A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE FOUNDING OF THE OLD STRATHALLIAN CLUB

Harry Riley welcomed readers to the first Strathallian Magazine with the following address:

MY FRIENDS

To many of you it will come as a great surprise to learn that this is not the first School magazine which has been issued from Strathallan.

Sometime during the season 1916-17, several of the younger boys ran an edition which was entirely written by hand and which contained many really creditable compositions. It was obviously for private circulation among a limited number, for many of the older boys came in for rather humorous criticism, and the Staff, myself included, were by no means let off lightly.

The next attempt was more ambitious: the Magazine had one issue and was printed, the whole being carried through by two or three junior boys in the School, and there is no doubt that it was a most creditable production; and it is a great pity that it was allowed to lapse.

Now, with this issue I think that we have placed the Magazine on a proper basis, thanks to the energies of the English Department; but it must always be borne in mind that the boys themselves, not excluding Old Boys, will be expected to take over to an ever increasing extent the editing management of the "Strathallian".

May it ever flourish!

Yours sincerely,

H. RILEY

The editors added – To those Former Pupils to whom this venture may come as a surprise, we send out an invitation for their co-operation by literary contributions, and by items of interest about themselves, and their activities, social or business, in the form of F. P. Notes, so that through this organ old School friends my keep in touch with one another. George Baker, who successfully sat an entrance exam for Brasenose College, Oxford, was the first such contributor, and he and Tommy Hart, a quite humorous writer, became the first pupil editors of the Magazine released in the Spring Term 1827.

The first reference to an Old Strathallian was that to Sam Dow who had left the previous year and had won the Vintner Scholarship from London University, which involved a study tour of many European cities. Rugby matches had been played at the end of September against Former Pupils and the Edinburgh Varsity Union, won and lost respectively, as part of the social calendar against the School XV captained by Tommy Hart. Some mention was made of the likelihood of a similar competition for the School Cricket XI, also to be captained by Hart.

The Magazine was to have been released at the end of the winter term as the first of three termly productions, but problems with the final editing and printing delayed release until the spring, by which time was added the content of the planned second Magazine. So the actual second Magazine was produced at the end of the summer term and successfully each term from then on to the end of 1830; a total of twelve Magazines that made Volume One. It was over this period that the Old Strathallian Club was conceived and established.

Strathallan School was a private establishment which lacked the Board of Governors that necessarily graced the better known Public Schools. Not being a Public School, Strathallan was unable to compete on the sports field against the established educational names in Scotland, but still managed what many considered to be a more competitive fixture list against other schools and clubs. Harry Riley knew that this situation would change as the school became more successful. His plan was that the school would be left to the care of former pupils though there was no formal grouping of the many former pupils whom he met informally each year, some of whom already wore a special blazer created by Rowans; Royal Blue with a tinsel badge and coat of arms buttons.
Each summer term was marked by a Sports’ Day, which had become one of the accepted times that many former pupils returned to the school, so the one held on 7th June 1927 was more unusual for two things. Firstly, the rain conspired to fall heavily throughout the day for the first time in ten years, considerably dampening the spirits of competitors and spectators alike. Secondly, Harry Riley met all those former pupils in attendance at a lunch when they witnessed the inauguration of the Old Boys’ Club for which Harry Riley agreed to act as temporary secretary and treasurer. Allan Robertson, from the Bridge of Allan days, was the first ever enrolled member of the Club. Riley was soon to be supported by A. W. James, a close friend, who took the role of General Secretary, and J. B. Morrison who became Treasurer. James always accompanied Harry Riley to the various meetings and dinners, and was ever ready to give an account of the formation and development of the Club. He always insisted that his position was a temporary appointment, even at the end of 1932 when he resigned to allow an Old Strathallian to take up the post.

