

Appreciation - Jack Harper

Son of Royal Burgh Standard Bearer Andrew Harper (1911); Attendant to Standard Bearers Jack MacDonald and Jim Smith in 1947 and 1948 respectively; Colonial Standard Bearer in 1950 and a member of the Common Riding Trust from 1996-9, and again from 2001-4, Jack Harper had a lifelong association with the Royal Burgh and in particular with our Common Riding.

Born on July 7, 1923, Jack has written touchingly in a recent memoir of his recollections of childhood Common Ridings and in particular of the first time he rode the marches as a nine-year-old in 1933.

He recalls final Casting practices at Thornfield House where Deacon Dobson of the Tailors Incorporation would explain to the children the histories of each of the flags; and he remembers taking part in the pageant of 1935 in celebration of the granting of Selkirk's royal charter 400 years earlier.

Schooldays in Selkirk gave way to work in Galashiels where Jack was apprenticed to a firm of engineers until he was called up into the Royal Navy in 1943 and served until 1946.

Having returned to Selkirk following his wartime service, Jack was offered a job as an engineer in a chrome mine in Sierra Leone and left for the colonies; it was in 1950 that he returned to marry Nancy, having saved up three months of home leave and, with wedding plans well in hand, he was told he had been appointed Colonial Standard Bearer. So June of 1950 was a momentous month for Jack and Nancy, who were married on the 30th. Sierra Leone then became home for the next five years before they returned to Selkirk for good in 1955 and it was in 1961 that their daughter Linsey was born.

Work as an engineer continued until retirement for Jack, but he will be remembered much more for his multiplicity of talents: writer, musician, historian and antiquarian, columnist and stalwart guardian of Selkirk's Common Riding tradition.

Jack was the author of a number of publications including, most notably, *The Common, The Flag and the Song* (1985) which is mentioned in Gwen Neville's *The Mother Town*, her anthropological study of ritual, symbol and experience in the Borders, which is centred on Selkirk and our Common Riding.

Jack was always willing to put his vast experience at the disposal of anyone with an interest in the affairs of the town and wrote a column for many years in this very newspaper under the pseudonym Wull o' the Wynd.

Perhaps it is in music that Jack has left his greatest legacy to the people of Selkirk. His *History of the Music of Selkirk Common Riding* is definitive; his arrangements for *The Night Afore the Morn*, *The Souters' Heritage* and *Sons o' Selkirk* are memorable, and his words for the Colonial version of *The Roses* are sung with some gusto every Common Riding on many occasions.

It is perhaps forgotten that Jack also played with both our Silver Band and our Flute Band over many years and was well known in music circles throughout the Borders. Furthermore, the Colonial Society and the people of Selkirk are indebted to Jack for all his efforts in bringing to us the first of the Common Riding records, produced in 1964, and featuring such favourites as John Mitchell, Ronnie Stuart, Netta and Margaret Laurie, Charlie Brodie, Alex Kinghorn, Ella Moyes, Bette Ford and Willie Grieve.

Jack was almost always present at Casting practices and indeed, from 1959, for many years was responsible for tutoring Colonial Standard Bearers in the intricacies of the Cast. As in most things, Jack was a traditionalist, following the practice of Michael Nichol, Deacon of Tailors, from whom he had learned the art, and would have no truck with more modern fashions.

It was Jack who set out a written instruction for Casting the colours which has been sent to generations of Colonial Standard Bearers on their appointments and is still sent to this day. Not many years ago Jack was still taking a turn at Casting practice.

Not only did Jack serve as a member of Selkirk Common Riding Trust, but formerly he was a member of the Common Riding executive serving as steward at the gymkhana and clerk of the course at the Rig.

Perhaps it is with Selkirk Colonial Society that Jack and Nancy will be primarily identified – not only as Standard Bearer in 1950, but on and off as secretary and treasurer and most prominently as Chairman from 1982 for 12 years.

Jack, together with Bill Hogg, can be credited with steering the society through difficult times and it is a great disappointment that he will not be with us to celebrate the centenary of the society this year.

Selkirk has lost a stalwart and determined defender of our history and traditions; a unique character who could be controversial, but of whom one always knew his heart was absolutely in the right place. He will be long remembered.