

Talk for Peoples Palace

March 2013

The Glasgow Humane Society was founded in 1790 by a group of Glasgow businessmen. In 1787 a Mr James Coulter left the sum of £200 in the keeping of the Faculty of Surgeons to set up a Society.

Humane Societies were being formed all over the world like in London, Paris, New York, Amsterdam and Venice; but Glasgow was the only Society to employ an Officer to carry out the practical work of prevention rescue and recovery.

A meeting was held in the Tontine Hotel on 16th August 1790 and the Society was formed.

From the beginning there was a boathouse in Glasgow Green.

By 1795 a house for an Officer had been built and the then Officer Mr Robert Jones stood down and a Mr John Wiseman moved into the house.

Since that date various men were officers Robert Duncan, James Baird, Duncan Downie, John McLean, James Geddes and John Geddes.

George Geddes became Officer in 1859 and was followed by his son also George.

Unfortunately, the second George's son died in 1928 while attempting to rescue a man at the suspension bridge. Ben Parsonage who had been assisting George Geddes for 10 years took over and went on to become the longest serving Officer, dying in the position in 1979.

I of course followed on.

Before the building of the St Andrews Bridge the Glasgow, Humane Society Officer ran a ferry service across the river here. The river is very deep and shaped like a basin with deep sides. A comparison can be made between the Thames at Putney and the Clyde at Glasgow Green. The Thames is 5 times wider but at low tide the Clyde here is 5 times deeper--the Thames bed being saucer shaped, the Clyde as said, like a basin.

Many thousands of citizens and visitors have been rescued thanks to the efforts of Glasgow Humane Society, many thousands owe their lives to the prevention work carried out. Many hundreds of families give thanks to the Glasgow Humane Society for the recovery of their loved ones remains.

The inscription in the slate slab at the north end of the St Andrews Bridge says "Ben Parsonage single handedly rescued more persons from drowning than any other person in Britain"

Today the Glasgow Humane Society concentrates on prevention work although rescue and recovery still take place. We drew up and published a booklet of Rules and Guidelines for safe use of the river. We established the City Council Water Safety Group.

The partnership of the Glasgow Humane Society and the City Council is achieving great things in the field of river safety and it is to be hoped that there will be a wider recognition and acceptance of this safety advice as other areas and Cities realise what this partnership has achieved.

I am proud to be the consultant Officer of the Society. Born in the house here on the Green and educated locally.

I have never lived anywhere else but Glasgow Green and am now bringing my family up on the same grassy areas.

I remember cycling to school--having to get off bikes when the Parkie whistled at you. No cycling was allowed in the park then (except by the Curator and Foreman) When aged about 6yrs I was pushed off my bike by the Park Curator who also used to cycle up to "winos" who were sleeping on park benches and shove them off the bench. The homeless were also thrown out of the Winter Gardens.

But what a place to grow up. In those days families came down in their hundreds to picnic in the park. Washing was hung out to dry every day. Part of the Park was blocked off for the building of a giant swimming pool--but the war put paid to that idea.

There were the open-air baths at the Greenhead--built after Humane Society pressure due to the number of persons drowning in the river.

The McLellan Archway then was at Monteith row--it's been moved several times before its present--hopefully permanent position. We played in the sand pit and paddling pool, sat on the seat at the Hanging tree. We saw Orange Walks, Trade Union Demonstrations, National Front marches, all kinds of meeting were held on this Green of Glasgow. We played on the tennis courts, putting greens, watched the men playing bowls and the old men playing draughts. We went to concerts in the open-air bandstand. As children we loved coming into the Peoples Palace and the man in charge used to set the oratory in motion for us--we loved it. The man in the Winter Gardens kept a cage of Budgies and Canaries and there were goldfish under the floor in the water system. We delighted in the flowers and vegetables on display in the "Plots" or allotments.

We lived with the smell of the Distillery, the noise, the smoke--to a certain extent we still do--though it is not as bad as it was when I was young. I hated the smell and still do. We lived with the smell of the river as in those days it was used as cooling systems for all sorts of industry in the East End. The river could change colour every day depending on what colour of dye was being used in the tanneries, or at the paper Mills or the Whites Chemical Works. Today the only regular smell is sewage but plans are afoot by Scottish Water to end that once and for all--though we still have seepage of oil and chemicals from the grounds where the old works stood.

All Society Officer hired boats on the river and my dad was no exception--so as a youngster I was seldom away from the boathouse--where we even sold crisps and coca cola to boat hirers and people in the park.

