

For the 19<sup>th</sup> September 2015

The words Helen Powlesland prepared for the 19<sup>th</sup> of September 2015 gathering. They are part of the 'Memorial' to her father John Powlesland who co-founded Kirkdale School and Camps with Susy Powlesland.

I'm very glad that we are able to have this "memorial" bit of the day because I think it is important to remember John and the contribution that he made in being one of the founders of Kirkdale school (and along with Susy having the original idea!). Susy always says that he was the brains behind Kirkdale. She was the practical one, but he had the imagination. She also always says that he was the one people went to when they needed help and advice, and although he was a quiet, unassuming man, everyone loved him.

John was born in Swansea Wales in Sept 1922.

I know that his mother and father were Christians and I gather quite religious. I believe that they were very strict. At the same time, they were extremely forward thinking and would have been described as socialists.

My grandfather on this side of the family was a trade union leader. My grandmother, John's mother, started the first feminist/ women's only trade union group.

During this speech I will be quoting from a letter that John wrote to his mother- / a very moving and telling letter, which I think says a lot about John.

As far as I can tell this letter was written when John first moved to London, he was living in the Kensington area, and it seems had moved there to take his first teaching job, following his teacher training. The letter begins;

"Dear mother... Thank you so much for.... Your fine encouraging letters. These are a remarkable help to me in this bitter struggle, which I feel I am conducting in most difficult circumstances, to find my nobler self and to find the true meaning of life... Most of all I am engaged in this purpose by a sharp and painful contrast between London's rich and poor".

It can be seen from this quote how John's desire for change was there from early on.

As a child John did not really fit in at school, socially. His sister, my aunt Thurza, often described to me how John was placed in a higher class from his age group because of his amazing intelligence, but this sometimes made it difficult for him to find his place at school.

I don't know if John's mother and father were particularly creative or artistic (they were certainly political); but a creative gene seems to run through the family. My aunt, Thurza, was an amazing artist and I know John wrote a novel at some point (sadly it was never published although he did send it off to many publishers).

I have read this novel- it's about an old fashioned teacher, a bit of a "Mr Chips" character.

John has been described to me as being a mathematical genius (unfortunately this was not passed down to his children or grandchildren!)

He had a place to read maths at Oxford but turned this place down and instead went to college to train to be a teacher. My aunt told me that his family were shocked and disappointed at the time/ but I imagine this fitted better with his ideals and vision of how he wanted to make a change in the world.

John specialised in Latin and Greek, and I picture him (similarly to his novel) as an old fashioned Mr Chips type scholar in a hat and gown- an old school teacher with strong principles, but somehow lost in the modern world. I have a slightly sad image of him; but this is juxtaposed with

his very modern, even radical, thinking on education, which ended up being the catalyst for the beginnings of Kirkdale school. So John was a contradiction, as I guess we all are.

In the letter John goes on to say:

"(People) wallow sickeningly in this wealth... With these I can set side-by-side the hand-to-mouth existence led in some of Paddington's lowest districts. I have some acquaintance with the follies and miseries of both, but, more than anything I am appalled by the cruel disregard of people for each other. I cannot so disregard them and have resolved without reservation to devote my whole life and any abilities I may possess towards the brotherhood of man".

He had not met Susy at this time/ or joined any of the organisations that would later become his life and the precursor to the beginnings of Kirkdale camps and then Kirkdale school). He met Susy on a forest school camp. John and Susy became camp leaders, but eventually broke off to form their own camps where they could more freely see their own ideas and ideals come to fruition.

(Amaryllis is going to expound on the other organisations that John and Susy were involved with and where they met other like minded people who also were involved with the founding of the camps so I won't go into more details here).

As I said, the memories that I have of John are a bit scarce, but there are some floating around: I remember him singing to me 'I dream of genie with the light brown hair' and I remember him calling me 'Helly'. I remember him going away for a few days once and me clinging on to him for dear life, and sobbing! I remember him at camps always working hard and making sure everyone was ok. I remember him sitting by the fire in his jeans and big jumpers. The smoke never bothered him! I remember his friendship with Ted and the funny little skits they did at Merrymoot.

I remember, when we were very young, we didn't always go on the camps for every holiday- we used to go to a caravan sometimes. And I remember holding his hand while he pushed 'Francie' in the pushchair, and we would go and buy 'choc choc' as he called it.

I remember when he started working outside Kirkdale, and he would come home wearing a suit, while we were all barefoot and long haired. I wondered if he felt a little bit like an outsider in his own school.

John would have been very happy to know that we were all thinking of him today and remembering what a success Kirkdale school was. In a strange way it's down to John that we all know each other and are meeting here now - like ripples on a pond, the outcomes of Kirkdale keep growing and growing, and can now be seen in our own children

A community still exists in south London- ex pupils, ex teachers, friends, people who went to the camps and the school, people who came along later- it doesn't matter. The community has also spread and grown all over the world- even if we never see each other, we are still part of that community and I think, still adhere to its ideals.

Kirkdale is still a success because we are here together. I think John would have been happy to see that too.

I think that John met his self proclaimed mission in life to devote himself to the "brotherhood of man". I hope he knew how much he did for others and how much Kirkdale and his gentle guidance achieved. His legacy of creativity and caring and always standing up for what is right- has been passed down to all of us.

Sadly John added a prophetic line at the end of his letter, speaking of his purpose in life:

"This may perhaps mean that this life will not last long, but for me, at least there would be no great virtue in prolonging a life that would mostly be lived to itself"

John did find this purpose, as he predicted he would, he also found a community of people who accepted and appreciated him, and I think that although he still had troubles and difficulties he would be very happy with his legacy and to see us all here today remembering Kirkdale;

I will end with his goodbye to his mother:

"And so you see, at the expense of some time and heart-searching... I have bid fair to win freedom and purpose, a place in society and an integration with the world... All my love, john"

I would like to thank Amaryllis for organising today, I know she has worked very hard and I am very grateful for the chance to remember my father and to see everyone here.

Helen Powlesland

September 2015