

Dr Roger Dixon, sadly died on 22nd June 2021, aged 72.

Dr Dixon taught at SMH from the mid 70s to 1991. Geography was his subject but he took an active part in Drama, Ski Trips and authored the SMH Cookbook in 1981.

Three of the 'faces of Roger':



The skier - with fellow staff members Jayne Dempster and Heather Ford in 1988 or 89.

Photo credit Jayne Dempster



The dramatic persona, but 'only' at the staff v pupils cricket match! (1986/7)

Photo credit Heather Watters (Bruce Merrie)



At a Garden Party, (1982,3 or 4), selling the Cookbooks, with Jo Stubbs (Podd), Ann Longhurst (Trustum), Fiona Wright, Sarah Batchelor, Sue Rogers, Katherine Light (Holt) and Julie Taylor

Photo credit Melissa Earle

Jo Stubbs (Podd) opens this tribute with some of many treasured memories of Dr Dixon.

Where do I begin?! I probably have enough material to write a piece that could rival one of my Geography A Level essays in length, but I think that if I had to pick just one memory, it would have to be taken from our Lower VI field trip to the Isle of Wight, most specifically our visit to Whitecliff Bay on 2 July 1983. We (Jo Galbraith, Brigitte McAteer, Jo Podd, Caroline Searle and Ann Trustum) had pestered him to take us on a field trip - the Upper VI had been to Wales for a week, so we felt it was only fair that we should have the opportunity to go somewhere. Eventually, we wore him down and he agreed. Everything was going well: no one had been sick in the minibus (despite the side facing rear seats) or on the ferry; we'd visited beaches with a range of coastal features, looked at rock formations, drawn sketches and written copious notes. The atmosphere was happy and relaxed.

On the Saturday afternoon, we arrived at Whitecliff Bay. Same routine - we all walked along the coastline, stopping at various intervals to add diagrams and information to our notebooks. We got to the end of the bay, took some photos, looked at some more rock formations and then started to amble back towards the car park. At least ... five of us did.



Dr Dixon was taking his time – in our naivety we assumed he was doing so for his own interest, which in hindsight was unlikely. As luck would have it, there was a small beachside café (more of a hut) with a few tables dotted around the dunes. We decided to order ourselves cold drinks and wait for him to come back. He returned, rock samples and hammer in hand, about fifteen minutes later. As he walked up the slope towards the café, Ann Trustum took a photo of him – big mistake, he was NOT amused!

Apparently, he had intended for us to do some more work on the way back. We got a right telling off and were then driven to another location to do some additional studies to make up for our “skiving and having a tea party at the beachside café.” We all sat in silence, not daring to speak, feeling suitably chastised.

We got back to the hotel, obviously later than expected and went to get ready for our evening meal. Dr Dixon appeared and asked if anyone could let him have some shampoo. None of us had any, apart from Jo Galbraith, who refused to let him have any because she needed to wash her hair before she saw her boyfriend on the Sunday. Unfortunately, this meant that Dr Dixon had to wash his hair with soap, which we found funny and thankfully, so did he. It broke the ice, ended the stony silence and harmony was restored once more.

On our return to school, we had been discussing the weekend in the LVI study room in Venn and Annabel Rogerson drew a sketch of the Whitecliff Bay ‘incident’. It was so good that we decided to present it to Dr Dixon, placing it on his desk in Room O at the start of our next lesson. He appeared from his ‘rock cupboard’ and we waited with bated breath. A stern look, followed by several twitches of the mouth, broke into a broad grin - we knew we were well and truly forgiven.



I was in contact with Roger just a few years ago. He’d requested a copy of the cookery book photo, so when I eventually managed to respond, I reminded him about our Isle of Wight trip and sent some photos of that too. “Good gracious Jo ... It’s like waiting for a bus – you know, hundreds all come at once!” He was surprised I still had the photos, but seemed delighted to receive them, remembering the Whitecliff Bay afternoon well (he even gave me the exact date) - although he couldn’t believe we’d really been quite so terrified. He told me that he still had the cartoon sketch we’d presented him with and forwarded a copy, adding that it made him laugh whenever he looked at it. Happy days all round and memories I’ll always treasure.

