**A life in education**

The Orkney u3a general meeting held on Thursday 21st August enjoyed a talk given by one of our own committee members, retired teacher, John Mowat.

Following his 36-year incumbency at Kirkwall Grammar School, John has been a weel-kent face to two generations of Kirkwall folk - maybe too weel-kent for comfort in this goldfish bowl of a small community. For example, Hallowe’en could be an intimidating if not dangerous occasion for teachers.

John was head of the chemistry department from early on in his career at KGS.

From his talk, we got some insight into his formative childhood experiences in rural Caithness. His account of the country boy from a John o’ Groats single-teacher primary school transferring to Wick High School, with over 700 pupils, rang very true. His learning experience in evading a bully there was amusing.

After Wick, John attended Edinburgh University, an even bigger pond, where he took an honours degree in physics and chemistry. Teacher training in Aberdeen seems to have been a cakewalk after that, and John was able to spend time developing his interests in sport, especially kayaking.

His first teaching job was at his old school in Wick, but after four years he moved to KGS, where he spent the rest of his career - apart from trips to other schools in the north to act as an oral examiner for Advanced Higher Chemistry.

For the conscientious and committed teacher, much of the educational value-add is developed outside of the classroom, and John was very generous with his time in this respect. Many pupils will remember John for his kayaking coaching, involvement in Duke of Edinburgh awards and Boys Brigade leadership as much as for his chemistry.

Then there were the trips which John led – to Norway no fewer than fourteen times – giving pupils the broadening experience of overseas travel. There were other exchange arrangements too, and outdoor activities closer to home, such as all-weather camping expeditions to Rackwick in Hoy.

John was very sensitive to the importance of staff teamwork in creating a good learning environment. He was a stickler for fairness and consistency, but he was never slow to chide complainers, “Life’s not fair – get used to it!” Another of his stoical, pragmatic catchphrases – “That’s life!”

There were many changes at KGS over the years, including the move from School Place to the new senior secondary school. More provision for special needs also developed over time.

In retirement John has been a tour guide for many years. The German language he was obliged to learn as a science student in Edinburgh has come in handy.

In his talk, John came across as a phlegmatic, dedicated, caring teacher, but when asked if he would do it all over again, he equivocated, “Maybe!”

[u3a provides opportunities for people who are no longer working full-time to come together to learn, volunteer, continue their interests and take up new pursuits. There is more information about us on our website www.orkneycommunities.co.uk/u3a. You can email us at info@orkneyu3a.org]