

## Alan and the Alps

The annual Alps excursion was something I was fortunate enough to inherit when I came to work in Kelso High School's Geography Department. It was an institution led by John Payne with Alan Wise a key part of the Alps trip legend. The first year I was at Kelso I couldn't go due to the birth of my son. After that I went every year.

Alan's contribution to the experience of the pupils who went to the Alps each year was amazing. Wherever we were in France or Switzerland and, occasionally, Italy (albeit briefly and at the end of a cable car ride at about 12,000 feet up) I knew we were all safe in any eventuality. I remember asking him what was in the huge (and it was huge) rucsac he carried whenever we weren't on the bus. He opened the top to reveal an array of ropes and climbing hardware that wouldn't have been out of place on a first ascent of one of the big faces in the Alps. He gave me that grin from under his hat and noted: 'This is the idiot extraction kit'. Enough said.

His sense of humour was infectious. I remember him explaining with a completely straight face to a group of pupils how all the water drained out of Lake Geneva when the tide went out and then it filled up again each night when it came back in. Looking out of the bus window a pupil asked him about the things that look a bit like footballs on the electricity wires between the pylons and Alan explained that this was how cheese was transported slowly from one village to the next in the Alps. His broad Cumbrian pronunciation of French place names was legendary – the village of Flumet (Flue-may) becoming Flummet – like punnet – for the duration of a trip.

And then there was the heavy rock. The story was that he had had an audition for Black Sabbath and he was a mean guitar player. It was obligatory to play 'Smoke on the Water' at full volume when we drove past Montreux 'on the Lake Geneva shoreline' if you remember the lyrics to the Deep Purple anthem. A couple of kilometres from the town Alan would start to move up the bus with his cassette in hand, things went silent and then the entire coach was given the unequivocal instruction to 'get your ears round this folks'.

He was always helping the pupils. He took time to explain the landscape and scenery, the wildlife and, of course, the geology. What he didn't know about rocks wasn't worth knowing. His ability to notice and point things out that you would just have missed was amazing. He knew so much about so many things yet there was not a trace of arrogance or superiority – he quietly helped us all, pupils and staff, make sense of everything to do with the Alps and so enriched the trips in so many low-key ways. He always had a good story and, with 26 hours each way on the coach, we heard many of them. Sometimes more than once.

It was both a pleasure and a privilege to spend time with Alan. Across the Borders and beyond there will be literally hundreds of former pupils of Kelso High School who will recall what they learned from him on an 'Alps Trip' and who will look back and remember what a great bloke and great company he was.

A truly amazing guy and a former colleague who will be greatly missed. Our thoughts and prayers are with Alan's family.

Gareth Oldham

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PT Geography, KHS (1997-2008)