Dr Dixon/Dr Dic/Roger was a truly inspirational teacher, who was passionate about his subject. His quick wit and wickedly dry sense of humour just seemed to make the trials and tribulations of Sixth Form life more bearable. He really cared about his pupils, wanting the very best for them. I know he will be greatly missed.

Mr Mike Wells kindly penned this memoir:

I am sure his former colleagues and pupils at SMH will be sorry about the sudden death of Roger Dixon. Roger taught Geography and was a much loved teacher and a genial and sociable member of the common room. He had taught at a prep school before coming to SMH and brought a lot of good humour and understanding to the teaching of younger pupils while conscientiously supporting the study of the older girls. He faced cancer very bravely while he was still quite a young man and was consistently positive.

Roger was a very good friend to me when I came to SMH in 1979 and we were among the few men then on the staff, and he was supportive of staff drama – probably an unthinkable activity now when teachers have so many forms to fill in and appraisals to do. He gamely took part in a production of ‘The Happiest Days of Your Life’ as the world weary teacher Mr Billings alongside a starry cast of Mrs James, Mr Liddell and other staff who were also good sports. Roger sometimes affected the persona of Billings but was a caring teacher who used humour to great effect.

It was a great talking point when he married Sally, who taught Biology at SMH. Roger and Sally were passionate about cooking and left to fulfil a long held ambition to run a hospitality business in a lovely house in Norfolk. A gain for their guests and a loss for SMH and the teaching profession. I have many happy memories of Roger – performing as Fagin in a school production of Oliver and presiding over a sixth form/staff wine tasting evening which did not go quite as planned and I am sure many ex pupils enjoyed his lessons. I certainly enjoyed his company, and his wit and former colleagues and friends I know will share many good memories.

Former colleague Jayne Dempster wrote: Such sad news, Roger was a great teacher with a wicked sense of humour. I have found an old ski trip photo taken in '88 or '89 (see above). Happy memories.

Former colleague Carole Baker wrote:

Roger was a very special person. I recall that when I returned to SMH for my second stint he was recovering from cancer but what actually stuck in my mind was how much comfort he had proved to be for a pupil who had been diagnosed with cancer in year 9 in 1981. By the time I returned in 1984 her treatment had not been successful and she had died but Roger kept in touch with her mother for some time. Sadly I do not remember the name of the girl but can see her beautiful face when I close my eyes. I worked with both Roger and Sally. Roger's pride and joy was his Triumph Herald. He was a joy to work with.

Former colleague Anne Yeats commented on her happy memories of Roger and Sally as did old girl Kathy Wharton (Picton). Annabel Galsworthy (Rider) & Sally Collins (Edelsten) were among many to comment on this very sad news and to say that Dr Dixon was a great teacher. Other old girls' memories follow:

Amy Ellison: My hand used to hurt trying to keep up with the dictation but I did surprisingly well in Geography. His cupboard had some amazing rock and fossil specimens in. He is thought of often in this family especially when Chris Ellison takes us fossil hunting. One example still sits in my bathroom today. He will be fondly remembered. (Chris' beautiful tribute is below.)

Laura Hazeldine: I always remember trying to make him smile (he always did!) He liked to give us his stern formal look to command the respect he deserved, but his eyes were always smiling.

Victoria Johnson (Davis): So sad. I loved Geography at school, solely because of him and went on to gain a degree in Geography

Jane Andrews (Goacher): I hated geography but he was fun.

Jenny Holman (Sterry): I am so sorry to hear this news. I used to love his lessons and actually somehow still remember some of the stuff I learnt like oxbow lakes and glaciation. (Claire Withrow [see also below] also mentioned these features!).

Tracey Scott (Baker): Very sad news. Dr Dixon inspired me to study Geology at Oxford. I will always remember him playing Fagin brilliantly in a production of Oliver.

Alison Platt (Schuller): I really enjoyed his geography lessons and have a great photo of him as an ugly sister in the staff panto, Cinderella. Also great memories of playing cricket against him in the 6th form vs. staff cricket match - he and Mr Wells destroyed our chances pretty quickly!

Sam Adams: Such sad news. A brilliant and inspiring teacher. I don't know many who could ignite a love of rocks in teenage girls, but he did! Loved geography because of Dr Dixon and still do.

