

**Michael Talbot**

**Music**

**1961- 64**



### **Sanctuary for Hungry Souls**

On arriving at Bretton Hall in 1961, I was bowled-over by its sheer beauty and magnificence. Walking down the sloping lane to where the new and old blended – and blue, glistening lakes shimmered as far as the eye could see – much, I thought, would be expected from this green, inexperienced music student. How then, was I to pass through these portals, to drink in full measure, so freely given?

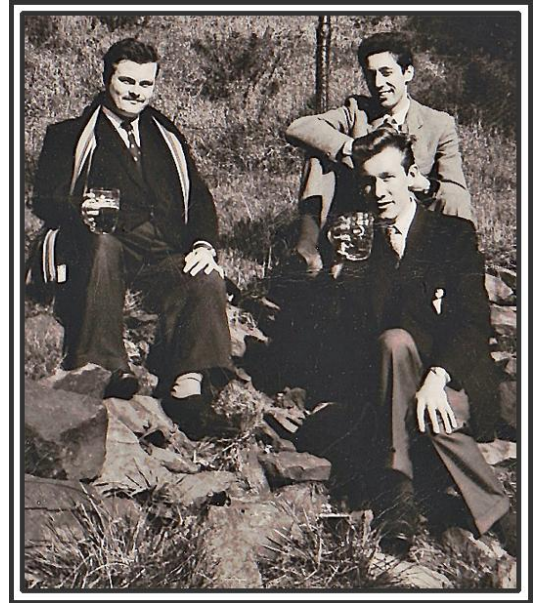


In 1961, I was one of the fifteen new arrivals assigned to reside in Estate House, situated in the village of West Bretton. On my first day, I found a spacious ground-floor room where Nick Wharton, Tudor Thomas and Collin Tanzer were establishing themselves. As we all got to know each other and those from the first floor, we soon felt at home using the

Estate House

communal kitchen to exchange pleasantries and later, long discussions. Rewarding ourselves occasionally, groups of us would head to the Midgley Arms – a mile or so down the road – for the odd pint.

One night on the way back, I found myself astride the pillion seat of a Lambretta, driven by Peter Walls, a 'sensible' science student. On rounding the corner of West Bretton, a piercing squawk erupted from a disgruntled, broody hen. There were hoots of uncontrollable laughter as we tumbled – an amalgam of machinery and flesh into the verge. We found we both shared the same zany humour. I've kept hens ever since! We soon discovered a collective friendship and sense of belonging with all our year group.



Nick Wharton; Peter Walls;  
Mike Talbot

My first 'shaky' experience was during a tutorial meeting in Stable Block with Dr Sankey, science tutor. The 'inquisition' began:

“...and what do you consider the criterion as it relates to your... ?”

The voice and question faded as my confused, foggy mind looked for deliverance and redemption by asking;

" - er, sorry, could you put it in another context, please?"

*[Don't look a complete idiot, there's going to be three years of this!]*

Next, was the handing-out of our pre-college work. This will please her, I mused! I had especially taken great care to type out this work with additional photos.

D+ ! Ok, so that didn't impress Dr Sankey, either!

*[At eleven years old, I had transferred to a Secondary Modern School, and after, embarked on a Mechanical Engineering apprenticeship. But it was a very stern, matriarchal aunt who persuaded me to change direction by doing some unqualified teaching.]*

*Brushing up my piano playing meant more lessons and further Associated Board exams. She also thought I could do with some extra English tuition.*

*Joan Trudget had been with the same piano teacher and had gone to Bretton as a music student; and so it was, that I applied to Bretton College.*

*Such sweet serendipity! I was called for an interview in London.*

*“Just ‘pipped’ grade VIII then?” Brian Longthorne remarked after I had struggled through a Beethoven Sonata.]*



Dr. Sankey

I later appreciated Dr. Sankey's demand for high standards; for clear, logical thinking, and I even began to revel in our environmental science projects which involved close scrutiny of the college's rich environment – learning to observe and record accurately.

I again reviewed my abilities when, at our first music meeting with Gerald Arran, he announced:

"Much will be expected; you lot have been chosen from three thousand applicants!"

I searched his countenance for a whimsical glint...

Our first session with Bob Fowler – college warden – was a stroll around the impressive lakes, chatting as we meandered in and around dappled, autumnal tree canopies.

