

Going to Contin School

75 years ago

Notes for a talk to pupils in Contin School in 1997

Ken Cumming

Thank you for your invitation – it is my pleasure to come.

Before I start my story about Contin as I remember it, I should mention that I was born here on 10th April 1933, at Oakview, which is still my family home. In the years before the 20th Century Oakview had been the village pub, Pennygown Cottage (Dunarerty) was the village jail, Roselea was the schoolhouse and Miss Rose's house (next to the Hall) was the School until 1877.

My story will begin in 1938 when I started school in the "Wee Room". Miss McLean – Kate – was my teacher. The head teacher was Aulay McLeod – known as "Fat Aulay".

I recall the slates and slate pencils with which we did most of our work – letters, writing and sums. There were no paper jotters till Class 2/3 when we did writing once a week – Mine was so bad I got the belt every time!

I remember the plasticine with which we made all sorts of objects, no doubt letters and figures too. There was 1 large roll-round blackboard in the Wee Room and we sat at double desks. In one corner was the teacher's desk on which sat 2 massive black tin chests in which all the Registrar's documents were kept. 'The Master' was the Registrar, so there were regular interruptions if someone called to register the birth of a baby, a forthcoming marriage or the death of a relative.

There were no visiting teachers then. Class teachers coped with singing, P.E., sewing, handwork, art – and in Big Room – gardening. Art and basic science for those not going on to Dingwall Academy was also taught. Visits began in 1945 as the War ended. Miss Bassin taught singing and Mrs Raynor, P.E.

When we progressed to the "Big Room" our day always began with the Bible – round the room, by memory. We learnt Psalms, passages from the Old and New Testaments, and the Shorter Catechism – all 106 questions by the time we went to Dingwall Academy.

Who can tell me the Books of the Bible – Old or New?

Then there was Arithmetic – addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, decimals, vulgar fractions, problems, percentages, L.C.M., H.C.F. English included reading, writing, poetry and grammar.

Visitors to the school included the Minister for the Bible exam once a year; the School Doctor, regularly, and on special occasions to give diphtheria injections; the District Nurse with her bug comb (as I have since heard her described – "Nitty Norah, the hair explorer). And then there was the Dentist!! Now that was quite a scene. Mr Ross was an elderly gentleman with a wooden leg. A pan, boiled on the open fire, held needles, etc. Kate's wooden chair was the surgery.

Mrs 'Captain Murray' supervised the Qualifying Exam (the Qually).

How did we get to school? – on foot, barefoot in the summer, boots in winter; on bike if you came a distance from one of the farms; or on horseback, like 3 sisters from Rogie. There were NO cars lined up outside the gate in those days. There weren't 10 cars in the whole village!

What time was school? – dawn to dusk in winter, or 9.30 to 3–3.30 p.m. when lunchtime was reduced to 20 minutes. There was NO canteen in those days. In winter a big brown enamel kettle was boiled on the open fire to make cocoa to wash down the children's own packed lunch.

A coal fire was all the heat in each room and there was no lighting. It was Blackout conditions anyway during wartime. In winter the fireplace was surrounded with pairs of wet tackety books to be dried for the homeward journey. Those of us who lived within minutes from the school went home for a bite of lunch. This was always a rush as I had to deliver Mrs Bethune's (postmistress) daily paper and gulp food and return in 20 minutes.

The games we played were Shinty, Scotch & English, Hop Scotch, Conkers, Skipping, races, etc all in their own season. Snowballing was banned after an accident. The playground was as it is today, without the tarmac.

There was the ash pit, behind the present Infant room, also the boys' outside toilets. The girls' outside toilet was nearer the schoolhouse.

During the war we did our bit for the war effort. We collected scrap paper to be re-mulched, old tyres for re-treading.

Our outdoor shelter doubled as a store, shelter, and hen scratching area for the 'Master's' hens.

We had visits from the Ministry of Information film van showing the horrors of the Blitz and how our efforts of collecting scrap all helped to keep Britain going. There were also films on healthy eating under difficult conditions, plus the usual slogans eg if you cough or sneeze or sniff do it in your handkerchief. All this we saw, seated on the bank where Torview road is now. The van reversed off the road and the back doors opened revealing the screen.

From the playground we watched the troops, who were billeted up at Coul House, march past on exercise, or en route to Tor Achilty rifle range for shooting practice, or along past the Forestry Offices to dig trenches still visible today.

We also watched the Norwegian Mounted Regiment train their horses – breaking them in to pull gun carriages, loads of ammunitions, etc.

The officers resided in Coul House and went by 4-horse drawn black coach to visit other officers in Brahan Castle. King Haakon and Crown Prince Olaf of Norway took the salute at Contin War Memorial as their troops rode past. The foundations of the stables are still visible in the field behind Torview. The billets were in the field in front of Coul House. The N.A.A.F.I hut was in the corner (by Mrs Benkowski's bungalow). Towards the end of the war we had the 'mechanised' troops with tanks, bren-gun carriers, and ducks (amphibious craft) used for the Normandy landings when the British drove the Germans out of France. A landing stage was built at Loch Achilty for their practice runs. On Sundays all these troops attended Church parade at Contin Church.

After school we played the usual games in season, ball games on the road in summer, guddling for minnows, or fishing and catching eels; sledging or sliding in winter.

Holidays were spent at home, or with uncles and grandparents. There were NO trips abroad. The Spring holiday was spent potato planting and the October holiday potato lifting. One of the first chores of the summer holidays was washing the blankets outside in tubs and 'tramping' them. Firewood had to be sawn to build up a stock for winter. Two fires were required in my house as my grandmother, a semi-invalid, lived with us for a few years.

Other sights and sounds from our holidays included the milkman in van or horsedrawn float with churn from which we all purchased our pail of milk; Paddy O'Hare, with his pony and cart, calling 'Fresh Herring'; and the travelling people – the Stewarts, McPhees, McNeils, etc with 2 or 3 carts, dogs running just under the tailboard, neatly between the back wheels. They offered services repairing kettles, pans, pails, selling clothes pegs and shoelaces, buying rabbit skins or rags. Some went from rags to riches literally. The McNeils tarred roads and the McAllisters went from selling second hand furniture to build up West End Furniture shops.

Work in Contin in 1938 centred round Coul Estate owned by Sir Arthur Mackenzie and later his son, Sir Robert. The house was let to Lt Col Forbes Robertson and had a full complement of staff – forester, gamekeepers, gardeners, house staff and chauffeur. The 8 farms were all let to tenants.

The Smiddy was a fascinating place to stop by to or from school to see hammers shape horseshoes, sparks fly and smell hot metal and hooves.

A bobbin mill at Achilty, burnt down many years ago, supplied bobbins for the jute industry in Dundee; dressed timber for the joinery trade; and firewood. Lumber jills were housed in Craigdarroch Lodge during the war, engaged in felling and dragging – very hard work. The timber was required for shipbuilding, etc to help the War Effort.

Achilty was the only wayside inn in the village.