

Robin Webster

Born 1939. Architect.

Available online at www.livesretold.co.uk



1. Parents and Grandparents
2. Early Memories
3. School
4. Greece and the Middle East
5. Cambridge University 1959-1962
6. Gillespie Kidd and Coia 1962-1963
7. The Bartlett School, University College London 1963-1965
8. National Building Agency 1965-1967
9. Llewelyn Davies Weeks 1967-1970
10. Teaching at the Bartlett 1970-1972
11. Domestic Arrangements and Marriage
12. Spence & Webster Architects 1972
13. Parliamentary Building Competition 1972
14. Belsize Park Gardens 1981
15. Teaching at Robert Gordon University 1984-2005
16. Cameron Webster Architects 2005
17. Charitable Activities
18. Family

1. Parents and Grandparents

The chapters that follow are an interview of Robin Webster by Alex Reid, editor of the Lives Retold website, and a contemporary of Robin Webster's as a student at the Cambridge University School of Architecture. The interview was carried out in June 2021 by working online on a Google Docs shared document.

Could we start please with your father's parents. Can you tell me where they lived and what they did?

My paternal grandfather (Alfred Webster) lived in Glasgow and was an artist specialising in stained glass: he was well regarded and still has a following, his windows are considered to be very good. He was killed in 1916 in the First World War..I never met him.

My paternal grandmother (Maude Webster Nee Cochrane) married Alf when she was 18, and carried on the business until my father took over in 1928. She had three sons, Martyn, Gordon and Comyn.



Detail of a stained glass window designed by Robin Webster's father Gordon.

And your mother's parents?

My maternal grandfather (Robert MacLennan) was a journalist and author who lived in Glasgow...he also wrote plays, and apparently had two plays running in Shaftesbury Avenue at the same time at one point. He died in 1925 in Nice, from TB, I never met him either. His wife was Florence

MacLennan (nee Ross), who came from Aberdeen, she had three children, Hector, Sheila and Finlay.

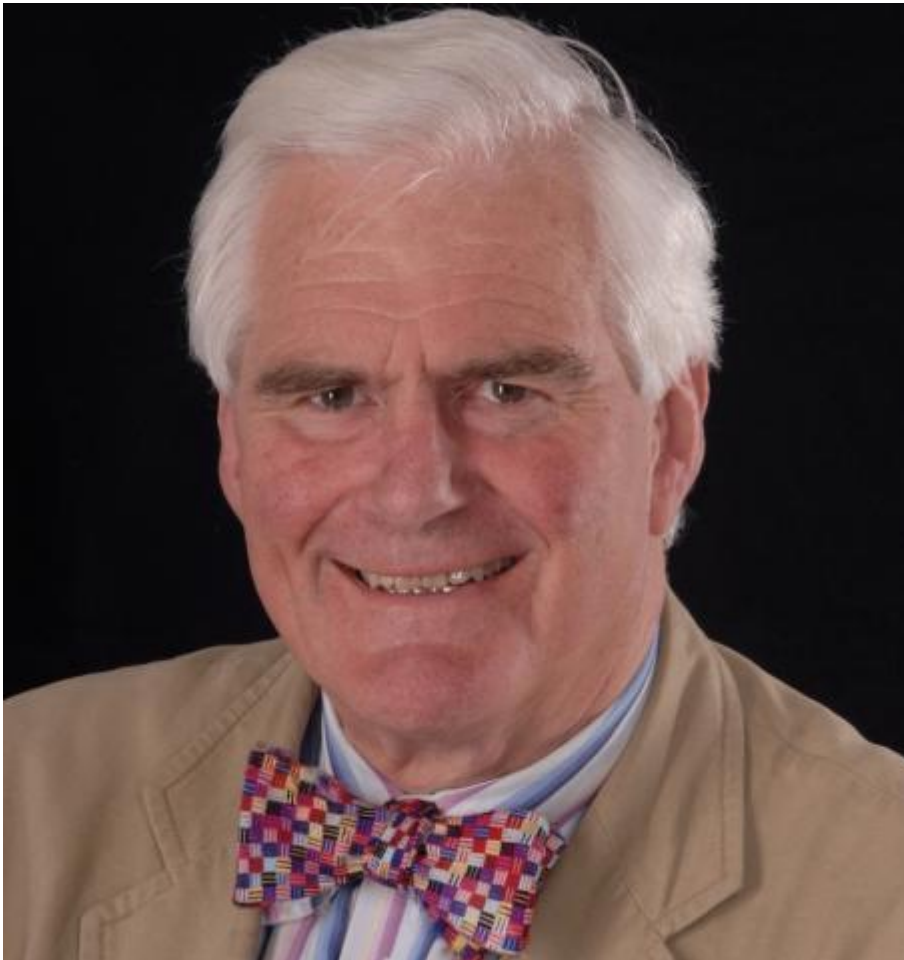
How interesting about the plays in Shaftesbury Avenue. Turning to your parents, we have in the Lives Retold collection an account of your father's life based on a talk you gave. So perhaps you could say a little about your mother - her interests and activities?

My mother did not go to university, but did accounting and looked after my father's business affairs. She was a very good tennis player, and was amateur ladies champion for the west of Scotland at one point. She was rather good looking as a young woman, and there are several portraits of her. Later in life she was involved with the Girl Guides and looked after the Scottish section that focussed on young handicapped girls, visiting them in hospital and organising holidays in the country etc for them. Many of them had infantile paralysis, which is not something you see so much nowadays.

2. Early Memories

You have given a good description of life in your family home in the account of your father's life. But if you could pick out just a couple of memories of your early years, inside or outside your home, what would they be?

I think the most significant thing is that I am a twin, and my brother Martyn (below) played an important part in my life. We were born on Christmas Eve in 1939, and were moved from Glasgow to Paisley, presumably to be away from any bombing, but actually rather closer to the very heavy bombing that took place in Clydebank. I remember my grandmother holding me up to the window as the bombing continued to see the red glow of the fires .. rather a dangerous thing to do now I think of it.



Post graduation, Martyn Webster worked at Glasgow Royal Infirmary in Pathology for four years before starting surgical training in 1968. He started work at Canniesburn Regional Plastic Surgery Unit in 1971, becoming a Consultant and Senior Lecturer there in 1976. He has also worked part time in West Africa for ReSurge Africa, a charity training local doctors in reconstructive surgical techniques.

We moved back to 5 Newton Terrace in Glasgow when the war ended. We used to holiday in an old farm at Halterburn near Kirk Yetholm in the

borders, where we were able to run free all day, (except for an hour or so in the morning when our mother gave us lessons). We dammed small rivers and flooded the valley, and walked for miles ... an idyllic time.



Kirk Yetholm.



10 Clevedon Crescent, Glasgow, to which the family moved in 1951.

3. School



Rugby School.

