

The Final Countdown – Summer 1967

by Rod Cross (1964-67)

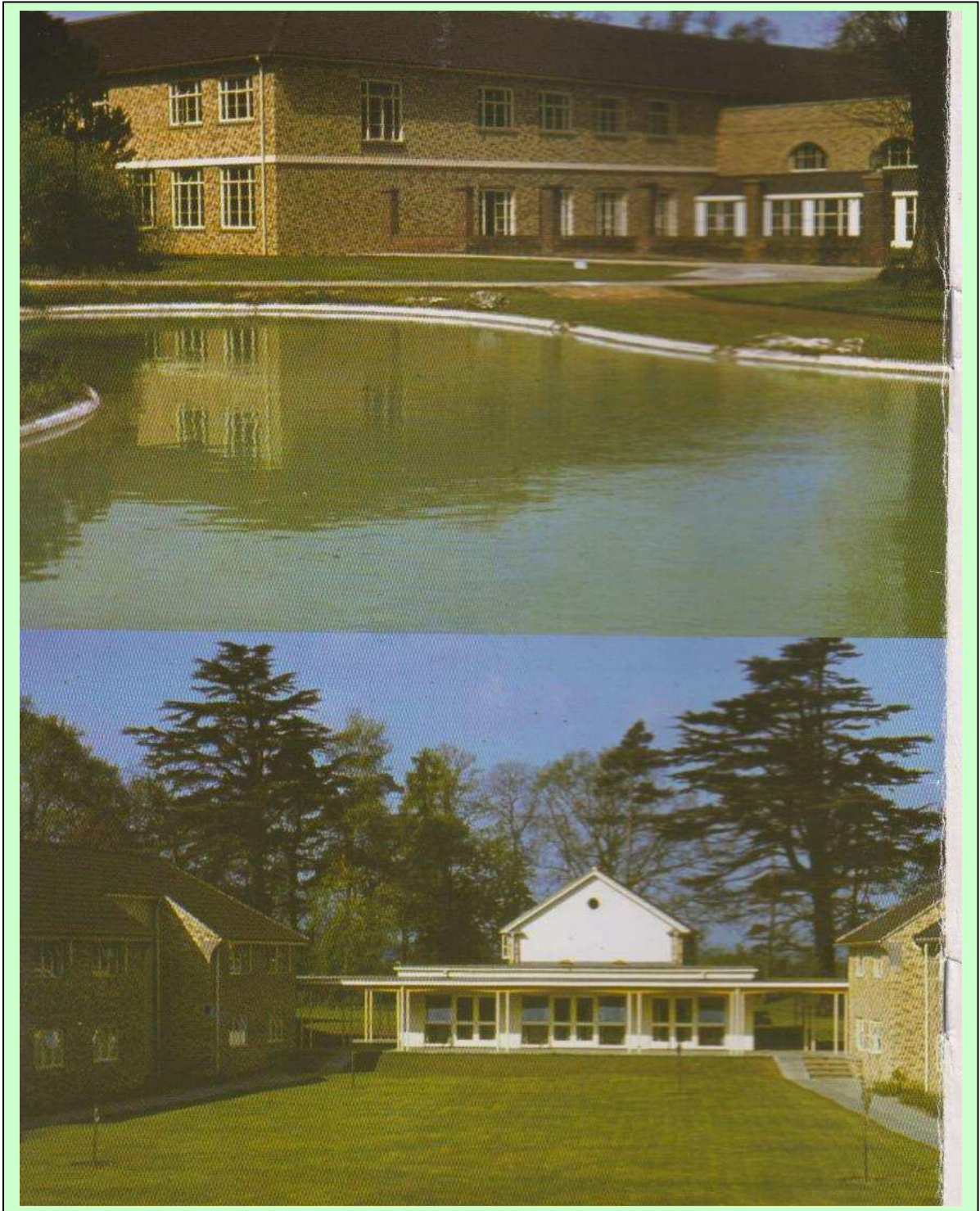


All good things must come to an end and, as we moved into 1967, life at Keswick took on an altogether more serious tone.

For a start, we were now residing back in college after the somewhat liberating experience of being in digs. There was also a final teaching practice to contemplate; two theses, or 'special studies' to complete; final exams to survive; and most importantly, a future career to think about and get underway.

Beginning in the last week of January, the pending teaching practice was of the most immediate concern. It was preceded by two visits to our appointed school for what were known as 'Observation Days'. There then followed 'Preparation Week', when we had to write a 'scheme of work' for each subject we were teaching and an initial lesson plan to accompany it. Both had then to be approved by an appropriate tutor, who either swiftly penned a signature at the bottom or sighed heavily and asked whether wood-carving with seven year olds was not a trifle over-ambitious. There were also masses of laminated work-cards to prepare in keeping with the current fad at the time. Along with work-sheets, run off on highly temperamental Banda machines, these were fast replacing the trusty old Ridout and Unstead text-books which had faithfully served generations of pupils down the years. The revolution in teaching methods was already underway.

With well-worn suits replacing roll-necks and jeans, we then embarked upon a gruelling six weeks in school, in which we were expected to teach for all but an hour a day. My school was on a sprawling housing estate on the outskirts of Norwich. It was modern and well-equipped and though the children were not the brightest, they were amenable and enthusiastic. The class-teacher was Miss Ash, a stern, humourless spinster of late middle-age whom I found difficult to relate to on any level. However, she had my best interests at heart, a fact



which did not become apparent till I was well into my fifth week. Up until then, I had been congratulating myself on my class control and absence of behavioural problems. Then it dawned that every time I walked in to take the class, Miss Ash would disappear out of the back door with four boys. These she deemed potentially troublesome; and so taught them separately in the corridor outside. Not only did this reduce my class number but every other child in the class was aware that if they played up this greenhorn student teacher, they too might be banished to the corridor and forced to work in isolation under the beady eye of the fearful Miss Ash. It can't have been much fun for the four boys concerned but it certainly gave me an easier ride!

