

Idris Rees

Music

1959-61

“I was directed to a room on the top floor, where there were three beds - the old servants’ quarters.”

I am from a village in the Swansea Valley called Clydach. My father was a coal miner, who worked on the face. If it were not for my good fortune in having Tom Rees as my father I would have left Grammar School at 15 and joined him in the pit, working shoulder to shoulder with him. “Surely not!” you may say, but the reality was that I was the eldest of four children and the money I would have been earning would have been a huge help in looking after my brothers and sisters. This was the mining families’ tradition. I write this as a testament to the gratitude I feel towards my parents and to my journey to Bretton Hall—the first step on a journey out into the world, the wide reaches of which I have been able to explore.

I could have gone to a Teacher Training College in South Wales, but they all trained Primary School teachers and I had no wish to teach in Primary School. I wanted to specialise in Music and teach in a Secondary School. I had a choice of Trent Park in Middlesex or Bretton Hall. I sent for both syllabi. I didn’t fancy Trent Park because of its proximity to London. For no very good reason that I can remember, I fancied Bretton.



Bretton Hall c. 1960

My interview was held in Drury Lane in London.

I had never been further than Cardiff - and then

only infrequently. My main source of transport was a BSA bike which my cousin had given to me. I enjoyed it. However, on this occasion, I had to catch the 6.30 train from Swansea and set off with a great deal of trepidation, not knowing what exactly an *interview* was. I took a Harmony textbook in which I was studying Stewart Macpherson’s explanation of all the different variations on chords of the ‘sixth’. One of my fellow passengers expressed the thought that this was very heavy reading for that time of the morning - to which I replied that I’d been up since 4.00 am. “Halfway through your day then!” was his retort. I found my way across London by tube and down to Cambridge Circus. Then I asked a policeman.

At my interview, which was conducted by Anne Holton (who later married Gordon Curl) no-one mentioned a *German* or any other form of *sixth*. I was accepted.

After ‘A Levels’ were over I went to work in the kitchens in Butlin’s at Pwllheli. I needed the money to buy books and also to buy an instrument. That experience, useful as it was financially, ensured I never went near Butlins or any similar institution for holidays ever again.



Tuba

The day of leaving home for Bretton finally arrived. The trunk packed with books had gone. The very secondhand, cavalry type, non-compensated tuba, whilst not delivered, was in Swansea station. Why was I buying an instrument at this late stage? My musical experience was defined by the music I played as a member of Ystalyfera Public Band. I was very lucky because we played some Beethoven (a very abridged version of the "Eroica"), Suppe, Rossini, Mozart, Haydn, Liszt and Sibelius. I played on an instrument borrowed from the band.

A violin had been given to me when I was in Form One of the Grammar School and I had a few group lessons, given by the Woodwork teacher, but to make progress I needed lessons with Bert Alexander in Craig Cefn Parc. This didn't happen!

There was no money! The idea of playing the violin was quietly dropped.)

My father had bought a secondhand piano as a reward for my passing eight subjects at "O" level and I had a few lessons with a lady who played the organ in chapel. We quarreled - end of piano lessons! I struggled on without much idea of what I needed to be doing.

Setting off for Bretton, my mother and I (dad was in work - morning shift) caught the bus to Swansea at about 5.00 a.m., complete with a large very heavy suitcase containing all my clothes, etc. On arrival in Swansea High Street Station we went to the parcel office and retrieved a very, very large box. I managed to open this up to reveal one tuba complete with mouthpiece and soft case. It was undamaged, so far as I could tell, so it went over my shoulder and I boarded the London train as far as Cardiff. At Cardiff I, my suitcase and my tuba changed platforms to catch a train for Sheffield. I'm not sure whether I had a direct train - I might have had to change again in Crewe - very probably I think!

On arrival in Sheffield I had to change stations. Hiring a taxi did not even cross my mind - I walked, complete with very heavy suitcase, tuba and whatever else I had to carry. That train then took me to Barnsley where I caught a bus to West Bretton. I had to consult once more with my travelling directions to discover the Drive down to the college; there was no indication anywhere where it was, so I took pot luck, picked up my very heavy



Beaumont Drive

suitcase, my cursed very, very, very large tuba and other accoutrements and set off down what I hoped would turn out to be the Drive.

The sight of all the grand buildings and the vast parkland was very intimidating at that stage, but I put on a brave face and carried on to where I was sure there would be directions to find my way to Reception. I came into college via the tradesmen's entrance at the back, having passed what was then the New Hall, Stable Block and the Music Block. I saw nothing of the Portico and the very imposing front of the house for several days - if not weeks. I always seemed to travel via the rear of the building up to Kennel Block or down to the fields, the lakes, the "tuck shop" in the market garden up past Kennel Block and the main gate.