Speaking of being a twin, you presumably went to the same schools as your brother? And at what stage did your lives begin to diverge?

We went to a small nursery school in Paisley, and then to Glasgow Academy. In 1950 the family moved to 10 Cleveden Crescent, and in 1952 I became seriously ill with osteomyelitis, and my brother took the common entrance exam for Rugby School..I was allowed in after I recovered on the reasonable assumption that my marks would have been similar.

At Rugby he went on the Science stream, and I went on the Arts stream, which was the first time we began to diverge. He left one year before me, as he was able to start at Glasgow University at the age of 17...actually I think he may have been only 16. I stayed on and was captain of boxing there and head of house etc. He got none of the extras that you get in your final year! I got an exhibition to St John's College Cambridge, and just missed national service.

Can you say something about the aspects of Rugby which you particularly enjoyed, and those aspects (if any!) which you disliked?

I enjoyed Rugby...my parents were rather strict and perhaps rather disappointed in my apparent lack of academic or sporting ability. My mother in particular was very ambitious for us, and I found it a liberating experience. Sometimes the exercise was a bit heavy going to begin with (three mile runs most days), but we got used to that. There were some very good teachers, and they seemed more encouraging than what I had been used to. At Glasgow Academy “the strap” was in common use. One master

used to strap you if you got your sums wrong, or didn't finish in time. So Rugby was a real relief and in the end I did quite well there, which helps.

Looking back on it, do you have any thoughts on the merits of sending children to boarding schools?

I don't think it suits everyone. Certainly sending very young children off to boarding school seems hard, although some have a difficult family life and maybe boarding school can be better. I recognise that private schools are a divisive thing in our society, and that I have been very privileged to have had it. I educated my own children privately, but not my grandchildren, as it has become too expensive.

4. Greece and the Middle East

After Rugby, I was lucky enough to get a travel scholarship and travelled to Greece, walking around the mainland looking at byzantine churches and frescoes, eventually crossing over to Turkey, and then proceeding to Lebanon, Syria , Jordan and lastly Israel (for which I required a separate passport). I worked in a kibbutz called Kfar Giladi in the north, near Galilee.

I also had my first taste of working in an architect's office for a few months in Glasgow, working for Burnet Bell and Boston, an old fashioned firm who retained their own clerk of works. They had two, for whom the clients paid, and they were employed to visit the sites every day and report back. The architects themselves rarely visited the sites. When he did, Mr Burnet wore a bowler hat .. and the contractors were apparently terrified of him.

May I just take you back to your Greek and Middle East trip. Were there any buildings that particularly struck you?

I was not very sensitive to architecture then. Obviously I was fascinated by the Parthenon and the rest of the Acropolis. Most of the modern houses in Greece at the time looked unfinished, due to some law that allowed them off paying tax if they left reinforcing rods sticking out of the concrete. I was impressed with the stadium in Delphi. There were wild anemones growing there. It was late February and rather cold; it actually snowed. There were far fewer tourists then. I was the only occupant of the YMCA at Delphi, until a Danish couple arrived after a week. And the students from the Art College from Athens arrived and threw a party.



A monastery in the Meteora, Greece.

One of my strongest visual memories is of the Meteora, in the middle of the mainland, strange vertical mountains with small monasteries on top. They had to be supplied by means of ropes and pulleys, as they were otherwise inaccessible.



The Blue Mosque, Istanbul.

In Turkey I was disappointed with Hagia Sophia, the big discs inside with writing from the Koran seemed to me to spoil it. The nearby Blue Mosque at Sultanahmet I found much more impressive, although structurally it was not so innovative.. And that was built later too of course.

Could you say something about what life was like in the kibbutz?

Kfar Giladi was a relatively wealthy kibbutz, (It actually had a swimming pool): it was not as strict as some (one did not let you have any personal possessions at all, and sewed up your pockets if you had any). I shared a room with a rather gloomy American who had lived there for some years. We all ate together in a big canteen, mainly eating salads , I remember green peppers and cottage cheese was a staple diet. We mostly worked on the fields, carrying aluminium drainage pipes and connecting them up to irrigate the fruit trees and vines.

There were quite a few kibbutzim there who had survived the concentration camps, and were a little crazy. It was quite hard work, but wonderful hot weather, and you could pick a whole bunch of grapes and stuff them into your mouth. I recall being very impressed with how well tilled and cared for the Israeli countryside and fields were compared to what I had got used to in Syria and Jordan.

Did the communal social structure strike you as something that could be a model for the future, or did it seem the strange product of very particular circumstances?

I thought it was a genuine and remarkably good effort to make communal living successful. No-one had any money, no-one was paid, but everything was provided. Nowadays apparently many kibbutz have closed, or have changed. The lack of freedom became a problem I think, and all the children were brought up communally, not by their parents, which also became an issue. I thought it was paradise at the time.

5. Cambridge University 1959-1962

I really enjoyed Cambridge. My first term I was stuck in digs rather far out, but after Christmas I was able to arrange to share a flat in Jesus Lane with the cousin of a school friend. I was rather in awe of the older architectural students, like James Mellor, who seemed very cool and sophisticated. I liked Sandy Wilson very much, he was inspiring. My tutor was David Roberts, who I now recognise was a good architect, but I am afraid I found him rather dull. I recall Lionel March and Peter Eisenmann; they were very encouraging.



Scroope Terrace, the home of the Cambridge University School of Architecture.

Are there any student schemes that you particularly remember at Cambridge?

I remember most of my own, in particular a project for a studio, which was a square plan but double height, with angular protrusions that contained all the “servant” spaces, the central square being left empty. I also remember that in an exam we were given a small plan and asked to do some details, and Alex Reid took the opportunity to make the building an unlikely several storeys high, as no section or elevations had been supplied.

I remember Alex Reid’s scheme in first year for a sculpture garden, rectilinear, very minimalist and beautiful, with graceful steps defining the places where each sculpture was positioned. Colin Rowe was the critic, and he was very impressed.

I remember John Sergeant and David Lea being around, although I don’t retain details of any of their schemes. They were a year ahead Stephen Mullin was also in their year, and a vocal contributor. Otherwise the most influential people were Alex and Richard, as well as Oliver Spence who did a beautiful measured drawing of the wooden bridge at Queen’s College. Robin Spence also did some Miesian schemes I seem to remember.

I remember one summer making a huge coloured parasol with the legend “*Birdsong is not indicative of innate happiness*” inscribed in coloured letters around it....

Was the parasol made for use on a particular occasion?

Yes, but I cannot remember what the occasion was now.

I also remember winning a year's supply of peanuts from another student (Charles Watts Jones) who I didn't expect to cough up, but he bought sacks of peanuts and entirely filled my room in Portugal Place with them, and I had trouble giving them away.

