

Paul Gandy

Art

1951-53

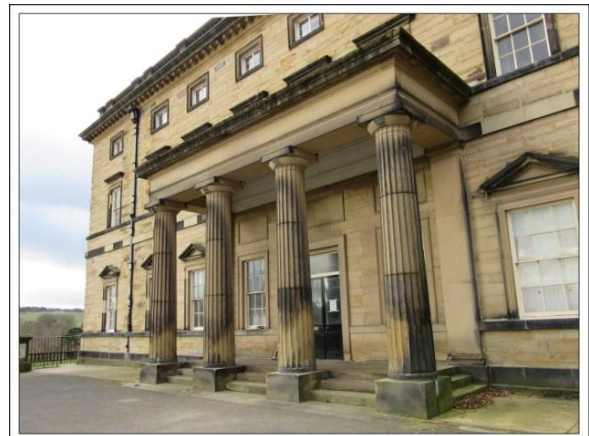
A Dream Born to Succeed

At the end of a day during the early months of 1951, I was off-loaded at West Bretton War Memorial by a kindly bus driver who said, *"Down't thur from top't drive."*

I made my first steps into the Bretton Estate. Late in the evening, it was very dark indeed, and some years before the regiment of street lights that made the long drive less sinister. In addition, it was snowing quite heavily – well, heavily for a boy from the far West Country, arriving for an overnight stay and an interview.

I carried a holdall under one arm and my folder of work under the other as I trudged apprehensively to the valley below. Unused to snow, but used to the night pitch of Bodmin Moor, I tramped alone and as manly as I could muster, to the emerging house lights ahead.

I rang the Portico bell and it was answered by a formidable lady with a Scottish accent who, I learned later, was no less a personage than Seonaid Robertson – Head of Art. She at once summoned the student president, asking him to look after me and convey me to my accommodation in Sick Bay. I think my feeling was of an under-pantry boy, looking for work.



PORTICO ENTRANCE TO THE MANSION

I had completed my National Service and was, therefore, quite hardened and relatively toughened-up, but my journey to Bretton was preceded directly from a provincial Art School – and a Devon one at that! We painted from plaster casts and had yet to discover the world of touch and feel and immediacy, allied to an open spirit.

I was offered a place, perhaps somewhat reluctantly, and not before my submitting:

"...a better folder of work showing improvement, please!"

Perhaps Seonaid Robertson was saying, *"You have a lot to learn before we send you into the vibrant world of children!"* – and she was probably right.

Entering Bretton at an early point in its life as an academic institution, inevitably fuelled the idea of new beginnings, but it was the permeating vibrancy of the arts as epitomized at Bretton – fulfilling, expanding and enlarging the human potential and understanding – that gripped us and fitted so neatly into where, as young students, we happened to be.



SIR WILLIAM WENTWORTH'S PALLADIAN MANSION.

We were provided with a classically-styled mansion in the understated English Palladian manner, which in itself was spacious, light, delicate, elegant, grand and an indulgent place in which we were to live together, learn, play and enjoy life. It was immensely joyful!

The parkland was overwhelming, with its acres of mature woodland, shrubberies, lakes, bridges, dams, stables, lawns, rhododendrons, camellias, Canada geese (always returning home on time – 3 a.m.!), robins, foxes, spring bulbs, clean air

and a stillness that 65 years later seems like a lost age.

Now that the College is no more, we can truly value the special vision of Sir Alec Clegg and his Wakefield Committee. It was an opportunistic idyll in which to grow – and mostly, we did!

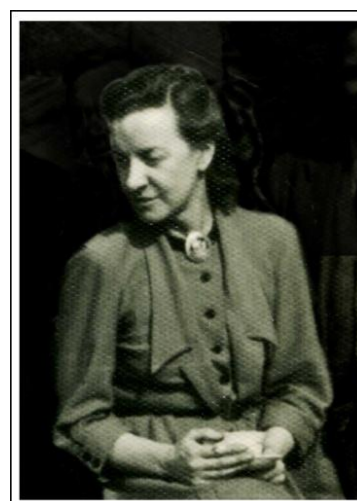
In 1951, Bretton was a fully resident student body of 112, spread over three groups: 1st year students; 2nd year, and Mature. The overall number was indeed small, but it had the great advantage in that everyone knew each other, and especially the disparate personalities that flowed from Music, Art and Drama. I recall students of considerable ability in all areas, with much to offer and growing and responding further in the physical environment of Bretton.

It was a dream born to succeed.

My first morning with Seonaid Robertson was a barefoot walk in the dewed grass (*I ask you!*), clearly a precursor to Modern Educational Movement with Miss Dunn. Both tutors challenged us to know our inner selves better and consider the simplicities available to us in life.

For me, Movement Education was the beginning of many years in a London factory with Dr. Marion North of the Laban Centre, but, like the most formative experiences, the best are unexpected, instinctive and spontaneous. Bretton did that for us!