The Strathallian Magazine that summer contained a membership form to be returned as quickly as possible as ‘invitations to the Annual Dinner at Xmas will be issued to members only. I expect a good turnout and intend to use the event to create office bearers. I also intend to make the Club a real live one which will not only facilitate performance of social functions, but one which will be a very real help to “O. S. ’s” in business and life as a whole’. Harry Riley also intended the Magazine to act in the interests of Club when he added that he will be pleased to receive from “O. S. ’s” items of personal interest with a view to publication. He produced twelve items on Old Boys himself for the magazine, a feature of the Magazine for many years, as well as highlighting Sam Dow’s European progress as the Vintner Scholar, a success of which Harry Riley was very proud.

It is with great pleasure that we watch the Former Pupils rallying round their old school by joining the newly formed Old Boys’ Club, which promises to be a really living bond of union. We understand that up to the time of going to press 106 have enrolled, which, though an excellent beginning, is a comparatively small proportion of eligible members. We hope that many will make their New Year’s resolutions, and will see that it is not broken. Thus, Harry Riley began the third Strathallian Magazine, with the assistance of the new editors; A. M. Moodie and E. W. Hart. This time the Magazine included the first account of the annual trip around Europe that Harry Riley made with his senior prefects; and an article on life in Burma written by Tom Ferguson, a former pupil from the Bridge of Allan days. The latter was the first of many accounts on businesses around the world run by Old Strathallians, which were to encompass every continent. Harry Riley provided an expanded “O. S.” Notes, as part of his plan to record and advertise the success of former pupils in business, academic and sporting life. He was especially proud of Dan Smith and W. S. Scott who were part of a representative Scotland XV in India.

The editors were beginning to recognise the enormous part that the former pupil contributions played in the magazine, and the success that this imparted, but were equally aware that existing school members were not as involved as they would have liked. “The Strathallian” is the official organ of the School: and the whole School reads it and enjoys it; and as it represents each member of the community, each member should feel it his duty actively to support it and have a finger in its production. Those boys who were responsible for the first number realise that they may be proud, and are still contributors. Is the School to stand by and let the number of F. P. contributors surpass that of the present pupils?
Of course, as 1927 drew to a close, the crowning event for Harry Riley was the Old Boys’ Dinner. This was held by about fifty former pupils at the Central Station Hotel, Glasgow, on the 16th December following an informal meeting of the Club when the proposed rules for the Club were confirmed and plans were laid for a future meeting to be held at Forgandenny on 19th February; the date agreed for the official opening of the new Simpson House. The dinner was highlighted by the exchange between Tom Ferguson, who reminded the assembled company of the spirit encouraged at Bridge of Allan by Jimmy Gowans, David Nicol, Allan Harley and George Mollison. Harry Riley observed that Tom had rightly divined the true source of Strathallan’s success and that the various generations of Strathallians had broadened and strengthened these foundations until now it could be seen the vital part of the school was neither bricks nor mortar, neither flesh nor blood but spirit. Further exchanges between Gavin Morton, recognised as the founder of the school rugger club, and Tommy Hart, the last year’s games captain, neatly pointed out that there existed in the school teams a splendid esprit de corps which was really the first essential of a successful team. Unfortunately, a bulletin of the evening with a photograph of the assembly, which we know was circulated due to a letter received from Hamish McPherson in Alberta, has not survived.

Harry Riley must have been delighted at the success of his move towards the formation of a secure link between the School and the former pupils. The practical mechanisms for the implementation of the scheme were well constructed and had withstood the tests. It is no coincidence that all this occurred at a time when the school roll broke 200 for the first time, a School song had been written, and a considerable investment had been made in new buildings and substantial new lawns for cricket. The three Houses; Nicol, Freeland and Ruthven, were to be complemented by a fourth to be named Simpson - Harry Riley’s mother’s maiden name. Like the publication of the first magazine, the opening of the building was delayed for a while. During this last summer, we have had a record number of Old Boys visiting the school ……this is most gratifying, as it shows not only an increasing bond of fellowship coming into being, but the growing interest of Strathallians, generally, in the doings of the School.
The Boss had achieved his goal: the establishment of the past was complete. Harry Riley took the opportunity to save his beloved Alvis from the exigencies of the annual European Tour with a cruise instead around the Norwegian Fjords. It is clear that the presence of the School Captain Hamish Kay and the Magazine editors Moodie and Hart on the cruise would have meant that magazine number three was discussed in some comfort. The fourth edition, edited by Mr. M. Norton of the English Department with the assistance of Willie Thomson and Leonard Galloway, was a much more balanced publication which intelligently covered Sports, Scouting and Drama at home along with topics like dairy farming in New Zealand, and included several humorous articles. It was noted that Tommy Hart, W. J. Walker and W. H. Reid who all played first-class Scottish cricket over the summer season were worthyly upholding the tradition of Strathallan as a cricketing school. At the same time, Guthrie Reid, whom some of the best Judges of Rugby Football had openly predicted to receive International honours in the Scottish side at Murrayfield, was compelled by doctors to give up the game; he continued to give to the sport as the organiser of the Old Boys’ matches.