Josie Tucci (Williams): I remember the 'tache'! Much respect.

Rachel Utley: I remember Dr Dixon: stern but funny, kind but strict and scary but familiar. A great teacher who will be truly missed.

Justine Keet-Mayers: I remember him teaching us Cecil the caterpillar.

Danya Mackley: I loved geography at school because of him.

Mireille Dupire (Blass): That's very sad to hear. I was useless at geography and he told me so! He didn't mince his words but he was such a big part of all our school life - especially his cupboard in the swimming pool block in room O.

Emma Thomas (Davies): Sad news, even though he told me at the end of the 3rd form that he "sincerely hoped" I would not be doing Geography GCSE. I was not a natural geographer.

Katie Halpin (Wilkinson): Such sad news, I remember the stern look he used to give the girls which was often followed by a cheeky smile. He will always be remembered fondly.

Nancy Wong: He taught me Geography and I got a good O level grade for it all because of him. He was very humorous and kind.

Miriam Luke (Batten): An amazing Geography teacher. He was ill with cancer in our O level year and had to miss teaching time with us. We all still did really well in our exams.

Geraldine Sayers (Royce): I too remember Dr Dixon - he taught my form geography in first and second year - a great teacher who was able to make the subject really interesting. He was really liked.

Marie Fieldhouse (York): Oh no, that's sad news. I had Dr Dixon for geography in my early years. I remember that there was a big storm and the school closed early so day girls could get home safely. While we waited for parents to pick us up, Dr Dixon kept us distracted doing hurricane drills, where we all had to scramble under the tables when he sounded the 'alarm'! He was a great teacher.

Clare Withrow (Smith): I am so sad. I remember him so well. I vividly remember he was teaching one day with the overhead projector and the room was dark and I fell asleep at the desk. I was dreaming and in my dream was a big fat black spider. I woke up with a jolt screaming and he ran over so worried and kind...

Vicky Riley (Mokhtar): I am very sorry to hear this. Dr Dixon was an incredible teacher and quite a character, with a very dry sense of humour and I remember him fondly. I went on to study Geography at A level at a different school and quite frankly I didn't learn anything new which is testament to the quality of his teaching.

Henrietta Nesbitt (Duveen): Sad news. I was appalling at geography, but he was a funny man with the driest humour on the planet.

Melanie Morrison:

Very sad to hear this news. My SMH cookbook is signed "To What!" - my extremely inelegant version of "I beg your pardon?"!

Juliet Elcock (Wenstrom, *or is that Mortsnew*):

Sad news ... My cook book is signed Dear Mortsnew! He was a special teacher, and dare I say a great shot with the chalkboard rubber! My family are always impressed with my geographical knowledge which all down to him. A super teacher.

Rebekah Palmer: Such sad news. I remember A level geography so well - there were just 3 of us (the others were Chris Ellison and Sasha Kofman) and we used to take a tray of tea over with us which we drank during the lesson. I don't remember doing a huge amount of work but I still managed to get a B in the end! During Chris' geology field trip she stayed at my house and DD came for dinner with my parents which was a very strange occasion! Very fond memories of him and many stories from our lessons that can't sadly be shared!

Claire Grinyer: Sad news, he certainly was a memorable character with very dry sense of humour. I always associate him with the swimming pool block as the geography room and his 'rock cupboard' were over there. I never knew there was a smoking staff room until I had to find Dr Dixon one break time hidden upstairs in there. He played my father in Oklahoma. I often used to wonder what he actually thought about us silly, giggling young girls, especially as one or two had a little crush on him! This reminded Chris Ellison [see also below] that she and Dr D got very angry with each other at one point back stage. She thinks it probably added to the on-stage tension between the father and the boyfriend!

And to conclude his students' memories, this tribute, from Chris Ellison:

I hardly know where to start – Roger Dixon (affectionately known as Doc Dic) was a determining element in my life for seven important years. Aged 11, I was already a dinosaur freak and so hungry for knowledge that when he began to reveal the world of geography to us, I became an instant disciple. I still remember our first lessons with him, it must have been 1983, in room P at that time, and his colourful mnemonics that have never left me: the short, rough, tough springy turf of the South Downs; and the long, rich, lush, green grass of southwestern England, to name but two. He'd got the art of teaching first years down pat, but to me it was poetry. But I also recall the time I got too big for my boots one year, and he gave me an A5 on my report.

