

David Maxwell Cowan (b. 1929)

David Cowan was born in Edinburgh in 1929 and the family home was in Joppa, at 32 Esplanade Terrace, the easternmost section of the promenade. His father was manager of a printing firm, Dane & Co. David's mother died young in 1938 following an operation and David was brought up by his father and grandparents. David retained this house until his father's death in 1966, by which time he had moved to Gilmerton.

David joined the RHS 12th Portobello Cubs around 1936 which met in the fairly new Preparatory School in Northfield Broadway. He remembered that the Akela was a teacher, and we agreed it was no doubt the redoubtable Miss. Hamilton ("Hammy") who, as we know, taught there for about 40 years and led the Cubs throughout that time. David remembers attending a big rally in Queen Street Gardens attended by a huge number of Cubs and Scouts. Baden-Powell was present.



Photographs

Left: David Cowan in his cub uniform in the back garden at Esplanade Terrace.

Right: David Cowan the young boat builder at Esplanade Terrace.

At the outbreak of WW2 in 1939 David and his father were on holiday. When they returned home, they found that all the school had been evacuated to an unknown location in East Lothian. Mr. Cowan then took David to an aunt in Peebles whose church minister, the Rev. Berry Preston, shortly afterwards offered to accommodate him in the manse. Mr. Preston is photographed below. The evacuation was a precaution against gas attacks, and the Preparatory School at Northfield Broadway was used as a decontamination centre. Once that threat had receded, by Christmas 1939, the pupils returned to Edinburgh, but most of the school remained in wartime use until summer 1940 and only music and gym classes were held in the main building. The male teachers had been called up and went to war.



Photographs

Left: David Cowan and bike in RHS uniform c. 1939.

Right: The Rev. B. Preston and family at Peebles.

As the war progressed, life became increasingly rough, and David remembers gathering firewood on the beach at Joppa, and rations became the norm. Tank traps were built on the beach, and anti-aircraft guns built on the sections of the promenade which stuck out near James Street. The guns were positioned to target German planes approaching Rosyth.

On leaving the RHS Cub Pack, David had at first joined the Scouts (the "Land Scouts"), but with a strong interest in boats and sailing already apparent, he was asked to join a new Sea Scout Troop under leader Geoff Wright, who was an employee at Ferranti's. The Sea Scouts, then as later, met at the senior school at Regent Road. David was a Patrol Leader in the Swan Patrol, assisted by Iain Torrie, who later became a close friend and fellow sailor on many expeditions. Jimmy and Colin Cruickshanks were also Patrol Leaders. They met in what was known as the "Drill Hall" next to the swimming pool, which is what we knew as the gym, judging by a photo which David showed us. The Sea Scouts practised the basics of canoeing in the swimming pool. David had already learned the skills required to make canvas canoes at the school. He made a canoe here himself, the first of many boats he built as a part-time hobby. The Sea Scouts took canoes to Fisherrow Harbour, where canoeing instruction was given by David to a slightly younger Sea Scout called Ronnie Corbett (who, David said, behaved much as we witnessed in the 1970s on the TV).

The Sea Scouts attended a big Scout rally in the Lake District in 1945, which, as it turned out, coincided with the celebrations for the end of WW2. The rally was held at Wray Castle a couple of miles SW of Ambleside on Lake Windermere. The Scouts took a train to Windermere with a collapsable trek cart, which must have then involved a six mile trek from Windermere, unless there was a ferry available. The 12th had three patrols there with six members each. There were also Guides. A steamer passed, blowing its horns continually and everyone knew the war had been won. A large camp fire was organised for the VE day celebrations, which were to last two days (only). The jollities were brought to a halt in a decidedly military fashion at midnight on the second day!

After the war, David was called up for two years of National Service, and not surprisingly joined the Navy. He served on HMS Raleigh at Torpoint near Plymouth and engaged in exercises in the English Channel. He spent much time on minesweepers.

After the two years, David returned to Joppa, and was able to help fix and refloat a Dukws craft, an amphibious boat used in the war, which had been crewed by amateurs captained by a local house painter. David was able to give them all instruction in operating the craft - especially in steering - and was allowed to drive a Dukws for a summer or two for the benefit of visitors to Portobello.

In his working life he became an apprentice electrician, earning his daily bread with the firm of Central Electrics in Edinburgh, while continuing to learn more about boat building, in which he also became very skilled. This extra work helped to keep the home fires burning at Joppa. He and his father remained there for a further sixteen years. His electrician's work demanded early starts in the morning, and the work could be quite hard going, for example when the firm rewired the City Hospital.

In the 1960s David moved to Gilmerton, where he formed a canoe club at Gilmerton Church and became Leader of the Sea Scout Troop there. He organised many expeditions, including a canoeing trip across Rannoch Moor in 1979, down the River Ba and through Loch Laidon. For this and other events they borrowed tents from Liberton School. He recalls attending a Jamboree at Fordell in Fife. One of his Sea Scouts at Gilmerton, Keith Johnson later became a Beaver Leader at Dalkeith, then warden of a camping site at Whiting Bay on Arran, before emigrating to Australia, where he continued as a Scout Leader and Commissioner.

Throughout this time, David became involved in building boats for Edinburgh Corporation through the Youth Opportunities Scheme of the Manpower Services Commission. This operation was based at Port Edgar. The completed craft he sailed and delivered to many clients all down the east coast. His voyages in his own boat were also extensive, round Scotland, through the Caledonian Canal, and on the Clyde and Forth. One of his sailing partners was Adrian Pelosi, whom he had met in 1941, and whose mother came from Luca's ice cream company in Musselburgh.

Though he had friendships with various girlfriends, David did not marry until 1976, in Peebles, but the marriage did not last. Happily he subsequently formed a friendship with Georgina White, organist of Gilmerton Church, and a stalwart of the Edinburgh Society of Organists. In 1995, three years after David's retiral as an electrician (his firm of Central Electrics closed), David and Georgina moved to a cottage at Falahill, near Heriot, where David's boat stood in the back garden when not in use.

Sadly Georgina contracted cancer in the early 2000s and died in 2003. Her funeral was taken by my wife Catherine, shortly after she became minister of Stow and Heriot. That was how we became acquainted. David remained at Falahill for about seven years, and then moved to a flat in Stow, where he remained ten years.

In autumn 2021, following illness, David moved to sheltered housing in Duns, with a care package, where Alan Symon and I met him on 2nd May 2022 and, appropriately, took him out for a meal at the Swan Hotel.

Alan Buchan