In the early days, our study bedrooms were more like small dormitories than private rooms. The beds and designer wardrobes stood in very tight curtained-off spaces, open at the top, which did not hide the snoring, but before falling asleep, we regaled the events of the day, often amidst much laughter. The large communal bathroom was opposite – reminiscent of army arrangements, and very public. Other students considered that the eight of us sleeping in 'Oak Room' were very lucky, but after 12 months the room was converted into three separate rooms for six students.



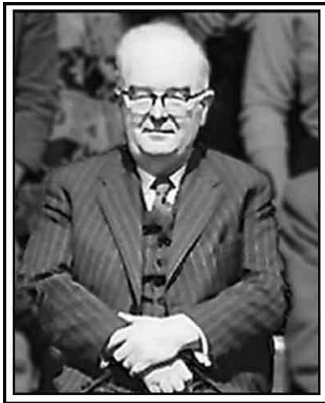
SEONAIID ROBERTSON

Friendship groups appeared to evolve across the courses, but mine, thinking back, were all from the Visual Arts. In the late evening, we met up as a group on Main Stairway for coffee, which was invariably of the war-time extract, with condensed milk. We were very self-important and called ourselves the 'Inner Wheel'. (Among those still alive, some of us keep in touch.)



COFFEE ON THE LANDING

Within the unsupervised studio-work, second years would help the new arrivals. To this day Derek Andrews recalls that I taught him to throw his first pot on the wheel. In later years he became a full-time potter. Praise indeed!



JOHN F. FRIEND

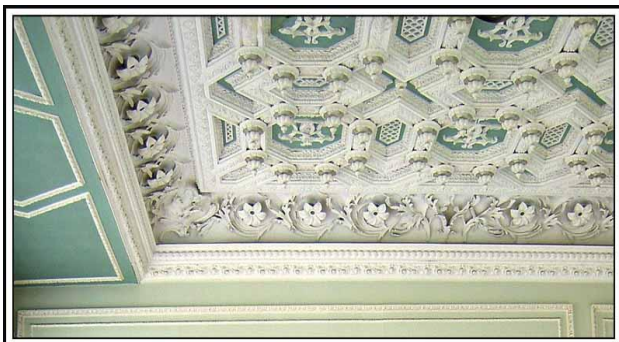
The Principal – John Frederick Friend – had a strong sense of Cambridge in himself, and we thought he tried to model the college along Oxbridge ways. We were summoned to dinner by a great gong and stood for Latin Grace – alright for me as a Catholic Convent boy!

Formal nightly dinner was much enjoyed until it was one's turn to wash the dishes for 135 diners. The Domestic Bursar supervised the task, instilling in us that the preferred order was: '*glass—silver—plate!*'

Common sense, really!

'Poppa' Friend expected us to behave well in this setting, including the Junior Common Room and in the Stable Block Student Lounge, and when we appeared not to live up to his expectations, he sometimes became upset.

On 6th February, 1952, King George VI died, and news reached the College at about 11 a.m. The then president of the students' union asked the Principal to suspend lectures for the day as a mark of respect, but Mr. Friend was reluctant to do so, probably thinking that we wished merely to avoid lectures. He *did* concede, however, and I remember a very quiet college for the rest of the day.



ORNATE CEILING IN THE JUNIOR COMMON ROOM.

In the latter part of 1952, when I was president of the Student Union, the Principal, who at the time, was unhappy about students' behaviour, considered furnishing the Junior Common Room with a large mahogany table, or even *closing* the room, but his problem was that the only access to the library was through the J.C.R. He told me to discuss the matter with the student body. I complied. There were no changes, of course!

It was Mr. Friend's idea that the students might like to plant trees in the park to commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953. The students liked the idea, and monies were duly raised. Subsequently, two 21 year olds were introduced to a kindly Yorkshire nurseryman, who guided us into the choice of 12 trees.



PLANTING AN AVENUE OF TREES IN 1953

An avenue was planned from the Portico, down to the boathouse. I have since thought that an *avenue* in a Capability Brown setting was inappropriate, but much worse was my inability to understand (then) that the Welsh students seriously preferred a swathe of daffodil bulbs. *Mea Culpa!*

Also in 1953, auditions for a performance of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* were held democratically across the three disciplines, and a committee was formed. I have always been fascinated that all the principal singers selected were members of the Art department.



PERFORMANCE OF DIDO AND AENEAS - 1953

Equally, I have always admired a staff who were ready to entrust members of a committee – some of whom had no musical training – with decisions for a very important performance in the early days of the college.

I remember that the performance of Purcell's opera was a very successful event and one in which I learned to Morris Dance, and the art of stage makeup activities that propelled me into school, college and factory theatre work in subsequent years.

I remember a College incident that rebounded when a group of end-of-term pranksters smashed the fire alarm on top corridor in the early hours. Someone added a note: "*Penalty for improper use - £5*".