I remember nothing of registering my presence, but I was directed to a room on the top floor, where there were three beds—the old servants' quarters. (The girls were on the "posh" landing.) The bed by the window was already taken, so I took the one next to the door, and the young man who arrived after me took the middle bed. We introduced ourselves and I became very friendly with Terry Bailey from Matlock; his father was also a miner. We were all three musicians, but the other lad, whose name I *should* remember, was doing the Primary School course and I saw very little of him - even in the very close, intimate confines of the college.



Kennel Block in 1960

We were 250 students at that time. The second-year group were very much older than many in the first-year because they had been on National Service. I was not able to relate to many of them, although I was roped into the Trad Band because Tony Wiltshire, who was an excellent double bass player, had had enough, having played with them for a year. I quite enjoyed the "gigs" up in Kennel Block. Many in my year had also completed National Service and so were more mature than

those of us who came straight from school. I think we were the first year not to have to complete National Service.

I only went once to the 'Bull' at Darton; I sang "Dafydd y Garreg Wen" (David of the White Rock) to a very appreciative, totally silent pub - possibly the first time they had heard the Welsh language - didn't get any gigs out of it though.

Of the 250 students, only 70 were men. (Say no more!) I took very little advantage of the situation because I had no money (what little I had went on smoking - an affliction I no longer suffer from) and was terrified of the thought of inadvertently getting someone pregnant—if this had happened, I would have been working at the coal-face, all dreams shattered.

Where the shortage of men came sharply into focus was when Geoff Pryce, Trevor Walshaw and I decided we would like to form a rugby team. The second-year had a very gentlemanly soccer team so they were not generally interested at all. However, we managed to scratch together 15 bodies of varying degrees of ability, and a gentleman from Barnsley travelled out, unpaid, to referee any matches we had.

We played Barnsley '3rd team' – we always asked for 3rd teams, such as Leeds University or Bradford Police. The latter left very shamefaced, having had a meal with us and discovered the nature of our college. During the game, our scrum-half, Mick Taylor, suggested to the ref. (he was the police's ref. - they insisted on having their own man) that if we were having a wrestling match why didn't we just get our shirts off, stop pretending we were playing rugby and get on with it. I think the local teams usually gave them a rough time, so they expected trouble wherever they played - not so in our case, and after the meal they could see their mistake. I think that if they had come again it would have been a far more pleasant affair, but we decided not to play them again. I don't know if the fixture was revived in later years.



Bretton Rugby Team 1960

In our second year we acquired some very good players like Mike Deakin, but we had lost a few that we could not replace. A mature first-year student was persuaded to have a go as we needed someone to play centre. He was taken off and taught to pass in one easy lesson, how to tackle in about 10 minutes and given a five minute run-down on which direction to run, and roughly the rules of the game. I don't remember who we were playing, but on the following fixture, playing at home, having been declared fighting fit and very heavily persuaded that he would be fine, Russ took to the field as inside-centre. My enduring memory of the agonies he must have been going through was of the opposing centre going to tackle him and all the pearls of wisdom about 'passing' went straight out of the window as he threw the ball straight up into the air. He struggled manfully throughout the whole of the game and as far as I remember, was persuaded that he would get better. He was already learning and he carried on his valiant attempts to master the finer arts of rugby.



Idris Rees - 1960



View of Bretton Hall from Menagerie Wood

I enjoyed running around the lakes, as did many others, and in my second year I organised a competitive 'race around the lakes'. Really it was more in the spirit of the marathons that are held in London and other cities. To everyone's surprise - as I was expected to win - Keith Robson, who had completed his National Service in the Royal Navy, won. I was second - very happily second as I think everyone took part and enjoyed the run, which was the purpose of the event.

I also organised a Sports Day—something that had never been done before because of the practical difficulty of laying out a track and facilities for field events. I took my measuring tape and some squared paper and went down to the field between the house and the lake - which had the advantage of being relatively flat - rather diminished by the problem of having a stand of trees on it. I could write a book about this, so I will cut it short. I presented the grounds team with my calculations - which I knew were beset with problems but were the best I could come up with. We had a running-track shaped like a pear, very wide at one end - where it went through the trees - and so narrow at the other, you had to lean into the bend in order to successfully get around it. There was a tree in the broad end which the track just barely missed. I had anticipated all of this and the chief groundsman and I had a quiet laugh about it. I think everyone enjoyed the day; results were irrelevant in the end. I don't know if this was continued - I think probably not - the compromises involved in laying out the track etc. were probably too great.

