

Hugh Huggett BA, BEd (UNISA). TTD, Dip Ed Tech (York), MEd (Wits)

It is not an easy task to write a tribute to a former colleague whom I have known and kept in touch with for over 35 years. What makes it more difficult is not only the extent of Hugh Huggett's involvement at St Stithians, where he served from 1969 to 2001, but his passion for everything he touched both during his teaching years and in life beyond the College. And above all, how does one convey the humour that accompanied his *joie de vivre*? As I page through my memories, my communications with Hugh and through the documentary records held by the archive there are many highlights.

When he retired from St Stithians in 2001, Hugh reflected on his profession:

So, teaching has always had this moral guideline and it has been part of this world that I have enjoyed greatly. My life as a teacher has had three parts: that of coaching sport, of encouraging culture and of teaching the Canon - that heritage, of the initially English (now world-wide) literary tradition.

And at the heart's core of this world has been the Boys' College - always reinventing itself; always new, always special: it is this for all of us, always. For 'No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main' (Donne).

First there was the classroom: the sharing of that literary tradition. Hugh first arrived at Saints in the mid-1960s as a student teacher under the guidance of another bygone creative legend, David Brindley. Hugh writes of his travels to rural Saints *'those years ago on my first Teaching Practice were similar to travelling to Ultima Thule for it truly seemed as if I was travelling to the end of the world'*.

Of David Brindley, Hugh recalls that it was he *'who was at the heart of my learning experience'*. *'I arrived one day in the cold and pouring rain to find no sign of David in his classroom. I found him in the rain with his class stripped of shirts learning how to write personally about actually sitting in the rain and using this to recall the senses as they wrote – amazing really but this was part of the attraction of the man: it was his unusual way of seeing life.'*

Hugh kept in touch with Brindley for a few years until the rifts of 1969 saw him step into the vacancy left by Brindley's departure. Hugh's teaching skills were absorbed in part from Brindley's style and influence, yet as much may be attributed to his innate creativity and wit. A friend, Brother Joseph Kiely, writes:

'On being a teacher, you have nurtured and developed

Encouraged and let loose so much potential.'

Hugh and I worked together as colleagues in his role as HOD English and mine as College Librarian. We shared a mutual love of reading: reading for pleasure and reading for understanding, fighting an ever-increasing battle to prioritise reading above the many demands of the modern curriculum as well as those of the sports field. It was Hugh who introduced the Grade 8 novel project which ran for over 25 years and required every Grade 8 to write – by hand – a novel framed on their own experience of life. On Founders' Day, these were proudly displayed in the BC Library. I wonder how many past students still hold onto those creative treasures? Hugh certainly derived a great deal of fun from the project and ultimately delivered a paper on it at an international conference.

Hugh contributed much beyond the classroom. He was a keen photographer. Richard Nevin, head of the Photographic Club founded by Hugh, recalls in 2001, his influential words: *'The development of the photographic eye is still the most important aspect of the art of photography: the link with Art is one way of accelerating this, the other is to dust away the cobwebs from the family camera, read a photographic manual and take photographs. The most vibrant method of developing a portfolio, however, is that of parental involvement and encouragement that will really start and maintain the process that will ultimately be so rewarding'*.

Beyond Brindley, Hugh kept in touch with Rev Harry Nel, the College's first full-time Chaplain. Rev Harry recalls an adventure he shared with Hugh on one of the first Community Service projects undertaken by the College. Walter Shave, one of the boys on this adventure, wrote to Hugh and Rev Harry more recently: *'My love of the outdoors started thanks to you all those years ago at Abe Bailey Nature Reserve chasing spring hares through the Bush!'*

Hugh's philosophy of sport was that *'Sport has always had the most simple principle at its centre – that the game is everything on the field and nothing off it'*. Although a fine summer Cricket coach of the 2nd XI for many years, Hockey was Hugh's game. When he started at the College, Hockey was so poor that KES 2nd XI beat Saints 10-0. Alumnus, Sean Riskowitz, paid tribute to Hugh on his last season of training the Under 16B side:

'As soon as it became clear that Mr Huggett was to be our coach, we knew that an 'interesting' season lay ahead. It was immediately evident after the first practice, that our side was lacking skill, tactical awareness and, well, the ability to play Hockey. After a 4-0 drubbing by St John's early in the season, the U16B side turned the tables and produced a season-ending 3-0 victory to end Hugh's coaching career. Riskowitz concludes: Although he is somewhat 'unorthodox' in his methods he is the most enjoyable and enlightening coach I have ever had. It was a worthy and valuable farewell present to Mr Huggett.'