I had to glean some reaction from this rather charismatic man about my English credentials. I had taken GCE English twice before, scraping through, and my spelling was weak.



Bob Fowler

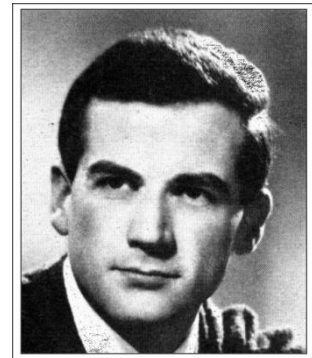
"I suggest you make a vocabulary booklet and write down difficult words as you go along..."

So, it turned out – this man wasn't too phased about my spelling issues!

Much later, we had to choose an author and write an 'extended' essay. I went for William Golding as he was still alive and still writing books – a safe bet, I thought.

I received a welcomed 'B+' for that, so maybe, I wasn't so thick after all! Thus, having picked myself up from the proverbial gutter of self-doubt, I entered the full experience of Bretton with growing confidence and fun.

I was so fortunate, also, in having Keith Swallow for piano lessons. It was he who inspired me with his playing and showed how I could pass that Grade VIII, at last. My placement in the '2nd' orchestra with the *violin* was, to say the least, questionable.



Keith Swallow



Daphne Bird

Our senior music tutor, Miss Daphne Bird, grilled us in music history, keyboard harmony and theory. She made us into a half-decent choir to perform in Wakefield Cathedral with a modern, discordant piece, 'Missa Brevis' by Kodaly and a more harmonious sounding "Susanna", both of which were recorded on tape and then onto vinyl.

There were fun times in our choir rehearsals when some of us got 'the giggles' watching the chirpy Miss Bird waving her baton about in time with her considerable, ample bosoms bouncing in contra-motion – and poor Tudor Thomas was sent off in disgrace.

When exiting the stage after one act during a performance, Peter Walls said there was someone still on stage. The poor fellow had fainted, standing up against the back-drop. We quietly went back and slowly supported him off. The audience thought it was all part of the act!

Sitting in the plush music salon one evening, listening to Anne Collins sing 'Little Polly Flinders', we all thought – what a *wasted* voice! She

later became a *famous* voice throughout the world. Sadly, she died of cancer around 2009. Once, in the 1970's, I heard her sing 'Rule Britannia' at the last night of the Proms.

Our formal dinners were always preceded by a sung Grace by small groups of music students. They used to press my back against a nearby cupboard, which provided a good vibrating sounding board to help resonate the low bass notes required for the rather long, drawn-out 'aaah - men'.... and did I hear a clatter of dodgy dentures from the nearby Staff table from time to time?



Swithen Hostel

Our second year saw many of us from Estate House ensconced in a spanking new student hostel named Swithen. We even had a friendly cleaner who kept us reasonably tidy – such luxury! Such a privilege! I occupied the first floor with Nick Wharton, Tudor Thomas, Stuart Wainwright and Peter Walls. The kitchen areas became magnets for chats during lecture breaks, and our own rooms for entertaining friends.

During the Bretton years, I soon discovered there was much more of the human experience to cram into this vacuous self. We once had a 'long essay' to prepare, called 'The Whole Man'. This sticks in my memory because it caused many of us in Swithen to dig into our very souls and secret corners – with long discussions into the night. We got to know our friends more deeply; to accept the human condition as we found it. We all became more relaxed and comfortable in each other's company and friendships – more aware of this journey through the Bretton years. The essay became a challenging friend, in its writing.

In the winter of 1962, a strong gale tore trees from their roots around the college lakes. I remember bringing a class of local children from Netherton Primary School to stand in the tree craters and count rings of

trees that had been freshly sawn. A fallen yew tree revealed nearly two thousand rings.

Then came the winter of 1963, the coldest since 1947, which lasted well into the New Year. We skated, and fell on the frozen lakes and when we drilled into the ice sheet, it measured nine inches.

It was during this cold snap I recall some amusing incidents involving an old 1949 Ford car which I had driven to college from Ipswich that year. It was kept among the trees in the shadow of Kennel Block and christened, 'Umpculese' by Peter Walls who married its number plate 'UMC' with its capacity and strength to transport five students. It had a habit of negotiating road corners at right angles, grilling its poor leafy suspension, burdened with a full load of revelling students on their merry way, to who-knows-where.