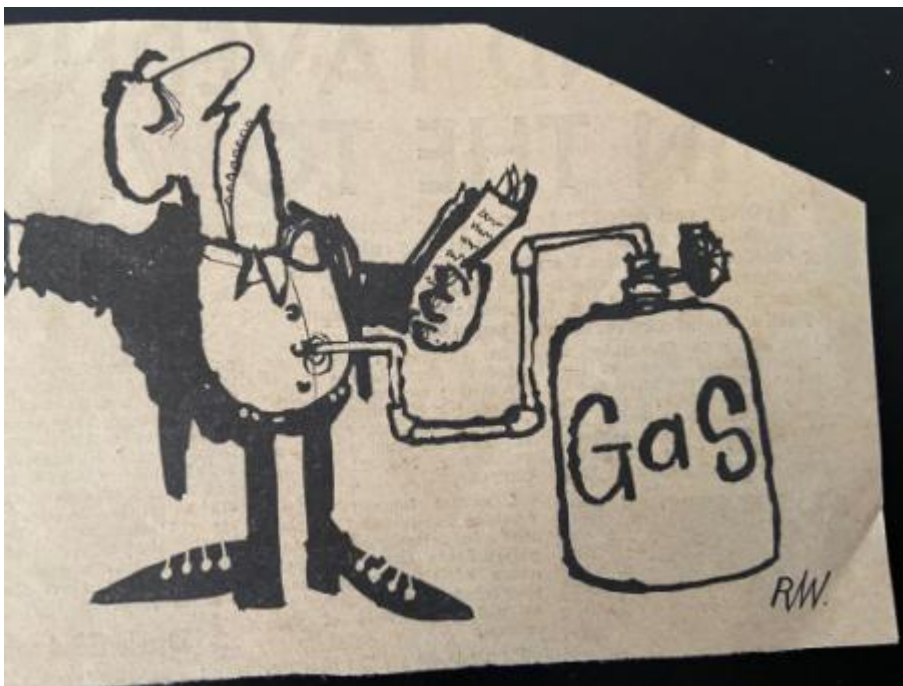
I do remember the peanuts. I think we were working in the Architecture School studio one day, when you mentioned that the radio in your room had a defect, namely that it would only play German brass band music. I and others were doubtful that this could be, and a wager was struck, the stake being a year's supply of peanuts. We trooped off to your room for a test; you switched on the radio, and out came German brass band music.

Were you glad that you had chosen architecture as your subject?

Yes, very glad, I enjoyed the studio and the discussions, we took it very seriously. I remember going to Leslie Martin's mill and being impressed with his furniture. I recall your "motel" scheme where the car was included in the bedroom, and Richard's concert hall, for which he made a model at home during the vacation, and he returned with it like a big birthday cake, and we all felt completely outmanoeuvred, or at least I did.

I enjoyed working on the university newspaper ("Varsity"), and made some good friends there like Peter Pagnamenta and Phil Forster, I have lost touch with them now sadly.

What was your role at Varsity?



I was given the title of "Art Director" but I mainly drew cartoons, including a weekly strip called "Globb". I did try to reorganise the paper's layout into

strict graphic design with lots of white space. I think I achieved this for one issue, but it was not liked and not repeated. I was also involved with a magazine, I cannot recall its name, but it was more progressive and I worked with a photographer called Chris Angeloglou. I lost touch there too.



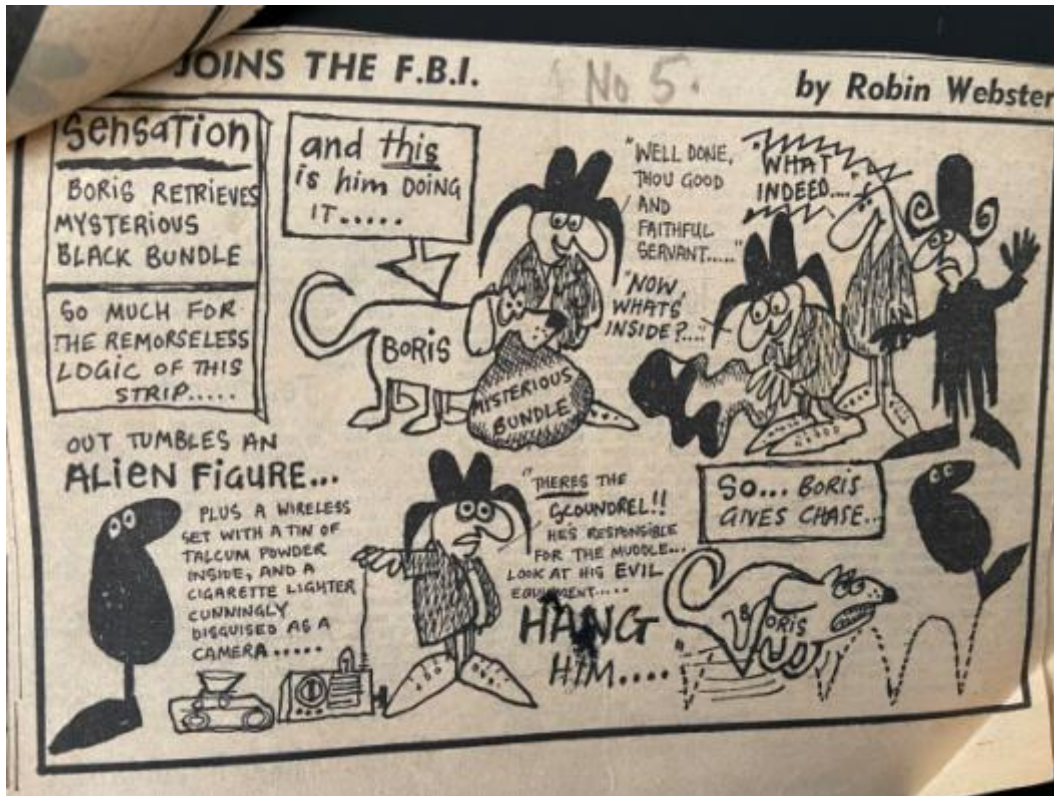
Cliff Richard photographed by Christopher Angeloglou in 1961. Angeloglou recalls: "having finished the take, Cliff sits in the control room to listen to what was recorded. Someone brought in some beer, and an orange juice for Cliff". Cliff was at Abbey Road recording "A Girl Like You", a song recorded by Cliff Richard and the Shadows. It went to number three on the UK Singles Chart.

I was a member of the Footlights and did late night gigs with Tony Hendra (right), who was much funnier than me. Peter Cook was still there but had already left the University. John Cleese was there, but I did not really know him. Also Tim Brooke-Taylor.

I see from Wikipedia that Tony Hendra went on to become the head writer and co-producer in 1984 of the first six shows of the long-running British satirical television series Spitting Image. He also starred in the film This Is Spinal Tap as the band's manager Ian Faith. He sadly died in March 2021.



