

Parting was such sweet sorrow

Half a century on, Willie Morrison reflects on his last days at Dornoch Academy in the early summer of 1959, and wonders how the time seems to have passed so quickly since then.

IT WAS in one way the most exciting of times, as we looked forward to facing the brave new world of higher education or employment, dispersed mostly to Scotland's cities.

In another it was the saddest, as we of the Sixth Year prepared to leave Dornoch Academy for the last time, exactly half a century ago this week, on Thursday, 2nd July 1959.

If my recall is accurate, it was a warm, slightly muggy morning, quite normal for

the time of year. We gathered in the school gym for the last prize-giving ceremony, listening to reports of recent former pupils' academic successes, speeches wishing us the best for the future, watching prize-winners claim their due rewards and receiving our leaving certificates, before singing the poignant parting hymn, *God Be With You Till We Meet Again*. I haven't heard it since, though the tune and words remain indelibly in my memory.

Most of us had been together for a long

time, a few local pupils since earliest primary school years, the majority since entering the first year of secondary education in August 1953.

Several like myself had come from north or west Sutherland, living in school hostels during term time. I spent over five years in Earl's Cross Hostel, a converted former mansion, along with over 40 other lads from beyond Dornoch Academy's daily travel radius. The girls from outwith the area lived in Ross House Hostel.

In the six ensuing years we progressed gradually from the last stages of childhood, through the trauma of our teenage years, to young adulthood.

Certainly as I left Dornoch Academy for the last time, three months before embarking on higher education studies in Glasgow, it was with a distinct feeling of sadness that I severed my connection with the rather sheltered, old-fashioned world in which I had spent my formative years.

I had scarcely covered myself in academic glory, leaving with a fairly average clutch of three Highers and three Lowers, somewhat to the chagrin of rector Allan Robertson, who told me tersely, and probably truly, that I could and should have done much better.

Nor did I excel at sport, though I was a reasonably competent sprinter, shot-putter and discus thrower, sometimes adding a modest point or two to Dornoch's tally at the annual inter-school sports. I gave football a body-swerve whenever possible, preferring to cycle the by-ways of east Sutherland on my sturdy Phillips roadster.

Having fallen out rather badly with the Earl's Cross Hostel warden the previous December, I spent my last two school terms very happily in local lodgings, first with an elderly but active lady called Etta Shepherd and her frail husband Davie, in their little bungalow at Camore.

However, their son Donald returned for a long leave from Malaya at Easter, so my fellow lodger and I had to decamp into alternative accommodation.

I spent that last term with crofter Geordie Macbeath and his wife Mina at Hilton, between Dornoch and Embo, where their daughter Sally Preston, a retired teacher, still lives. A kinder couple you couldn't have wished for, and if formal lessons were by then behind me, I did at least learn to drive Geordie's grey Ferguson tractor, a type now as much an icon of agricultural heritage as the Ford Model T is of automobile history.

With the Highers exams already past by the end of March, our last summer term, which I still recall with twinges of nostalgia, evolved into a pleasant dawdle.

My classmates and I did little by way of schoolwork after the exams, though in



The church clock, standing as it did at six minutes to three on a June afternoon in 1959, didn't quite reflect the poet Rupert Brooke's reminiscences of Grantchester, as these six sixth-year pupils were pictured in the shadow of medieval Dornoch Cathedral, enjoying a social break, with Highers and lessons long behind them. They are, from left: Margaret Mackay, Bonar Bridge; Alex Dingwall, Spinningdale; Norma Milne, Bonar Bridge; Elizabeth Mackay, Tongue; Willie Morrison, Durness, and Giorsal Campbell, Tongue. The photo was probably taken by Lindsay Robertson, our classmate and the rector's son.

1959 we had to attend school until the very last day of the session to qualify for our leaving certificates.

The weather was mostly good and we spent much of our time socialising, wandering the peaceful sandstone streets of Dornoch, or walking the ridge above Lochan Triall, half a mile from the academy.

We did spend a little time, now and then, listening to Flossie Strachan, our able principal English and history teacher, hold forth on literary matters, or our maths principal John McPherson try to impart some advanced aspects of his subject, something sadly beyond my grasp.

I also dabbled a bit in watercolouring, although I had dropped art at the end of third year.

Our class hired Seaforth Macgregor's bus for a last excursion to Inverness on Saturday, 20th June, with members of the fifth year invited to make up numbers.

We returned very late, after visits to the cinema, the two dances then taking place simultaneously on Saturday nights at the Northern Meeting Rooms in the Highland Capital's Church Street, and, I confess now, a surreptitious visit to a pub with some of my colleagues, for a sweet stout, as a defiant mark of new adulthood.

After our official departure, we were to

meet as an entity on one last occasion, at the school's 1959 senior Christmas social, to which the previous session's leavers were traditionally invited.

The emotions we felt, about to go our separate ways after being together for so long, were perhaps best expressed in the 1959 Dornoch Academy Magazine by former classmate and friend Alex Dingwall from Spinningdale, a ready rhymester besides being class photographer, competent artist and splendid athlete, in a short poem, reprinted here for the first time:

DEPARTURE OF THE SIXTH

Words cannot tell, nor tears express

The sorrow felt by us;

Those who go out to face the world,

The world of bitterness.

The smiles we'll miss, the jokes we'll miss,

The friends we hold so dear;

The heated word, the friendly chat,

Advice, so crystal clear.

The discipline we'll take with us,

A steadfast friend for aye;

The teaching, an unequalled aid

To us for, for many a day.

But as we go along the path

That leads through strife and strain,

We're heartened by the cheering thought

That we shall meet again.



A baker's dozen of senior Dornoch Academy pupils, taken by Alex Dingwall near the end of the 1959 summer term. They are from left, standing: Marigold Mackenzie, Lochinver; George 'Dodo' Murray, Bonar Bridge; Willie Morrison, Durness; Leonard Will and Frankie Carmichael, both Dornoch; Ken Fraser and Anna Ross, both Embo; Lindsay Robertson, Dornoch; and Elizabeth Mackay, Tongue; front, kneeling: Jessie Joan Grant, Embo; Susan Lindsay, Dornoch; Giorsal Campbell, Tongue; Maris Macdonald, Spinningdale. Sadly Dodo, Giorsal and Maris have since passed on. Anna, who was visiting former classmates that day, had actually left school the previous year.