In both 1985 and 1987 Saints joined forces with Michaelhouse to send a Hockey team, the Kestrels, to the prestigious Oxford Festival in the UK. The first tour was accompanied by Hugh and Robin Cox from Michaelhouse and in 1987 it was Denzel Wilson who joined Hugh for the adventure.

Hugh had, himself, played for the South African Hockey Union side in 1961 against the Swallows (an Oxford & Cambridge combined side) and was able to unearth a picture of himself in action:



It is largely due to Hugh's commitment, skills, and sheer hard work that Hockey rose from the dust to the sophisticated success that it displays today. Hugh soon became Master-in-Charge of Hockey, a post he held for over 20 years. His involvement deepened as he took on provincial and national roles including Southern Transvaal Hockey Committee Chairman, Manager of the Transvaal Schools' Side, and a member of the South African Schools' Hockey Committee.

Hugh was also involved in the establishment of the local Aitken Hockey Tournament which had its origins at Saints. Trevor Aitken (Class of 1972) had injured his knee in his Grade 11 year and was forced to give up Rugby. At the time there was no competitive trophy for boys' Hockey in the former Southern Transvaal region and

with Trevor concentrating on Hockey, his father offered to donate a trophy on which the name Aitken should not appear. His wishes have held to this day. Trevor went on to play for Southern Transvaal as well as the SA School's team, later representing SA in the Under 21 team.

Possibly the greatest contribution Hugh made to the College was to the development of Music in the College. He co-founded the *Duke of Cornwall Singers* aka, *The Dukes*, in a period dominated by sporting excellence and academic demands. His innate Welsh musical talent and fine voice, combined with the drive of the recently appointed Director of Music, Moira Schafer, paved the way. From humble beginnings as a staff and student barber-shop group, The Dukes emerged as a choir that has become world-renowned. To be a member of The Dukes is as prestigious as playing Rugby for the 1st XV, Hockey 1st XI or achieving Summa Cum Laude in Academics. Mark Henning, BC Head at the time, records his gratitude to Hugh for *'breathing sparks of life into the College'*.

Hugh recorded that *'one of his many pleasures about the cultural life at Saints – more than singing in the Saints Singers for years, or doing Social Debating, or organising the [...] memorial talks – has been the growth in the life of the Dukes'*. He continues *'but all too soon the original Dukes were far greater, more powerful, more focused, more varied than the Staff...and whether touring South Africa or the Eastern Seaboard of The States, the insights into our culture and its power of spiritual renewal through song was immense'*.

Hugh's musical involvement started with the St Stithians Singers (1971 – 1982). This choir was founded by Hugh together with the first BP Head, Walter Macfarlane, and the then Director of Music, Anthony Lomberg. The choir consisted of parents and staff and eventually grew to 120 members. It later became the Johannesburg Singers. During its extant years, the Singers put on many successful performances ranging from Gilbert and Sullivan operettas to major choral works such as *Elijah* and *The Messiah*. Some of these performances also included the BC Choir and received great reviews in the press.

Besides the St Stithians Singers, Hugh was an active member of the Johannesburg Welsh Male Voice Choir, known as *The Men in Red*. On one memorable occasion, Hugh brought his choir to perform in Chapel under the baton of Dalene Hoogenhout, together with the Dukes and the Wits Choir – many of whom were ex-Dukes.