Could we go back to Globb? Who was Globb?



Globb was a ridiculous character with a large black hat, and a dog called Boris. I have some rather faded cut outs of the strip (above). I later discovered that the strip was being circulated to other student newspapers in Australia and elsewhere.

Did Globb comment on current affairs, or was it about his domestic life?

I now find it weather hard to know what it was that possessed me to draw him. Sometimes he would comment on a film that was showing at the time, but he was not political, although some of the other cartoons I did for the paper were more political.

6. Gillespie Kidd and Coia 1962-1963

What do you remember about working at Gillespie Kidd and Coia?

I had worked during the vacation in a number of different architectural offices, but I was most inspired by Andy Macmillan and Isi Metzstein at Coia's office. Andy was a gifted designer, and Isi had a very perceptive intellect. Architecture was central to any conversation and discussion, and most of the office went to the Griffin pub on Wednesday evenings, to listen to Isi and Andy talking about their schemes but mostly about other architect's ideas. The pub had a rather ambiguous notice on the door "No Ladies Supplied".



Jack Coia himself (above) had passed on the running of the office (which was in his house in Park Circus) to Andy and Isi, although he used to come around the drawing boards and tell people to "get that off your board!" meaning they were spending too long on a job. When the archbishop came around (he was a very important client) everyone had to remove any other drawings they had on their boards, and put on drawings of Cardross Seminary or one of the churches the practice was designing, so he would think the entire office was focussed on his jobs.



St. Peter's Seminary, Cardross, soon in 1966, soon after its completion.



Peter's Seminary is a former Roman Catholic seminary near Cardross, Argyll and Bute, Scotland. Designed by the firm of Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, it is one of only 42 post-war buildings in Scotland to be listed at Category A, the highest level of protection for a building of "special architectural or historic interest". It has been abandoned since 1987, and is currently in a ruinous state, as shown above. In July 2020, the site was gifted to the Kilmahew Education Trust Ltd who plan to reinstate the educational elements of the Seminary Complex after a process of conservation and restoration.

7. The Bartlett School, University College London 1963-1965



University College London, of which the Bartlett School of Architecture forms a part.

Six of us decided not to go back to Cambridge to complete our RIBA Part 2, and went instead to the Bartlett, which had recently been taken over by Richard Llewelyn-Davies, who had dismissed the old staff and introduced scientists and psychologists to develop “a more rational” architectural education.

The Cambridge contingent included Richard MacCormac, Peter Jamieson, Peter Carolin, and myself. We joined students who had been the first group to study under the new regime there, and who had approached design from a purely analytical perspective, whereas we were not afraid of trying out ideas and formal concepts to see if they would fit the brief. It soon became clear that we had a distinct advantage, and were able to produce more workable and elegant designs than the “scientifically” based ones.

We were tutored by Bob Maxwell and Alan Forrest, and Jane Abercrombie (the psychologist on the staff) was very interesting in helping us understand how group dynamics worked, which I have later found very useful. Bill Thomas was a significant student contributor to the year, and he later worked with Richard as an architect/developer client.

8. National Building Agency 1965-1967

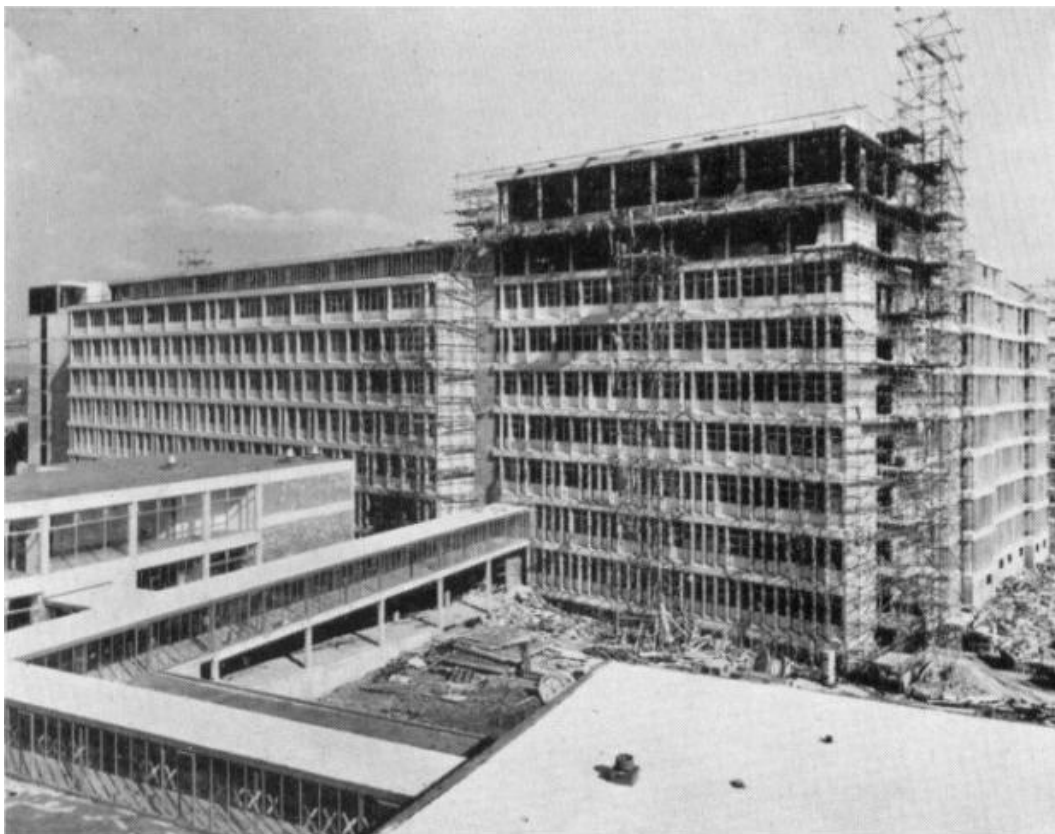
In 1965 Harold Wilson's government was keen to embrace "white hot technology", and was promoting industrialised construction. The NBA was formed to test these, and we were wined and dined by various contractors who were investing heavily in various concrete prefabrication techniques and equipment.

Our team was given a small area of housing to develop in Harlow new Town, and we produced a scheme derived from a Swiss one, which was high density but low rise. It was a good design, but it was decided to build it from "Ace wallboard" which was extruded asbestos ... before the problems with asbestos had become public knowledge. It has since sensibly been demolished. Ian Fraser led the team, and Peter Bell, Frank Duffy, John Deuchars and John Hermsen made up the rest.

9. Llewelyn-Davies Weeks 1967-1970



From left to right, Gwent Forestier-Walker, Richard Llewelyn-Davies, John Weeks, and Walter Bor.