Mike Talbot in Estate House

Before antifreeze was widely used I would cover the engine with old sacks. Then one dark, cold evening, when I was driving in first gear up the lane to West Bretton, Stuart Wainwright reminded me there was sacking still wrapped around the engine. When we stopped and lifted the bonnet, a startled hen flew out and disappeared into a hedge.

On another occasion, during my final Teaching Practice at Rossington School, I was following a lumbering lorry up a very steep hill near Doncaster. The lorry was changing down through its twelve gears every five seconds until it was at a walking pace. My Ford had three gears and I was struggling behind in second. I needed first gear, and, because it lacked synchromesh, I tried to double de-clutch to match engine revs. There was a loud bang and I had managed to sheer half the teeth off the crown wheel. Thereafter, we managed to limp along in a shunting

motion, with a deafening clonk in the rear axle as the pinion struck the sheered crown wheel every half second.

I have mentioned our kind cleaning lady in our Swithen hostel. It was she who came to the rescue. She knew of a friend who tinkered with cars as a hobby and said he would see what could be done if I managed to get 'Umpculese' to him. A very obliging student (I can't remember his name) gave me a white-knuckled tow through the arching snowdrifts.

When I collected the car, the cleaning lady's kind friend had written out a bill for £7. 10s. 6d. He had not only fitted another crown wheel, but had renewed all the brakes and generally checked over the car. I tell this story because it reflects how generous I found these local Yorkshire people to be. I still have that invoice.

There are other snapshots that linger in memory – some quite serious and many light-hearted. I think many of us will remember where we were when President Kennedy stood up to the Russian missile threat. I was in my room in Swithen listening in to a home-made radio – and looking from my window over the Bretton Hall complex with its lakes and peaceful, rolling parkland – then thinking, how fortunate we were to be 'here'.

One lazy summer day, I heard a distant voice emanating somewhere from a distant hostel – Wentworth, I think!

“...come ye that thirsteth.. come ye from wherever you are...”

Thus intrigued, I ventured closer to the voice. A head appeared at an upstairs window staring with intent over the adjoining field.

“...repent and be forgiven...!”

A herd of obliging cows were gathering at the fence near to the hostel – as if in obedience, heads raised and inclined – as if hanging on to every command of this evangelical 'Billy Graham', drama student.

Then there were certain incidents – of attaching a wire on the cold tap and one on the hot tap in my own room at a specific time when I could hear the usual morning ablutions being carried out along my floor in Swithen. I had the 'input winding' of a transformer and 3-volt battery connected to the 'output'. When a make-and-break was made, one could hear the desired shocked, verbal responses from the adjacent rooms! There was enough resistance between hot and cold taps for this to be quite effective.

Also, hiding 'tramlines' of wire under the bed cover before inviting friends up for a social evening could be amusing. Trying to keep a straight, dead-pan face was impossible when backsides were suddenly scratched, preceded by contorted, electrified bodies.

Waking in the morning to a recording of Maria Callas singing 'Tosca' from the room below, or the strain of 'Wagner' from along the Swithen floor was nothing unusual, except on one early morning when we were all startled by a piercing, wailing from outside.

A student, by the name of Noel, was striding purposefully past the hostel blowing into a set of bagpipes. Even at seven in the morning, I did not think this unusual; in fact I thought he was doing us all a favour!

Just when we were all beginning to relax after our 'final' exams, I saw my name on the students' notice board, instructing me to see a Professor Ivor Keys from Leeds University. When I complied, I was grilled on my music history exam, and then asked to play a prepared Beethoven Sonata in the Music Salon.

Shortly after, a metaphorical death-knell rang loud and clear in my head, as my name again appeared on the notice board, this time to see the Principal. I knew of a student who had recently been 'sent down'.

I remember sitting in the Principal's upstairs Bow Room overlooking the lakes – and three years of Bretton flashed by.