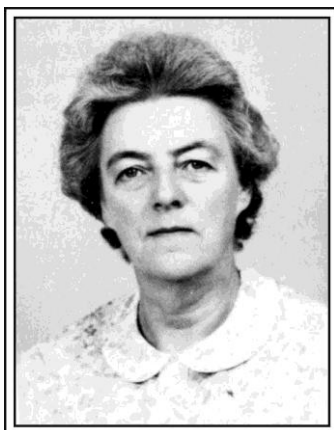
A giggle that did not go down well was the placing of a female nude white plaster sculpture on "Poppa's" personal loo. His Comment was: "*Is nothing sacred in this house?*"

Another end-of-year giggle was the pinning of cooked fish to the low down underside of the Senior Common Room coffee table. We heard that it took some time to discover the source of the stink. *Very juvenile, of course!*

John Riley, with a strong church organ background, played a recording of Wagner's '*Ride of the Valkyries*' at the end of all examinations – and at the highest volume! It released the tension!

Mr. Friend's family were known to be strong Anglicans, who attended services at Wakefield Cathedral. Derek Andrews and I used to pedal by tandem to Catholic Mass in Wakefield -- an experience notable for its pantomime quality. Derek had the motoring skill, and I, without much mechanical savvy, was a liability. Mrs. Friend took pity on us and most Sundays packed us into her family car.

Among the tutors that I recall were: **Daphne Bird** (Head of Music); **Margaret Dunn** (Vice Principal); **Martial Rose** (Head of Drama); **Seonaid Robertson**; **Reg. Hazell** (shy and gifted), and **Paul Bird** – all individual personalities, who brought a vibrancy to Bretton.



DAPHNE BIRD



MARGARET DUNN

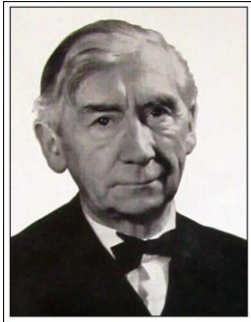


MARTIAL ROSE

Martial Rose organised a study trip to Stratford (was it the year of King Lear?), travelling down in the college bus, camping in tents on the banks of the Avon and cooking breakfast al fresco at first light. It was a quality adventure - simple, highly social, well organised and a notable theatre experience.

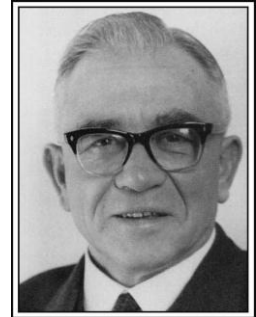
The Principal was keen in the early days to develop contact with Bretton alumni, but I recall that it was not an easy exercise. We published an Old Students' magazine, organised reunions with accommodation, and invited speakers. The events were typical of any college reunion, but attendance at Bretton was an uphill struggle. Maybe former Bretton students were too involved in extra-curricular activities in their early years of teaching.

Esme Church, a celebrated British actress, was a part-time tutor at Bretton, and she regaled us for hours with the magic of footlights. Martial Rose produced Maxim Gorky's 'The Lower Depths' with great success, which enlarged my empathy for the less fortunate in life, and illustrated for me that art as experienced is lived daily by everyone.



SIR HERBERT READ

Seminal days as the College developed were marked by special dinners, preceded by impressive lectures from notable guests such as Sir Herbert Read, Rudolf Laban and Alec Clegg (who was subsequently knighted in 1965).



SIR ALEC CLEGG

Paul Gandy. (2015)

Student at Bretton: 1951-53

President of the Students' Union: 1952-53

Chairman, Bretton Hall Old Students' Association: 1954-57

Outcome of the Planting of the Avenue of "Coronation" Trees



1953



1963



2015

POSTSCRIPT

**Bretton Hall Closed
as an Educational Institution
in July, 2007.**

Inevitably, there are misgivings in the closure of Bretton Hall:

- Is the College a loss?
- Was the absorption into a major city conurbation an improved location?
- Was the widening of disciplines at Bretton helpful, when its original remit was an Arts College?
- Do the music colleges and Laban London suffer from *their* high end specialisms?
- Was the physical side of Bretton not an exceptional environment in which to nurture students of the Arts?
- Was Leeds University short-sighted, short on problem-solving, and equally just another academic juggernaut eating up the prey?
- With my generation fast dying off, and with an Arts experiment that lasted about 50 years, what cultural memory will society have of Bretton Hall College?
- Why is it that so little lasts any more, and why do we have politicians, academics and accountants with such limited vision?

Alec Clegg's vision is forever lost.

Of course, some good has grown out of closure, and we now have the brilliance of Yorkshire Sculpture Park. Quite inspired of course, but did it not grow out of the success of Bretton? Perhaps a more appropriate name would have been: '*Bretton* Sculpture Park, which would have been a suitable accolade for the late College.

Paul Gandy (2015)