Northwick Park Hospital under construction. It was opened in 1970.

After about three years at the NBA I was head hunted by Llewelyn-Davies Weeks Forestier-Walker and Bor to join a team designing housing at

Washington New Town near Sunderland. There was not much architectural discussion in the office that I found very stimulating, although John Weeks and Peter Cowan were interesting.

The office was master-planning Milton Keynes, and designing Northwick Park hospital. I spent a lot of time on the train up to Newcastle to go to the site, where I had interesting conversations with the clerk of works. The scheme was again high density low rise, but funds for construction were low and I considered it disappointingly poorly specified.

10. Teaching at the Bartlett 1969-1973

Which year were you teaching, and what was it like?

I taught in second and third year, at different times. Rodney Mace did some effective “deschooling” in first year. Newton Watson was the effective head of school, Llewelyn-Davies rarely appeared. Bob Maxwell was important..we had lots of visitors, I remember MJ Long coming, and Jim Stirling was an external examiner. He praised a student that I thought certain to fail, the crude simplicity of her approach appealed to him I think. I remember advising one weak student to stick at architecture, rather than focus on the rock group he was leading. I often reflect that this was probably poor advice.

Which architects did the students particularly admire?

We did try to take the students along a logical and rational path and deflect them from following stars...although Corbusier, Mies and Aalto were important. I remember trying to suggest an Aalto based approach to one student who just never got it, and the result was a disaster of which I felt ashamed.

My recollection of my time at the Bartlett (1967-1969) was very much the rational approach you refer to. It was explained to us that when designing a hospital, the Llewelyn Davies firm would undertake detailed studies of how hospitals actually work, in terms of movement of people, adjacencies, etc, I do not remember that kind of analysis being taught to us at Cambridge.

John Musgrove loved making spreadsheets of adjacencies, but I recall Peter Cowan discovering that rooms of 200 square feet could accommodate 85% of different activities, so that rather deflated John...and led to John Week’s ideas of indeterminacy.

I met up with Robin Spence who was working for Basil Spence’s office nearby and we entered some competitions together.

11. Domestic Arrangements and Marriage

I was living in a room in 128 Westminster Bridge Road, which was owned by an uncle of Richard MacCormac. Richard organised a number of his friends to take rooms at a very reasonable rent. Various people came and went, including Richard himself, Tony and Valerie Crowther, William and Hetty Hawkes, Sebastian and Penny Carter, Tony Croft, and several more. Tony Croft used to wear a suit and tie and travelled to the city every morning on “the drain”, but the rest of us were significantly less smart.

I met Kate Crichton there, a nurse from Guy’s hospital who had come to collect a dustbin in which she apparently expected to brew some beer, and I immediately fell in love with her. She lived in Brick Lane with a bunch of other nurses, (where we had several parties), and later she shared a flat in Kennington Park Road with another nurse.

We got married in January 1967, and rented a flat in Wembury Road Highgate, before buying a small terrace house at 9 Prospect Road, Child’s Hill for £4,000, where we lived for 13 years.



Prospect Road, Child's Hill, London NW2.

12. Spence & Webster Architects 1972

Robin and I started to enter architectural competitions together, and we met for lunch in the rather dismal UCL canteen, usually eating welsh rarebit which consisted of a grey emulsified liquid poured over soggy toast. I imagine we chose it because it was the cheapest item on the menu.

Our first effort was for a community building in Northallerton, a simple shed with glazed walls and a large high tech dividing wall to create flexible rooms internally. It got nowhere.

The next effort in 1970 was a two stage international competition for MP's offices and ancillary accommodation, and we won. Our scheme solved the structural problem posed by the underground which ran diagonally across the site at Westminster Bridge by building four service towers, connected at the top by a large space frame from which we hung the offices. This created a large covered public space below, (not requested in the brief) surrounded by the galleries that gave access to the MP's offices. There were lower courtyards giving light to restaurants and meeting rooms below the public podium, where large screens relayed ongoing activity in the legislature.

We won the competition, but after three years of intermittent debate (we won two open votes in the House of Commons) the scheme was quietly shelved as there was a financial squeeze, and MPs were embarrassed to be seen to be spending money on themselves, however necessary it was.

Hugh Casson wrote us a letter saying he had been asked to take over, but Michael Hopkins finally built a smaller scheme without any public spaces on a much reduced site. We were given a pewter handshake in recompense, which allowed us to buy a site in Belsize park Road, where we were to build a couple of courtyard houses for ourselves.

13. Parliamentary Building Competition 1972

I think this is a good moment to move on to the Parliamentary Building competition.

Robin Spence and I entered this in 1971. It was a two stage competition. Richard Horden helped us, and we had Tony Hunt as our structural engineer.

Getting to the second stage of six was exciting, James Mellor helped us set up some montages..The announcement of the winner was held in Westminster Hall, Julian Amery MP reading out the winners like a “Miss World” beauty parade, with us coming last. Very exciting, although my cousin , the MP Robert MacLennan had found out the day before and confidentially tipped us the wink. Julian Amery likened us to Danton and Robespierre, who went to the guillotine shortly after they became famous.

I would like to talk about the origins of your design. But before that, I have a couple of questions about the competition. Who were the judges?

The only judge I recall was Denys Lasdun, who was very supportive of our scheme, saying “it firmly marks the corner of Whitehall and Bridge Street” and that it avoided corridors, with the internal gallery access. I think the other judges were probably civil servants.

Were either or both of the stages anonymous?

Both stages were meant to be anonymous, and I think they must have been, as no-one knew who we were...I remember the newspaper hoarding..”Shock new building in Whitehall!”

After you were revealed as winners, was there any suggestion that, being so young, you should somehow team up with a bigger firm to execute such a huge project?

I think the civil servants might have liked that. It may have been suggested, but we were never really pressed to do so. It might have possibly helped, but the real problem was the very poor support we got from the civil servants. A man called Pearce was in charge. Sandy Wilson and MJ Long knew him from their British Library project and sympathised with us. He told us about client requirements and questions with no time to do anything about them, and produced completely false information about the costs and structure, which we and Tony Hunt were able to demolish.

Rogers had Pompidou behind his Pompidou Centre scheme in Paris, whose political reputation was strongly related to it. We had no-one, other than

Sydney Chapman MP, who cared a fig really. In the end, Hugh Casson wrote us a letter saying he had “been asked” to take a look, but eventually the brief was completely changed and Michael Hopkins built Portcullis House, which was much smaller and did not have the public face that we had. Nor did it avoid corridors, although I don’t think it is a bad building.

How much detail did you have to provide at each stage about your scheme?

The first stage was a full set of 1:200 plans sections and elevations.

Second stage a model, perspectives and more drawings. No computer drawings, although the roof structure was calculated using computer programmes.

Did you get paid to do the second stage?