Lest everyone thinks that I had no time for anything other than the lakes and the fields, this was a problem for me too, I have to admit. (Towards the end of my second year, Mrs. Friend, the Principal's wife, whose flat overlooked the lake, commented that I seemed to spend so much time outdoors, she wondered when I ever found time for any work.)

There were, however, many days without any outdoor activity, and Bretton was broadening my outlook in all sorts of ways. I was, naturally, in the choir, and at Christmas the choir and orchestra performed Schubert and Arnold Cooke in Wakefield Cathedral. The Schubert Mass in G I really enjoyed; the Arnold Cooke was a totally new experience. I was, at that time, a lapsed Welsh Methodist, without any experience of Church of England music at all, therefore, whereas mention of the name Arnold Cooke brought 'Oohs and Ahs' from the ladies of the chorus, I was looking at the music and wondering if I would ever make sense of it. I did - we all did - but it was very challenging for me. We also sang Dieterich Buxtehude (until that time merely a name in a textbook), Handel, Gilbert and Sullivan (staged) and a great deal more over the two years. I also played in the orchestra - at one time having to play the second bassoon part on the tuba. I managed this very successfully, without producing the heavy blurring sound that was expected. Amazing as it may seem, the tuba is capable of a very fine pianissimo.

I also played in Mike Ledward's Trad Band in my second year and expanded horizons further by playing in jazz clubs in Bradford and other venues around West Yorkshire.

Our most memorable gig was in a pub in Barnsley, which had a very quiet night on a Thursday. The landlord decided that possibly we would draw in a crowd and so engaged us for a trial period.

During our break in the middle of the night, a young lady would come out of the dressing room with her mother (who was her 'dresser' and chaperone) in tow to perform on stage – singing or dancing – I know not what! We were busy imbibing back stage.



Bretton's 'Trad Band' Performing in Barnsley

One very memorable outcome of this engagement (which didn't go beyond our trial period) was that our pianist, a very attractive young lady from Liverpool who had played tuba in the `Liverpool Youth Orchestra, called Brenda Evans Powell, was asked if she - and only she - would like to play in what was a very notorious pub in Barnsley at that time. The name of the pub I have long since forgotten but it was the local strip club and part of Brenda's contract would have been to wear very little (if anything, I suspect!) However she turned it down. It was very disappointing for us all, as we would have gone along to support her efforts.

Our route back into College after these gigs was over the roof from the back door area. There was always a window open that we could climb through. The tuba would be left in the car until the following morning along with Mike Pegg's drum kit.

I was stunned in the second year to be chosen by John Heaton to sing in the Grace Choir - hardly the sort of thing a very lapsed Welsh Methodist expected to be involved in, but every night I sang grace before descending to the Dining Hall for the evening meal.



The Grace Choir - 1961

The Dining Hall itself was something I never could understand. The concept of the 'Top Table', and particularly of being served on by the ladies from the kitchen! I was, and remain, a socialist, and whereas I accepted it, I found being served on in this way very difficult. I wanted to get up and help, or at least offer to do the washing-up.

I'm afraid I never understood all the carvings and wall decorations in the portico area and beyond. It all went over my head. I didn't understand, and I didn't want to show my ignorance by asking about them. Now, having travelled all over the world, I would possibly appreciate them more, but at that time they were largely ignored by me.

I recall the lectures, which opened my mind to all forms of new ideas. Susan Isaacs was quite an experience and I always tried to carry on the concept of child-centred education in everything I've been involved in. However, if I begin there I will be writing a treatise - not at all the object of this exercise - perhaps no one would want to read it anyway.

There are two other things I *particularly* remember - each connected with the half-term break in the Christmas term - the only half-term we had, since all the other terms ran through without a break. I could not travel home for this mid-term break. The Glamorgan Education Authority paid my travelling expenses for the beginning and the end of term only, so I had a return-ticket three times a year. This meant that I stayed in Bretton in glorious isolation for the half-term week, whilst everyone else went home. I would stand in the Hall, looking through the window as parents came to pick up their daughters and was reminded of this by a statement by John Godber in his reminiscences of life at Bretton - his parents came to pick him up.

My second particular recollection concerns Hillary Friend, the Principal's daughter, who was away at school somewhere. During the half-term break she used to walk around the lake with me. We chatted about all sorts of things, exchanging views on life and all that, but that was the only time - and then not for the complete week - that I had company.