During the Christmas break a frozen pipe had caused damage to the ceilings of the new building and the proposed February meeting at Forgandenny of the Old Strathallian Club was postponed and held instead on 11th March 1828. Harry Riley was able to mount a tour of some of the new boarding rooms, not all occupied until September, and the new dining rooms. There were several proposals made at this, the first formal meeting of the Old Boy’s Club. The blazer came in for some discussion and very colourful suggestions, although use of the existing version produced by Rowans was to continue for the present. Invitations were to be sent for an Old Boys’ Commemoration Day on the last Saturday in June, and the next Annual Dinner would be in Glasgow on 21st December at a cost of about fifteen shillings a member.

Fourteen former pupils met Harry Riley at an informal dinner in London in April with a view to forming a London Branch of the Club, and Glasgow former pupils arranged a special game for the School on the last day of April against a Glasgow University XV that boasted four Old Boys and a guest Old Boy from Oxford, and was lost only by three points to nineteen. The London representatives invited Harry Riley to referee a game of rugby between the firms of Steel Brothers and Balfour Williamson, which teams involved ten Old Strathallians. The expertise of the London “Strath” Club came to the attention of London Scottish, having available some of the best of the School fifteens about four or five years ago. Alan Porter who worked for Steel Bros was playing for ‘Scottish at the time.

Robert Barr, President 1939 and 1st Old Strathallian Representative Governor of the School. He was at School 1921-26 Member of the 1st XV and XI for several years.

Many were present, as usual, at the Annual Sports Day on June 15th 1928. Harry Riley had invited Lady Grant of Monymusk, a former occupant of Freeland and one of the daughters of the previous owner, Collingwood Lindsay Wood, to present the prizes. One of the new prizes was a silver cup given by Mr and Mrs Dow for the champion House at rugby; first winner was Freeland. A second cup given by the Dows for Cricket went to Nicol, presented at the end of the season by Harry Riley on July 10th. Other dates were established on the calendar. Interest was kindled in a grand tennis tournament which culminated in semi-finals and finals on July the 5th and 6th, and a swimming championship was held on Monday July 9th in the swimming pool only made available some four days earlier: little regret was expressed that the annual dip in the River Earn was a thing of the past. Harry Riley officially opened the pool on the evening of Friday 26th October. This meant that on the occasion of the Old Boy’s Annual Rugby match held on 1st December there was also a swimming relay competition between the School and former pupils; victory to the latter through the formidable efforts of George Smith, A. Moodie, and Alan Lambie, hot from the Rugby field.
The second Annual Dinner was held on Friday 21st December 1828 in Glasgow. The majority of members were still in favour of the venue but the selection of a future venue was the subject of diverse opinions, so much so that a Dinner Committee was established with Sam Dow and Guthrie Reid to look at the situation seriously, while Tommy Hart and J. B. Morrison were appointed to act with Harry Riley in drawing up rules and regulations regarding the formation of Branch Clubs at home and abroad. The membership had increased from one hundred and five to one hundred and forty four over the year, and there were fourteen life members on the roll. The Committee announced that they would like very much to have at least fifty Life Members by the end of this year, and the parents of boys who are about to leave have been approached with a view to their making their sons a present of life membership. Harry Riley felt that experience shows that where joining the Club is left to the boy himself he often delays so long that he loses touch with his old school and school friends.