There was a small fixed fee for the second stage. Eventually we produced a hell of a lot of work, and the “pewter handshake” was far below the RIBA recommended fee scale for the stage we had reached. But it got us on the map, and we were given a feasibility study for the Natural History Museum, and a conversion of a building at Dover Castle to a Visitor’s Centre...again with the civil servants as awful clients.



The covered atrium, designed to welcome the public into the building.

Could we turn now to the genesis of the design for the Parliamentary Building. Firstly, what exactly was the building to accommodate? MP’s offices? Committee meeting rooms? Canteen? Library?

It had MP’s offices arranged around a central covered atrium, with glazed gallery access to them. The atrium was open to the public at podium level

with live screens showing activity in the `house of Commons and Committee etc.

Various committee rooms and canteens and a lecture theatre were arranged around lower courtyards I cannot remember if we included a library or not.

Did the brief for the competition give you any guidance about public engagement, and about any associated security issues?

No, although after winning we had talks with various security advisors who were concerned about bombs etc. But actually as the offices were raised above pavement level it was not difficult to make it secure, or as secure as any other building.

It seems to me that the central (and exciting) feature of your design was the drawing in of the public so that they could engage with the democratic process. Did that idea come from the client, or from you?

That idea was definitely ours. I don't think any of the other entrants really addressed this.



A garden terrace was to be created in the great space frame of the roof. This was for use by MPs and their guests, as with the river terrace at the House of Commons.

That's a great credit to you both. Could you say something about how the structural concept arose. As I understand it there was a huge space frame roof, supported on four cores, from which the building was hung? And you could walk about in the space frame?

The main structural problem was that the Underground and Westminster Station ran diagonally across the site, so the four towers had to straddle

this, and the offices were then hung from the space frame roof that was supported by the towers. The roof was planted as a garden, and provided an alternative to the terrace by the Thames for MPs and their visitors to meet. We produced some montages with people in rather unlikely clothing enjoying the garden.

It sounds wonderful.

14. Belsize Park Gardens 1981



A recent photograph of the Spence Webster houses in Belsize Park Gardens.

Can you tell me how you found and bought the site?

We had been given some funds for our work on the Parliament building and we used this to buy a derelict garden in Belsize Park Gardens. We got it by the skin of our teeth..the Church Commissioners were selling it and suddenly announced that our bid (£25,000) would be accepted if we brought the cash around by midday..Robin and I had two BMW motorbikes, and we raced around to do this.

What model of BMW motorbike did you have?



BMW R 600, ex Police.

Big and powerful! Turning to the building, what were the main considerations that drove the design?

The land was lower than the road, and we wanted to build courtyard houses, so they would not be seen, and the surrounding trees would still offer a respite from the five story inedible confectionery that made up the rest of the street. This was a very uncommercial decision. We could have built 5 story flats and made a killing. Indeed some 15 years ago someone proposed to demolish out=r houses and do just that, but there was a local community uproar, and they were refused planning permission.

So are the houses still there?

Yes I think they have been combined into one..they eventually sold for millions, I sold mine in 1984 before the big uplift in value, Robin sold his I think about 15 years ago when he moved to the South Coast.

They were designed with a very minimal steel framework (60mm square steel tube columns) Tony Hunt's office were the structural engineers. We adapted the Kawneer aluminium mullions for the glazed sliding doors to match this, so the structure and cladding were a single thing. The plan was that the surrounding wall gave us outside rooms as well as inside rooms, and on fine days it was as easy to eat in the garden as inside..my house originally had two large ensuite bedrooms and four children's bedrooms, as well as a large living room and dining area. Robin Spence's layout was a bit different, no very small bedrooms...but the divisions were made irrespective of the structure, and mine was easily changed..it is a very flexible idea.

It sounds great. I am interested that there was a local uproar when demolition was proposed. When you were originally applying for planning permission, what was the reaction of the planners and local residents to such a modernist design?

The planners accepted that it couldn't be seen behind the existing garden wall, they said a proposal should either match the existing villas, or they accepted our idea of practical invisibility. There were local objections to our proposal though, but that changed after we had built it....we did get some odd reactions..one individual asked if it was a car showroom...

So was there an old garden wall all round the site?

No, there was a rendered brick wall along the Belsize Park Gardens frontage only, we built a 2.4 m high white blockwork wall around the rest of the site. There were some lime trees alongside the original wall which we retained, as well as some very large chestnut trees at the back.

Did each house have its own private courtyard and garden area, or were any of the outdoor areas shared between the two houses?

Originally we designed it without the central courtyard, and with two separate private entrance courts at either side, but a sunlight study showed it was better to have one larger court, which was shared..I guess some folk might not have liked this, but the back gardens were private, divided by an aluminium garden shed made from lorry details. Norman Foster was spotted looking at these details before we had finished the construction...

Any final thoughts about that project before we move on?

I am very proud of the scheme..the central courtyard had a Mediterranean climate, we grew a fig tree there, as well as a central acacia..living there was very easy and comfortable. The current owners seem to have roofed over the central courtyard, although I think it is retractable.



Another recent photograph of the Belsize Park Gardens houses.

15. Teaching at Robert Gordon University 1984-2005

You were at Robert Gordon University for a long time. What are your main memories of that time, both professional and personal?

I had always taught, but part time, (at Cambridge, the Bartlett, and the Mac in Glasgow, as well as a short stint at Washington University in St Louis.

The Scott Sutherland School was set in a beautiful site by the river Dee, and Michael Shuan had built a Miesian building there already for Grays School of Art. It had a worthy but rather dull reputation.

I invited the architectural “Winter School” there in 1985, and it was a spectacular event, with Richard Horden building huge silver hot air balloons and Tony Hunt, John Winter and other luminaries all taking part, Tim Hunkin (right, in later life) built a large structure from scrap timber, with spires and pitched roofs, which at the end of the week he set fire to...very spectacular, and after that I think the school had a different reputation.



Tim Hunkin's pyrotechnic house under construction.

We used to have competitions with the art school sculpture department, who could make the tallest sculpture, or the longest cantilever, etc. The sculpture students always won, as they were more adaptable and improvised more.

We did some serious stuff too..we won an international competition for the west side of Manhattan, which Jackie Kennedy sponsored. We never got to build anything, but I see some of our ideas are now taking fruit there.

We did research on stone cleaning, proving that the money being distributed by the Scottish Development Agency was actually destroying our best buildings, so we put a stop to the worst forms of cleaning..

Personally, my wife Kate had relatives nearby and we lived below the old railway line in Cults with a view over the Dee valley..really lovely environment. The old railway line had been converted into a footpath, and my children used to cycle along it to meet their friends..and I walked to the school with my dog.

Did you do a stint as head of the school of architecture? And if so, for how long?