With teaching practice safely out of the way, the next hurdle was the completion of special studies. One of these was on a topic that could be loosely termed 'Education'; the other, in our main subject. Each was expected to be an original piece of research of about 8000 words in length. To me, the term 'special study' demeaned the amount of academic input required. Friends of mine at university were writing theses or dissertations. That sounded much more grown-up.

One of the most original pieces of research in my year group was conducted by my good friend Dyan. Stuck for ideas for her main subject of biology, she was gazing out of her window one day at a herd of Friesian cows grazing in a distant field when she noticed all were facing in the same direction. It was a Eureka moment! Within minutes, Dyan had the idea for the basis of her research. Do cows always face in the same direction and does it depend upon whether they are eating, sleeping or merely chewing the cud? What part do weather conditions play? Is the time of day important and is the behaviour the same after dark? There was an endless set of questions that could be posed. As a geography student, I was initially roped in to advise on the meteorological aspects and to point out north from south and east from west but after that she was on her own. I'm not quite sure where all her 8000 words came from but I do know her special study was approved and apparently very well-received!

Final exams, for some, were, in truth, no big deal. In terms of difficulty, I rated them somewhere between the old '11 plus' and 'O Levels'.

One either achieved Distinction, Merit or Pass. To fail, it seemed one had to either hand in a blank answer sheet, or just not turn up to take it up in the first place. Even then, such was the demand for qualified teachers that one would probably have scraped a pass anyway! There were five papers: two in education, two in our main subject and, rather curiously, one in something called Health Education. It was never explained why the latter was afforded status as an examinable subject. Maybe, somebody had advance warning of our current obsession with health and safety.

The exams were conducted formally, with everybody sitting in serried ranks in the main hall but nobody I knew did a scrap of revision. There was no panic nor last minute nerves, no vital facts scribbled on the backs of hands or secreted on slips of paper in a pencil case, and no lengthy discussion afterwards about what had gone right and what had gone wrong.

In contrast to the breathless activity when first introduced to college life, the last two weeks of our final term were somewhat anti-climactic. Day students stopped attending once the last exam had been sat; then mature students gave up residence and went home to their families, and with no lectures or tutorials to attend, college life lost its structure and meandered somewhat aimlessly to a close at the end of the first week in July.

By this time, of course, most people had their immediate futures safely mapped out. Broadly speaking, there were three main categories: those who were going back home to live with mum and dad; those who had found a marriage partner at college and were either settling down together or whiling away time in Norwich whilst their chosen one completed their training; and those who wanted to continue the adventure somewhere else. I was in the latter camp. With the aid of an AA Road Atlas and a large pin, I had settled on Southampton, though I could just as easily have ended up in Southport or Southend! Alan, who had been in my digs during our second year at college, was joining me and we already had teaching posts and accommodation sorted out.

When the final evening arrived, so many people had already left early for home that Keswick resembled something of a ghost town. Here and there, a light shone from behind closed curtains but an equal number of rooms were now

devoid of their occupants. The posters had come down from the walls; the radios and record players played no more and the windows of empty rooms stared blankly across the quadrangle.

At 10 o'clock, I went for a last walk round the college grounds and bumped into Sue outside the West Common Room. We had a lot in common, as not only had we gone through college together but we had both started at the same secondary school on the same day. We reminisced for well over an hour, reliving events of the past 10 years. It was hard to imagine that within a single decade, we had progressed from primary school pupils to primary school teachers.

Next morning, packed and ready to go, all that remained was to make the round of goodbyes. I had already arranged to meet one or two people during the holidays but otherwise the words, 'See you, then', had something of a hollow ring. In truth, there was only the slightest chance of meeting most of these people ever again. It was hard to be saying a final farewell after we had lived together cheek by jowl for almost three years.

With time to kill before my lift was ready, I idly flicked through that week's edition of Aspect – the College weekly paper. There was a letter condemning the visit of evangelist Billy Graham to the Albert Hall; a review of T.S. Eliot's 'Murder in the Cathedral', which had been performed in the Sunken Garden the previous Friday; and a complaint that members of the Women's Hockey 1st XI had been the only ones to receive colours that year. The latter was signed by eight members of the 2nd XI. Elsewhere, the 3rd year students had beaten the staff at cricket by 40 runs; the trampoline club had elected next year's officers at their AGM and Megan wanted to purchase a lady's bicycle (must be in fairly good condition). It was a typical mix of the serious and the banal, such as one might read in any community-based paper.

Being a member of this community had been a wonderful experience and I felt I had taken full advantage of the diverse opportunities it offered. Of course, there were regrets at having to leave this comfortable life behind but it was time to move on.

The last thing I read was Mick's final Aspect editorial. It really hit the nail on

the head: 'We all leave here with mixed feelings and the more you have enjoyed being here the more mixed they are'. Then came the sting in the tail: 'If you are one of those who have been waiting to leave for the last three years, I should think it has been hell - and you deserve every minute of it!'

I smiled - harsh words, indeed. How glad I was they didn't apply to me!

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