I could have gone up to "The Bull" in Darton or caught the bus into Barnsley, but I had no money, so I enjoyed Bretton - and I *did* enjoy Bretton. I never really felt alone - there were always things to see. After all, I was living like a lord in my huge estate; food was made for me - all I had to do was turn up and eat. I could chat with the groundsman - I lived a life of total luxury for that week.

That leads on to a further point before I indicate my way forward after Bretton. The costs of my training to become a teacher were provided by a Government Grant. After my tuition and accommodation fees had been paid directly to the college, I received a very small maintenance grant, which I supplemented during the holidays by working as a porter or a gardener in a hospital in Swansea, and I was provided with the means to get to my chosen college. I could not depend on parental support at all, as I am sure was the case for many others.

If the lack of 'grant' system that prevails now, had existed then, I would have been working in the pit. There is no way I could have undertaken all the debt that is being foisted on young people now. If able people are worth educating so that this country can be competitive in the world, then they have to be fostered. I know all the arguments about the system simply being a tax which you may never have to repay, but this is not the true end of the story, I think.

Finally, my two years came to an end. I was to be released into the world of work, ready to inspire young people with my love of music and provided with the tools to accomplish this. It didn't quite work out as planned, however. George Bradshaw who taught brass in the college told me he thought I could make it as a professional tuba player. I was stunned as I hardly ever touched the instrument - possibly that was what impressed him - I was doing nothing and getting away with it! Be that as it may, I decided to apply for a third year of study at the Trinity College of Music in London, was accepted and was awarded a grant.



Idris Playing the Tuba

After leaving Trinity I became a professional musician for six years. The story of my efforts as a freelance musician in London are not relevant here, but I had some very good gigs and some not quite so good. I earned a living. I re-visited Bretton twice whilst I was in London because I shared a rented room with Dave Ebbage, a Yorkshireman who is a very fine musician and was the proud owner of a Jowett car. He would drive home during term time occasionally and I chipped in some petrol money and got dropped off in the village. I hated the new hostels being built in front of the portico.

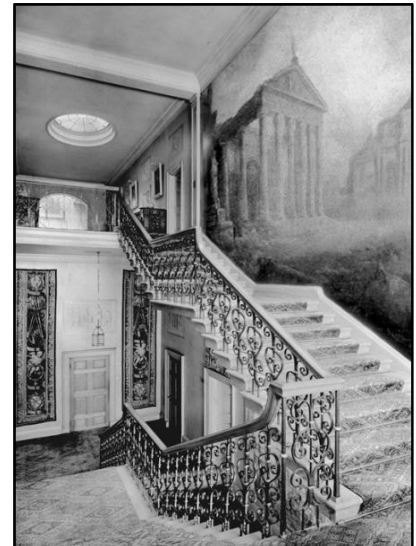
In 1966, during my time as a musician, I married Norma Rickard—a pharmacist. After the birth of our second child, I decided that it was time to settle to a steady career. I went to Newport to teach music in a lovely Catholic school where I pursued a career as a teacher, and when Norma and I were in our 40s we bought a community pharmacy in West Wales, which we ran for 20 years; for 10 years of that time I was Head of Department in a local Comprehensive school.

In 2009 I decided it would be great to revisit Bretton with Norma. We drove up and stayed in the Bull at Darton - I even recognised the area, famously blessed by my solo rendition - but only just. The Yorkshire Sculpture Park I had never heard of. The mess they had made of the college, I couldn't get over. We trespassed, so that I could show my wife the college that I knew. I couldn't accept the plethora of additional buildings, which in my view ruined the place. I was glad to see that the lakeside view was as it always had been.

There were no more sports on the meadow in front of the Hall - no more races around the lake - the upper lake is now some form of nature conservancy area. We walked around the lower lake, which was just barely recognisable and we could hear all the traffic at the bottom end where once we had swum in total peace. Still, an amazing place! but.....

I had read that there were plans to make it into an hotel. "In your dreams!" was my reaction - they would have to demolish everything apart from the original buildings at huge cost. It could never be anything other than Butlins with all that infrastructure! I note now that demolition has begun and it will be only the original buildings that will be retained.

When the hotel is opened I hope possibly to take my wife back - we might get to sleep in the room in the servants' quarters that I occupied as a student 57 years ago, and sing grace on the grand staircase!



Idris Rees

2017

The Grand Staircase



Idris and Norma at their Golden Wedding Celebration in 2016