When I took the job in 1984 I was Head of School, and remained so until I left in 2005, although the management structure changed over the time, faculties were formed with deans (now apparently disbanded), and my influence as a head was reduced. We did not have rotating heads like some schools.

How about your leisure activities?

Aberdeen has a wonderful beach, (although the North sea is rather cold), and my children used to ski in the cairngorms in the winter. There were many wonderful walks in the surrounding countryside, and Kate was also a keen gardener. Life was easy and good.

Did your time at Aberdeen coincide with the great North Sea Oil boom? If so, what impact did that have on the town?

The oil boom started about 15 years before I arrived in 1984, and the Aberdonians were reluctant to make friends with the “oilies” as they would be moved on every three or four years..to really be considered a local, you had to be at least a second generation Aberdonian, and have gone to the local schools. Robert Gordon’s school and the grammar school was where all the bankers and lawyers had gone to, and they ran the town.

The oil boom was disappointing in that it did not produce any significantly good architecture, although some money went into preserving the best of the “Granite City”.

Any last thoughts about your time in Aberdeen before we move on?

I was lucky at the School to have staff who supported what I was doing and we worked well as a team.

16. Cameron Webster Architects 2005

So what happened next, after you left Robert Gordon University in 2005?

My wife Kate sadly died in late 2003, and I had one last year in Aberdeen before retiring from the University. I moved back to Glasgow, where my brother and his family lived, and my daughter Miranda and her husband Stuart Cameron also moved up from London, where they had been practicing for ten years since graduating. We decided to form a practice “cameronwebsterarchitects”, working initially from my living room at 7 Walmer Crescent, and after a couple of years converting an old printworks in the west end and using that as our office, which we shared with both creative businesses.

Stuart still had some work in London, which helped financially, and we got some commissions for houses and conversions in Scotland.

Our initial schemes were a conversion in Bearsden and a house by Loch Craignish, in Argyll. These won awards and put us on the map. We have gone on to win more awards and designed the new centre building at Cove Park, which is extremely successful, and very much appreciated by the clients and users.

The office has now moved to the building next door, an old slaughterhouse in the back lane, and we let out the Printworks to others. Our projects can be seen on our website “cameronwebster.co.uk”

I would like to hear a bit more detail about one project. Could you say something about the Cove Park project - the brief and what drove the design?

Cove Park is an artist retreat, situated in the Rosneath peninsula with wonderful views over the Clyde and Loch Long. It had been going for about ten years when we won a competition to do a feasibility study. Artists, writers, musicians and other creative people are paid to come for a few weeks to live and work there. They are given private accommodation in small studio “pods” (which were already there before we became involved). The centre building, where people came to meet, eat and talk was housed in a draughty old timber building which had originally been a zoo. What was required was to provide some office space, a central kitchen, plus dance space, somewhere for communal meals, and a “snug” where people could linger and chat.

There was not much money. We were able to build on the foundations of the existing building, and we extended it to form a main space that opened out onto the view and created a variety of different but linked spaces

internally. It is a timber framed structure, clad in larch, well insulated and heated with a biomass wood chip boiler.



It sounds great. You say artists are paid to spend time at Cove Park. So how are its operations funded?

It is a charity, funded by the people who bought the site and who have endowed it, although they always need financial support. The idea was to give artists the opportunity to do their own research..there is no expectation that there will be a product at the end of their time there, but they do give

performances, have exhibitions, etc. It is a very well thought of organisation. The building was paid for largely by Creative Scotland.



Cove Park building.

17. Charitable Activities

I know you have been active in various charitable activities, including the RIAS and the Royal Scottish Academy. Could you say a bit about these activities?

When I was in Aberdeen, I took an interest in the local chapter of the RIAS, and chaired the chapter for a bit, but when I moved to Glasgow I did not take an active role immediately. However a few years ago I was approached and asked if I would stand for election as President, as there was some disquiet about how it was being run. I was elected to Council in 2017, and subsequently elected President in 2018, demitting office in 2020. The governance of the Incorporation was out of date and we have managed to change this, although there is still work to be done. The current president is young and very good, and in hope that we have moved on to a really committed and worthwhile Incorporation that will effectively lobby the Scottish Government and support its members.



The building of the Royal Scottish Academy in Princes Street, Edinburgh.

I was elected to be an Academician of the Royal Scottish Academy in 1996, and elected Treasurer in 2017. The RSA holds exhibitions in its building in Princes Street, but also supports artists in many ways. It is funded entirely by donations and the income it receives from past endowments, its annual expenditure in charitable work and exhibitions is about £400,000.

I was also a trustee of the Glasgow City Heritage Trust, and actually worked for them for a few years as their grants officer but now I am just a “Patron”.

I am also chairman of Friends of Glenan Wood, a wonderful old sessile oak wood by Portavadie on Loch Fyne. It is part of the North Atlantic temperate rainforest, and very important to preserve..without help it is

subject to invasive species and grazing by deer and sheep, which will prevent it from regenerating in the long term.



Glenan Wood.

I probably have my fingers in too many pies, I am a local community Councillor for the Ibrox and Cessnock ward, am secretary of our local building association (Walmer Crescent Association), and have also been involved in work to improve the lot of poor people in central India and in Zambia, trying to help with water supply and better sanitary facilities and drainage etc.

What is the organisation doing the work on water supply etc?

In India I was visiting with my local church, and supporting a local charity.

In Zambia we worked with the help of “Water Aid” who provided the means to finance and dig wells and dams, my group organised locals to undertake maintenance and other ways of earning an income. I feel bad that I have not been able to do more, there is such a great need.

I do congratulate you on an amazingly active and productive retirement!

18. Family

I wonder if you could say something about Pauline, and about your children and grandchildren.

I met first Pauline in 2008, (who is a nurse as Kate was), and we got married in 2012. She has three children, from her first marriage, Zak, Farzana and Azra. Zak (29) lives currently in Pakistan, Farzana (27) is now in London working for the publisher Hachette, and Azra (21) is at Dundee University studying Illustration.

My eldest daughter Miranda (47) teaches in the final year at the Mackintosh School of Architecture at Glasgow School of Art. She is married to Stuart Cameron who is in charge of Cameron Webster Architects and who is a very talented designer (as they both are.) They have three children, Katei (17) has just left school and is flexible regarding her chosen career, probably doing something in the arts. Isabel (14) is still at school, as is Alistair (11). They live in Glasgow

My son Tom (45) is a freelance cameraman, photographer and film director, working for the BBC and other companies, currently shooting a wildlife film with Martin Clunes in Mull. He lives in Ewell, south London. He has a son Finlay (12) who is at school.

My youngest daughter Lucy (41) is married to Jeremy Ede, and they both work at SASA (Scottish Agricultural Science Agency I think). She is an evolutionary scientist. They do not have any children, and live in Edinburgh

That is a wonderful tour of the extended family. Could we now close please with a little about your retirement leisure activities: drawing, painting, building a boat, and building a bothy?