Eighteen London Strathallians led by James Motion held their first annual dinner at the Kenilworth Hotel, Bloomsbury, with Harry Riley as their chairman. Riley gave the members a detailed account of the progress made by the Club since its inception, adding that he regretted that there had been some difficulty in tracing some of the members who are known to be resident in London. He knew at this time that there were plans for Branch Clubs at Dundee and Edinburgh through George Smith and Jardine Stuart respectively. Riley had intended to keep the Club together as one body but now found a serious divergence due to location, which he was trying to negotiate in the best way. In the end he gave his approval to members to link themselves up with the parent body through their Local Branches. One of the first ‘collective’ issues of the new branches was to decide on the final form of the Old Strathallian Blazer – plain or striped? The latter was selected by a majority of only three votes, and Guthrie Reid led a ‘blazer committee’ to decide on the final colours.

On 3rd February 1929, the Dinner Committee met at Forgandenny. The sundry expenses of the Dinner had always been met by Harry Riley, but the committee wanted a more formal arrangement and were aware of the costs to members. They decided to hold the Dinner on Saturday 1st December with the interests of Old Strathallians living at a distance from Glasgow at heart. D. Oliver Melrose, Strathallan’s most successful goal kicker ever, personally offered such members to arrange to stay with old Strathallians in Glasgow for the night of the Dinner. A second innovation was the intention to invite a guest of honour to be present at the Dinner and bearing in mind that he is sure to tell us a good deal about ourselves, we trust we shall be proud of seeing ourselves as others see us.

News was received of an impending dinner to be held in Rangoon from Alan Porter who stated that there are many Strathallians in this district now, and we suggest that they should get together and have a Strath dinner and send an account of it for the Magazine. There was also a ‘Strath’ Colony settling down under the wing of Clydesdale Cricket Club with five Old Strathallians in regular attendance, one of whom, Tommy Hart, had already arranged a School versus Glasgow ‘Varsity XV match at the end of the 1928 season.

The Dundee Strathallians’ Dinner held at Kidd’s Restaurant in early February was a proven success with a good turnout through the work of George Smith, the Dundee Local Secretary. This was despite the serious Influenza outbreak that wrecked similar plans by the Edinburgh Strathallians: their first dinner was not to be until Saturday 7th December at the North British Hotel. Harry Riley attended in Dundee yet again as the honoured chairman and was accompanied by Mr. M. Norton, the editor of the Strathallian. There were also a large number of unofficial dinners due to the ‘coming of age’ of several Club members throughout the year, the largest gathering of which was for Sam Dow and required a substantial Glasgow ballroom.
The first Commemoration Day fell on Saturday 29th June 1929 as planned but the date of Sports’ Day was changed to become the day before. This year, no invitations were sent as they know that they will be heartily welcomed and the more of them there are present on these occasions the more pleased we shall be. As might have been expected, fewer former pupils than usual attended Sports’ Day for which the prize giver was Mrs Murray of Taymount, the sister of the previous year’s guest. Commemoration Day began with a chapel service at three o’clock in the afternoon for about thirty members and the Senior School; another twenty former pupils arrived later. Harry Riley specifically selected the hymns “Fight the Good Fight”, and “We Love the Place” and gave one of his expected addresses, emphasising the ideals of the school and the greatness of its spirit. On such a day with present upholders of that spirit mingling with those of the past, all might benefit; particularly those who had left, and in the whirl of business lost some of that idealism, are afforded an opportunity of recapturing their schoolboy fervour and public spiritedness and can go back to their work with a new faith and a renewed strength. The service was followed by the annual twelve-a-side cricket match between the School and the Old Boys; the latter fielding nine first team blazers. This strength proved not to be enough when the School, probably invigorated by the close contest with H. B. Rowan’s XI only a few days previously, came out victors as they passed the Old Boys total with 131 for eight wickets. In the evening was held the second ever Swimming Relay Race.