Room O, where we had most of our lessons from that time on, had an adjoining cupboard with room P. We naughty little schoolgirls took great pleasure in locking a teacher in there if they were ever unwise enough to leave a key in the lock (I think Mr. Wells also got caught out by that!). But the cupboard held treasure too – the rock collection. The day I was allowed in, officially, shown the specimens and allowed to touch (and given a piece of labradorite) was another forgettable moment at SMH. Dr. Dixon already knew I was a mini geologist and did all he could to feed my obsession. That guidance went as far as giving me one-on-one geology lessons in sixth form, a privilege in so many ways. But these lessons weren't only about teaching me how to draw gastropods and what I needed to know to pass exams, they were about telling me stories, stories about his past and my future, preparing me for university, what I would find there and what would come after. One memorable day he laid out my life to me: "You'll work hard and you'll play hard. By the second year you will have shacked up with some bloke, and then you'll do your PhD." Yep, pretty much nailed the next seven years of my life.

And I will be forever grateful. By the time he handed me off to the UCL geology department, having presented me with his own personal copy of Rutley's Elements of Mineralogy from his undergraduate days, my knowledge base was so sound, and my fossil-drawing skills so adept, that the first year was a breeze. Thanks to the mistakes I made on my fieldtrip with him to the Isle of Wight, I already knew not to hammer at the bottom of cliffs and not to leave my clinometer on a rock so I had to hike back a couple of miles to collect it. There are so many other things I could explain about our time together (as could Rebekah and Sasha, no doubt, with whom I shared him during physical geography A-level), like when he stuck a drawing pin in my hand, on purpose... but maybe there are tales best left untold.

I am part of his legacy, the way he touched the world. Me, and so many other girls that he poured his energy into over the years. I only hope that I am able to pass on the love of learning he kindled in me and that someone remembers me as fondly. Dr. Dixon, you are missed and will never be forgotten.

Penny Harrison, Team Manager, SMHA, concludes this wonderful tribute to a dearly loved teacher and friend who will be much missed but never forgotten:

For our own tribute to Dr Dixon we cannot do better than to reproduce his preface to the second edition of the SMHA Cookbook which I had the great pleasure of publishing. I was so grateful for his kind advice, and for these words.

“Most people have memories of some sort about school food. At my own preparatory school I was fortunate – Tony, the chef, formerly of the army catering corps, was good. Those were the days of comfort food – steamed puddings, apple pies, green (why, I don’t know) curries and many other memorable dishes, tho’ not always memorable for the right reasons. I recall very little about meals at senior school (Stowe), which in itself says much about its quality, but I clearly remember the 18th century grandeur of the surroundings.

One of the first things I had to do when I joined the staff at SMH in 1978, was to ask for a day off work to participate as a finalist in the Evening Argus/Segas ‘Cook of the Year’ competition on December 12th, live in front of an audience, at the Metropole Hotel. I was runner-up – and the only contestant to imbibe the wines meant for the judges; what a way to miss a day of school! On another occasion, I gave a wine-tasting session for some of the VIth form. Olive, of course, attended too. Her condition towards the end of the evening suggested that she had enjoyed herself.

These were the days of ‘family service’ – the school sat down *en famille* to eat all at the same time, with a member of staff sitting at the head of the table dishing out the food. It was sad, but necessary, to change to the cafeteria system.

It was after this that I started to think about producing an SMH Cookbook. I bashed out the recipes, all contributed by girls, parents and staff, on at an old typewriter, Amanda Vokins prepared the super cartoons, which still make me chuckle, and Emma Fletcher the delightful illustrations. Shoreham Copy Centre printed the pages, and many of us spent many hours collating the pages, ready for binding, in the Geography Room in the Pool Block. By the time I left SMH, in 1991, only a handful of copies remained.

It is flattering that there should be a desire to republish much of the original by the SMHA, although the credit for the original naturally goes to the entire production team, as it does, indeed, for the new edition. This cook-book is quite an achievement and deserves every good fortune and success.

Roger Dixon”