We've had some interesting days in the Park--bombs found below the Suspension bridge--a gunman on the bridge being carefully followed by Police---the day a Grand Master died in Richmond Park during a Parade---the day the bonfire at the Guy Fawkes night was cancelled because the Parks had built the bonfire over the gas mains. During the night we use to have the noise of football matches as the Co-operative Bakery played the Templeton's Carpet Factory during their night shift dinner hour. There used to be an old Pole sit on a park bench and play brass instrument--he played trumpet, sax, and about 4 others--he was good but spoke little English. The Salvation Army band used to play on the south towpath.

The Park has certainly changed--mostly for the better--but we have lost a lot.

In the middle 1800's rowing was a huge sport with races taking place for bets of hundreds of pounds. Rowing then was bigger than football with over 100,000 persons coming to watch a race. Football took over as the number one sport with Rangers starting from Clyde Rowing Club and Celtic first playing on the Green

Since I was a wee boy, I was steeped in the Society work. Before School--after school. It was an accepted fact that into the house would come Police, Ambulance, public, some dripping wet, workers of all kinds--labourers and bosses--didn't matter--all were in to see my dad about something and all were given the usual tea and biscuits by my mother--no matter what time of day or night--the house was a free for all. I listened intently as a youngster to stories of rescues, deaths, murders--of heartbreaking situations that other people found themselves in---and of course the media--the reporters were never far away sniffing for a good story.

To begin with I was used for baling the water out of the boats, cleaning the boats, running messages--getting extra equipment as it was required--running to the house to tell Mother that Father had rushed to some rescue somewhere. We were left to put things away if for instance Dad had been repairing a boat when the shout went up or the phone rang--and lock up. Then there was the long agonising wait until Dad returned --sometimes hours later--sometimes we'd get a phone call saying he would not return until the next day. Even if he came home at say 4 in the morning Mother would be up kettle on tea made, biscuits out--even a fry up would be laid in front of Dad and the Police officers if they wished--nothing was too much trouble for Mum.

I progressed onto going with Dad when he was called out watched and learned the art of rescue and recovery. Dad never failed to amaze me with his expertise in boat handling, his knowledge of the river and its wiles, and of his ability to recover the bodies of missing persons when all other methods failed. What a life, never knowing when or where you would be wanted--always being on high alert--and always knowing exactly what to do. Hundreds and hundreds of rescues--never two the same--searches lasting weeks into months in all kinds of weather. It has to be said though that if Ben was given a locus where someone had entered the water and a rough position where the person had sunk--he would always recover them quickly. --it was where no one had seen where they sunk or where just clothes had been found--these were the ones that could go on and on and on.

We lived with extreme happiness and extreme sadness mixed together.

Father and I have been fortunate in that we have never seen anyone drowning--we have never lost a person who we saw struggling for help in the water--we were always on time--expertise, local knowledge and rowing ability combining. Of course, there was always a delight and a pride in carrying out a rescue, but there was also a pride in being able to recover a body quickly and save prolonged heartbreak for the family and friends.

As said, it was not unusual to have people carried up the garden path half dead and into a bed in our house--even occasionally covered in blood when some poor soul had decided that they would slash their wrists or cut their throat before entering the river--but they all lived. There was no immediate

response by Ambulance in those days and we had to do the immediate medical care ourselves--and the cleaning up afterwards.

We are lucky now a days as I know that by the time, I reach the banking with someone an Ambulance will be in attendance and there are always Police Officers to assist.

Glasgow Green has some history but perhaps non greater than the history of the Glasgow Humane Society which blazed a trail of unrivalled success in the prevention and rescue of drowning persons and in the area of search and recovery.

Swimmers drowning, balloonists landing in the river, cars being driven into the water, boat accidents, drunks falling into the water, homes flooded, dismembered bodies, children, old folks, all ages, all religions and all colours. We do not carry out so many rescues now, but we have been able to concentrate hard on prevention. To use the recorded knowledge of what has caused accidents over the past 213 years to prevent future accidents.

Glasgow is setting an example to other Cities the world over in the prevention of waterway accidents and I am extremely proud to have played my part in this. There is still so much to do, not least of all with the increase in the numbers of participants in rowing as a sport upstream of our weir, and in the legacy that will be left after the Games--but we will rise to the challenge and continue to look after our citizens and visitors

I could go on for hours --there are so many stories to tell about the Society-- but I wont---though perhaps you will invite me back to relate some tales.

Thank you