The magazine was to lose Thomson and Galloway after two years service as editors; both heading for Scottish Universities like many of their fellows. They were replaced by D. Walker and J. T. Johnston, a tricky scrum-half and good opening bat. The undoubted success of Strathallians and many Universities made the annual reunions doubly important, Old Strathallian Dinners were to be held now in Glasgow, Dundee, Edinburgh and London; this last to coincide with the England – Scotland International at Twickenham and expecting a large Strathallian attendance. Foremost amongst the representative honours was Tommy Hart who secured Strathallian’s first International cap at Murrayfield, with the support of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd School XVIs and a very large contingent of Old Boys. Dan Smith had been selected some three years earlier but had been unable to take his part, and the next would be Tubby Ritchie, on the bench for the French game in 1830 but played against England the following season; and Ronnie Dunn, a trialist in 1931. Such was the wealth of expertise amongst the Old Boys that Guthrie Reid became convenor of a new committee with Robert Barr formed to take charge of future Old Boys matches against the School.

The third Annual Dinner was held as planned on 21st December 1929 at the Grosvenor Restaurant and a large gathering from the now 179 members, including representatives from each Local Branch, was present to hear an address from the guest Lieutenant Colonel A. D. MacInnes Shaw, D. S. O. If your school can combine education, and first class commercial education at that, with the esprit de corps I see tonight, your school is second to none. But there is even more than that; one makes at school friends, and these friendships are greater than any other friendship that we can form throughout life. Harry Riley could not have wished for a more complimentary endorsement of the course of action that he had started just two years previously through the Magazine. Further speeches that night showed the affection felt for him by the Old Boys. James Dow emphasised with more than a little self-deprecation the schemes and enormous expenditure on the School which would not, I am sure, have been authorised by any Board of Governors. One story told by Harry Riley was of the time he met a U. S. Senator and his wife on a train journey on the Riviera. The American, a great traveller, spoke of places all over the world, to which Riley replied almost every time: “Oh, yes, one of my boys is there!” The American’s wife turned eventually to Riley and said in a mystified voice, “Say! You’ve got a boy in Shanghai, another in Chile, several in America and many in London. Gee! You must have an enormous family.” Harry Riley’s protestations that he was but a bachelor only served to complicate matters further.

The Boss had achieved his goal: the bridge between past and present was complete.

He confided to the assembled company just how much work he had done unnoticed on their behalf. We are now in close touch with business concerns all over Britain who are very anxious to take our boys who earn the school’s recommendation and train them eventually for executive posts. Now this part of school life takes up a lot of my time, since I visit not only the boys in these firms, but also their directors who keep me posted not only with the progress that the boys are making, but with their own exact requirements. There is a tremendous advantage in this to the boys, to the School, to business and the country. He added significantly, in explanation of the bond he continued to form with his senior boys, I have drawn my prefects much closer to me than ever they were in the history of the school – and I have done this on the advice of some of you here tonight. We had the first of a series of prefects’ dinners this last term, where after the usual formal toasts, we had quite a useful exchange of views, and I was delighted to find that they were able not only to make useful and constructive suggestions, but they showed an increased keenness to do anything in their power to further the interests of the School.
The contacts that Harry Riley had made over the years, and the numbers of former pupils in successful businesses as a result, now led to an extraordinary Rugby Game held at Forgandenny on March 12th 1930. The previous December, the Old Boys Rugby XV had managed their first victory against the school for some years, due to the preparation of Guthrie Reid and Robert Barr. Now, nine Strathallians, of whom all worked for the India Tyre and Rubber Company of Inchinnan, brought several of their colleagues for a Rugby Game against the School. The School, however, reverted to type as on many of these occasions, and, captained by T. F. F. Docherty, made up for the earlier lapse by soundly beating their challengers India of Inchinnan. Revenge was achieved by the latter a year later against an unbeaten School XV captained by George Moncur, said to be the most elusive attacking centre and defensive tackler ever.