The Men In Red

The St Stithians Singers amalgamated with The Symphony Choir of Johannesburg, which has been run by Richard Cock for over 40 years. Hugh served on the Committee of this choir and sang with several former St Stithians Singers, later joined by some ex-Dukes ... *'in fact, almost all the Second Bass section has connections with Saints Singers*. Hugh recalled his singing days as *'a period of great warmth and fun [which] have left me with many fine friends ... with whom I am still in contact'*.

Together with Moira Schafer and Mike Clarke, Hugh was involved in directing and staging some memorable Gilbert and Sullivan operettas: *The Gondoliers* in 1976 and *The Pirates of Penzance* in 1990. Who could forget the swashbuckling performance of Nick Hudson as the Pirate King, Ricky Clarke as the heroic Frederick, the

clipped precision of Richard Tait’s *Modern Major-General* and a host of bonneted Grade 7s and 8s in frilly frocks as the chorus of maidens?



Hugh was also involved in the early development of technology in the College. He completed a Diploma in Applied Educational Technology at York University in 1976. On his return his ideas contributed to the development of the Boys’ College Resource Centre, a state-of-the-art facility at the time. Hugh’s introduction of video was captured in a delightful Grade 8 drawing published in the 1976 Stythian magazine. Always willing to try new ideas, Hugh was also a member of the first staff laptop program in the mid-1990s.



Hugh was also Housemaster of Collins House from 1982 to 1988. This was at a time that the first ever black students were admitted to the Boys’ College after the battle that Mark Henning and Rev Stanley Pitts waged on behalf of the Church and of the independent schools to open our schools to all races. Hugh’s understanding and sensitivity to the ordeal that those first students experienced in a monastic boarding environment is recorded in the papers that Hugh donated to the College Archives: letters from the students and the detailed report that Hugh wrote of balancing the status quo with the beginnings of a new order.

Hugh was a devoted family man to his wife Libby and their three children, Clare, Emma, and John, and their seven grandchildren. Teaching runs in the Huggett blood. His beloved wife, Libby, their son, John (now a school Head) at Somerset House, and their daughter, Clare (now a Deputy Head and director of ESTEAM and Curriculum Innovation), have all taught English, and Emma has made her mark at Investec. Family life extended well beyond the classroom. In one of his recent short pieces Hugh wrote:

‘So, our African countryside consumed our lives with its idyllic quietness and beauty; pictures were burnt into our psyches of sunburnt folk who smiled and talked endlessly without any of the city platitudes falling upon our city-hardened ears. And we travelled sand roads: walked and climbed hills and mountains; trekked and hiked and rambled across unusual corners; camped out in blizzards and storms and idyllic calm evenings...until it seemed as if these times would never end [...] And I cooked endlessly upon an aged plough share or upon spitting coals as the grey smoke drifted away to the stars and my dreams.’



After retiring from Saints in 2001, Hugh continued teaching English at the local SSB Vuleka School for a further 18 years. He also started a Creative Writing group, and we are privileged that he has shared the products of his writing about his life and career. Inspired by the story of the ancestry of one of his Saints students, Hugh conducted research and gave a talk on his ancestor Sir Richard Solomon, a South African barrister and politician who lived from 1850 to 1913. On another occasion he wrote in his inimitable eloquent way of a walk-through Saints and how different it was to his first apprehensive approach to the College down a dusty track: *‘We slipped across the road – tarred now – in front of the Chapel. We walked along the edge of the rugby field and past the small statue of a cheerleader frozen in the urgency of action.’*

One of a few ideas of Hugh’s that did not come to fruition was his dream to replicate the 1911 Epic Horseback Ride of Wally Mears from the Eastern Cape to Ixopo. However, it was Hugh’s enthusiasm for stories that led to Wally’s story coming to light in the Kingswood College Archives in Grahamstown. Perhaps a fitting tribute to Hugh’s memory would be to bring such an adventure to fruition.

To laugh often; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a thinking child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded. (Emerson)

These words were spoken at Hugh’s farewell from the BC. Hugh was indeed a successful man in all that he undertook. He will be sorely missed, as a colleague and as a friend by all who knew him.