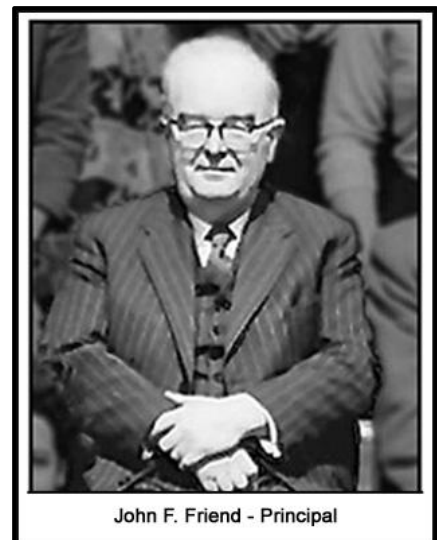
"Not too good, then?" I managed to ask – while Mr. Friend pored over a thick file.

Never before, or since, have I studied a face with such intensity. He looked at me. Kind, watery eyes peered through those familiar spectacles; a thin, sympathetic smile appeared. He looked somewhat surprised.

"I don't know - lots of 'C's and 'B's and the odd 'A!'"

He paused for a few seconds, before adding:

"Names on the notice board are picked at random."



John F. Friend - Principal



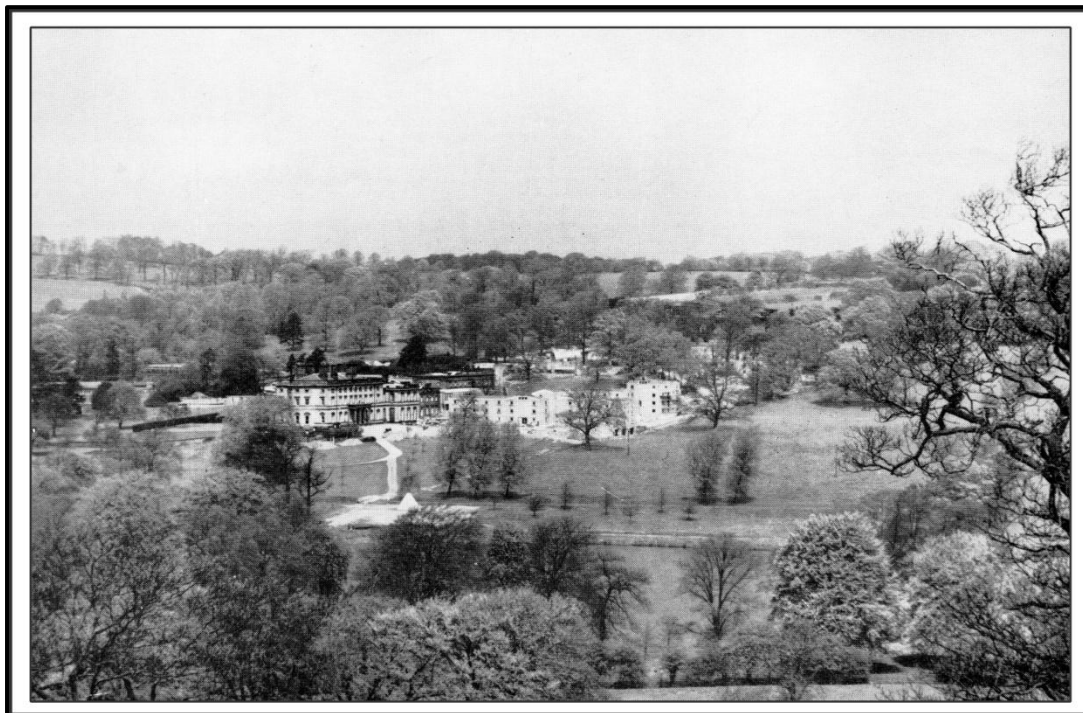
We talked at length – talked about a shared Suffolk. John Friend was a Suffolk man. It was a marvellous moment in time – and in my history.

It's so easy and, perhaps, shallow to reminisce about the 'funny' episodes during the Bretton Hall years – and equally difficult to bring to the front, the true and deep bedrock of experience that only a stay at Bretton could reveal.

In 1964, as I closed the door of Swithen for the last time, I glanced briefly over all that, which had so filled and enriched my very being ...

This jewel, this sanctuary for hungry souls, this Bretton; forged and set in every heart that embraced her. This special place that nurtured and fed us like a mother's milk: that sent forth its offspring to share its spirit across the land. All who filled their cup to overflowing have spilt its rich nectar for others to sup.

This Bretton - which haunts our memory in life passing - lingers on, to comfort her children.



Bretton Hall and Park – 1963

*Michael Talbot (January, 2015)*