck-up relatives as aping the nobility, calling them the nobs or the Nobby Clarks.

This picture [11] was taken at the 1949 school sports day, with Mrs. Clark presenting a prize to Robert Ewart Henderson who later became a respected Edinburgh Q.C. (1937-2012). Mr. Clark is on the right of the picture; he had graduated in 1906 from King's College, Cambridge, with a Third Class Honours in the Classics tripos. He had taken over as head of Larchfield in the late 1930s. The school had been rather run-down before Mr.Clark arrived, but under his headship it was doing well, with a strong emphasis on the classics and the humanities. I am extremely grateful to Mr.Clark for coaching me successfully for the Fettes scholarship examination in 1949. That enabled me to get a public school education which would otherwise have been beyond the family finances.

Unfortunately for me, Fettes went in for muddy football games and cold showers and I entirely share my father's opinion of them.

Getting back to Helensburgh in the 1950s. What was it really like? In a single word, it was quiet...with a capital Q. There was very little motor traffic and no television until 1952, then only a few hours per day of hazy and flickery pictures from the BBC. The population consisted largely of retired people and I saw a lot of Aunty's circle of elderly friends, going back to her nursing days. They would come round for afternoon tea and I was admitted to the sessions and subjected to kindly cross-questioning about my progress at school. The main advantage of coming in for tea was that I could partake of some of Margaret Scott's delicious home baked scones.

As I said, Helensburgh was a quiet place for a teenager and there was a fair amount of rainfall, so I read a lot. There were innumerable books at "The Lodge" but most of them were of a Victorian religious nature, going back to the era of my grandfather. Instead I became one of the first customers of the newly opened Templeton Library which occupied a former mansion at the corner of John Street and Montrose Street. On many a wet afternoon I would be the sole occupant of the beautifully proportioned reading room on the second floor, taking in works by Arnold Bennett, John Buchan, A.J.Cronin or Compton Mackenzie. I did not have the patience for the Victorian writers such as Walter Scott, or even Stevenson. My older sister Diana, whom many of you have met, was also a voracious reader of books and she went on to take a degree in English at Glasgow University. There she met a gentleman called Norman Richardson, and they were married in April 1956. My job as the nearest male relative, was to "give away the bride" at the service. Just yesterday I attended their 50th wedding anniversary party!

In 1950 as in 1900, no science of any kind was taught at Larchfield, but almost from the moment of my arrival at Helensburgh I became interested in experimental chemistry [12] and later in electronics. My mother was not very enthusiastic as her interests lay in music. Aunt Annie cautiously approved of my scientific activities, although she became worried when I set up a small chemical laboratory in my bedroom. In the field of chemistry which later became my career, I learned a lot before I ever received any formal instruction.

Like my father 50 years earlier, I became part of a small circle of boys who had the same interests, but this time in stinks-and-bangs chemistry. This smoke-canister picture [13] is typical of our exploits. A lot of what we did was harmful to the environment, or perhaps even illegal, but we were fond of invoking the old latin saying, *de minimis non curat lex*. For obvious reasons I prefer not to answer any questions about the formulations that we used! However, nobody got hurt and I am grateful to have had a uniquely exciting experience of practical chemistry. Several decades later, when I was working in Canada at McMaster University, I became chairman of the Engineering Safety Committee. This was a classic example of the poacher turned game-keeper.

Envoi

So there we have it. Helensburgh in 1900, and still in 1950, was a quiet spot; a sort of think tank, perhaps even a Shangri La, isolated from the dirt and noise of heavy industry in Glasgow. The town was a little bit slow and boring for those who liked the bright lights. However it was not a bad place to grow up in, as there was plenty of time to think the long long thoughts of youth.

The essence of Helensburgh, in my humble view, is to be found in this picture [4] that my father took in 1900. On the left of the picture, my grandfather symbolises one side of Helensburgh life: the conventional dignified citizen in late middle age, ready for his afternoon constitutional. But on the other hand side of the picture we have “the younger generation” in the person of Jack Buchanan, poking a little fun at the status quo. The picture symbolises maturity and dignity, coexisting uneasily with exuberant youth and its challenges and its promise for the future. It seems to me that these two facets of Helensburgh still exist today, although in several other ways the town has changed profoundly.

What are the recent changes? I can only give a visitor’s impressions. There has been an enormous increase in motor traffic and new building, mainly houses. The pace of Helensburgh life has speeded up, with most of the larger shops and tearooms now open on Sundays. The underlying change is that, thanks to the developments at Faslane, there is an immense military installation just up the road. Helensburgh is not the quiet backwater that it was in 1900 and 1950, but it is still a highly desirable place to live, if the house prices are any indication.

As the process of change unfolds in the 21st century, the Helensburgh Heritage Trust will continue its good work of reminding us of what has gone before. I hope these reminiscences will contribute to the work of the Trust.

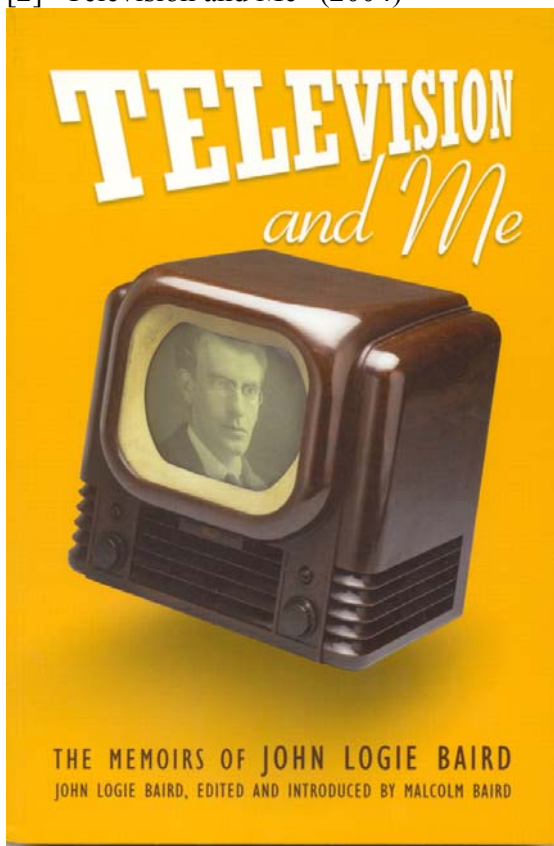
Thank you for your attention.

PICTURES BY NUMBER

[1] The Lodge in 1900



[2] "Television and Me" (2004)



[3] John Logie Baird, in Larchfield uniform, 1900



[4] Rev. John Baird and Jack Buchanan, 1900



[5] Jack Buchanan – studio photo 1930



[6] J.L.Baird and passenger and Humber tricar, c. 1906



[7] Annie Baird, ca. 1905



[8] The skating pond, model yachts, 1949



[9] Princes Street looking West, 1950



[10] The Lodge, 1950. Compare view [1] in 1900.



[11] Larchfield sports day, 1949, Henderson gets the cup. Mr. Clark is in the background.



[12] Malcolm closely observes a chemical reaction!



[13] Smoke canister with R.Clark, (no relation to Nobby)