I find the concept of retirement difficult. I do not now run any jobs for the practice, but I do take on some commissions as an expert witness.

I have always drawn and painted, I enjoy working with the Glasgow Print Studio, who have great facilities and are very helpful: I have learnt a lot there. I am lucky in being able to sell some of my work.

My children are building a bothy at Lunga, on a wonderful site by the shore in Lunga estate (not the island of Lunga). I have a couple of Wayfarer dinghies there and am hoping to sail more there.

What please is a bothy, and do you need planning permission for one?

It depends on the size and where it is, we do have planning permission. A bothy is really a very basic hut.



The bothy under construction.

It's impossible to get planning permission for any habitable new structure in the National Park in Wales where we have our cottage. In the case of your bothy, was there a building there before? And are you allowed to install WC etc and live in it?

No nothing there before. Yes we have a septic tank etc. The site is not in a National Park, where the restrictions would be much tighter.



I have recently completed the construction of an Ayle's Skiff (above), a traditional wooden rowing boat, for the Upper Loch Fyne Coastal Rowing Club, with of course huge help from others..I really only did little bits, but again I learned a lot!



I should have also mentioned that Pauline and I converted a near derelict old cottage at Millhouse Tighnabraich in 2012 (above), and I now spend a lot of time there.

Thank you very much Robin. I think that completes the life story. Is there anything final you would like to add?

Thanks for the opportunity. I feel a little like I am blowing my own trumpet really. It's difficult to know how much to say and what to leave out. Everyone has interesting lives in one way or another. How much interest they are to other people I am not really sure!

19. Footnote

In the previous chapter Robin Webster mentions that his children are building a bothy, a basic hut, on the Lunga estate. For those who wish to know more about the hutting movement in Scotland, the following was archived in 2021, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the Scotsman website at www.scotsman.com. The article, by Alison Campsie, was published in January 2020.



Now, a new generation of hutters is emerging in Scotland as communities take shape among the trees across Scotland. Hutting, long a way of life in Scandinavian countries, draws people into the countryside to spend time closer to nature and simpler times.

Huts usually have no electricity or running water but are often made comfortable with stoves, candles and, importantly, good design. Composting toilets are the norm.

Next month, a hutters rally will be held in Dundee to bring hutting enthusiasts together with planners and landowners as several key projects - from Dumfries and Galloway to Highland and the Central Belt - gain momentum.

At Carnock Wood in Fife, the first hutting community to be built on former national forest estate, is taking shape. More than 600 people applied for one of 12 plots with leases and a code of conduct now being drawn up with the help of Reforesting Scotland.

Meanwhile, planning permission has been granted for 14 huts in a birch wood near Lanark where a Roman camp once stood. Louise Witter, from Aberdeen, bought the 32-acre plot two years ago, partly as an investment and partly as place where an environmentally friendly project could take root. Ms Witter, the director of a chemical legislation firm, is now in the process of setting up one of Scotland's latest hutting communities, which is called The Encampment, in part of the wood. Planning permission for 14 huts on the site has been granted with seven plots now leased out and one more reserved.

Hutters will rent the plot from Ms Witter for between £1,300 and £1,500 a year and then construct their own hut. Building one of the huts - planners have already approved a design which comes in three sizes - is then left to the plot holder. It is expected each could cost from around £7,500 to build, depending on materials used. Ms Witter said she was unaware of the hutting trend at the time she bought the woodland. She said: "It was the land agent who suggested hutting. I thought 'what on earth is hutting, people don't really do this do they?'."

"I was surprised how many people actually knew about it. Setting up a hut site is not what I set out to do, but it is something that came to me." The hutters come from places such as Edinburgh, East Kilbride and Fife with teachers and civil servants among them.

"Most people live within an hour's drive, just far enough away from everyday life, but not too far away," Ms Witter added. She said that some were interested in hutting given they had been brought up with "bothy culture". Others had spent time at Carbeth, Scotland's original hutting community near Strathblane in Stirlingshire, which started as a camp for recovering World War One soldiers seeking refuge from the dark industrial landscape of Glasgow.

Each hut at The Encampment will have a wood burning stove and has been designed so it has no electricity or running water with light coming from candles and other low-impact sources.

Ms Witter said: "You are going back to a more natural way of living. You go to bed when it is dark and you get up when it is light. "The way I see it, the more technology you have, the more you would be as well staying at home. I really want to minimise technology on the site. I don't want to turn up and there are 60 inch televisions there.

"I also really want to make sure that we don't upset the wildlife." Badgers, foxes, squirrels and deer live at the Camp Wood site with raptors known to drop by.

Ms Witter, who said the planning process had been slow and challenging, is due to build a hut on one of the plots next year but admits she is not sure if the lifestyle is for her. "I actually don't know if it is. A bit of me thinks it really is for me but I will have to wait and find out. I think hutting is a bit like Marmite. I think you either absolutely love it or you would rather be at home," she said.

The Scottish Government has backed the creation of more huts in Scotland and introduced a planning policy in 2014 that was designed to make it easier to access this way of life that encourages low-carbon living, a sense of community and physical and mental wellbeing. A hut is now defined as a simple building that is used as recreational accommodation and generally not connected to water, electricity or sewerage. The inside space of a hut is no more than 30 square metres with the idea it can be removed at the end of its life and leave little trace. Huts do still require planning permission, however, with hutters finding mixed reactions from planning authorities across the country.

Reforestation Scotland's Thousand Huts campaign will host its Hutters Rally in Dundee on February 8 with around 200 hutters, prospective hutters and landowners due to gather.

Broadcaster and journalist Lesley Riddoch will present her latest research on the differences in uptake of hutting in Scotland and Norway with other keynote speakers including Scottish Land Commissioner Megan MacInnes; Gavin Mowat, Policy Adviser to Scottish Land and Estates and Jon Hollingdale, Chief Executive of the Community Woodland Association.

Sessions will also be held on affordable hutting, how to develop a hut site, land access and planning permission. Donald McPhillimy, director of the Reforestation Scotland campaign, said it was hoped building would start at Carnock Wood this summer. Hutters here have formed a limited company with some of the decisions regarding the site to be taken on a co-operative basis. A separate code of conduct will set out site rules on issues such as dogs, noise and gardens. Final negotiations are now being made with Forestry Land Scotland on the details of the lease.

Mr McPhillimy said the progress had been slower than hoped but that now more was known about the reality of setting up a hutting community. "Hopefully people will be soon able to enjoy and relax in the new community there. "It is like any human endeavour. It has been challenging at times and also rewarding. It has been very rewarding meeting this new group of people and then them also meeting each other. There is some very talented and interesting people in the group and that is going to be good for the future."