A. M. Melville, the President of the India Tyre and Rubber Company was, however, more partial to cricket, and was present when an India of Inchinnan XI played the School XI on 24th May. India lost for the removal of only three Strathallan wickets and the demands on the School of some fourteen runs in the last over to win. However he was also the guest of honour at Sports Day on May 28th when he officially opened the new Cricket Pavilion. In front of a large company of Old Strathallians and parents, he paid tribute to Mr. Riley’s work and to the type of boy the School was sending out into the world. He also made a personal presentation of the Melville Cup to be awarded each year to the winning house at Cricket; the first being Freeland in 1930. This was the last year when Old Boys versus School events would be held on Commemoration Day with the cricket, swimming relays and water polo. A tennis match was introduced the following year, and golf on the Glenfarg course a year later.

Professor J. Steggall of St. Andrews presented the Sports’ Day Prizes. Professor Steggall was an old friend of Harry Riley, and a representative of the academic contacts that Harry Riley had made and maintained over the years. The two men had first met when Professor Steggall administered the first examinations at Bridge of Allan. He had performed this function for Harry Riley ever since, and had overseen the growing number of University scholarship examinations. Harry Riley was never to forget the contributions and support made in this area and, although firmly dependent on his Old Strathallians, later insisted on a wide academic representation in any future Board of Governors. Professor Steggall was also the guest of honour at the Dundee Local Branch Dinner held on 6th December. In proposing the toast of ‘The School’, the professor agreed to what extent the School occupied a warm corner of his heart, and emphasised how much the School owed its position and success to the driving force of Mr. Riley, whose name I couple with that of the toast as being inseparable.

Riley replied that without the spirit shown by the Old Boys during their schooldays, I would never have dared to put into practice the aspirations which are my share in the School’s growth.

Harry Riley was very happy with the huge turnout on Saturday 28th June for the second Commemoration Day, with at least doubled numbers of Club Members in attendance, although he did wonder where the next service would be held if numbers continued to increase at the present rate. He then summarised his position for the Old Strathallian Club at the Annual Dinner on the evening of Saturday 20th December 1830, exactly four years after he had published that first address in the Strathallian Magazine.

When I speak of the School I mean the whole corporate body, not only at Forgandenny, but in a larger and greater degree in the outer world. ……..At School, those of you who have paid us a visit within the last three months cannot but realise the very great improvements that have been made since we last met here.

N. Guthrie Reid, second president elected in December 1933 He attended the school from 1923-26; member of 1st XV 1924–26 and was Captain 1st XI 1926 that defeated the famous H. B. Rowans XI. He was advised to give up Rugby while full-back at Glasgow Academicals and his understudy was selected to play for Scotland.
In sport, the Strathallian records speak for themselves, and they have spoken so loudly that they have awakened that somnolent body, the Executive of the Scottish Rugby Union, to a realisation that we are to get our full quota of international tickets a year.

At the Universities, we are gaining honours degrees. There are some present here tonight who have been guilty of the old Scottish offence of raiding across the border, and the ‘traditional enemy’ is being relieved of several hundred pounds per annum, won in the face of the keenest competition in the world.

In business life, great international companies, such as Shell Oil, Rand Mines, Hudson Bay, have Strathallians on their staff and they invite invitations from others.

In the Civil Service, the Secretary of State for the Colonies has now included us in the list of public schools to be solicited from entrants to the higher branches, and I may say that we have at least ten or twelve boys who are serving in responsible positions in our Crown Colonies. I tell you it is a very significant sign of the times that Old Boys’ organisations of Scottish public schools have quite recently invited us to co-operate with them in the formation of a Joint Club in those parts of the world where individual clubs are impracticable.

Thus, Gentlemen, at last we are gaining that recognition for which we have long striven, and I believe the future holds in store for us even greater things and I appeal to you to stand ‘four square’ by your fellows so that we might show a united front, and to fight your own battle in life in the way in which I have seen you fight on the playing fields at Strathallan.

The Boss had achieved his goal: the past and present were linked irrevocably with the future.

GRMR