

Scottish  
autism

CELEBRATING  
50 YEARS

# Autism Tales



by Andrew Lester

Andrew Lester is a member of our board and is the parent of a young autistic adult, Amy. Andrew and his wife Kate moved to Duns, Scotland in 1981 when Amy was four years old and she started at Struan House the day after her sixth birthday. She spent weekdays at the school until she graduated at seventeen.

Andrew is an architect who has previously served as Chair, as well as designing New Struan School.

2018 marks 50 years since the founding of Scottish Autism and to commemorate this milestone year, Andrew has shared with us some of his favourite memories and funny moments during his time with us.

## Measles Inoculation

When primary school children were getting their measles inoculation the process would take only a few minutes for each child in a Primary School so 2 classes of 30 could be inoculated in a morning.

It was decided to allow 2 days to inoculate the 30 pupils at Struan.



The first day was very, very difficult – well it would be. Many children with ASD don't like changes to routine, bodily contact, strong smells and even people in uniforms. Halfway through the equally difficult second day the door to the room that was being used for the process burst open and a small boy – let's call him John Smith – announced:

"Hello, my name's John Smith and I am here for my measles jab."

In he came to a delighted inoculation team and the conversation went something like this:

"Well hello John, how nice to see you. My name is Elsie and this is Mary".

"Hello Elsie, hello Mary. My names John and I'm here for my measles jab."

"That's lovely John, and how are you today?"

"Fine how are you today? My names John and I am here for my measles jab."

"That's lovely John. Now could you take off your jersey and roll up your sleeve for me John."

"Yes I can take off my jersey and roll up my sleeve. I am here for my measles jab."

“Now John, I am just going to rub some cotton wool on your arm. It may be a bit cold and smell a wee bit. Is that OK?”

“That’s OK if it is a bit cold and smell a wee bit. I’m here for my measles jab.”

This was wonderful, everything was going swimmingly. If only the previous children had been so accommodating.

“So John, what I am going to do is take this needle-”

“Just what the f\*\*\* do you think you’re going to do with that?”

And up went the balloon!

## Visit by Dutch Students

Amy had been attending Struan for a few years and was beginning to settle in – it was a roller coaster ride at first.

Every activity was a learning opportunity and juice breaks were no exception. Fruit was chopped up with sharp knives (motor skills), pieces were counted onto trays (counting), juice was mixed and poured into cups and everything was then passed around with an invitation to take something (verbal skills).

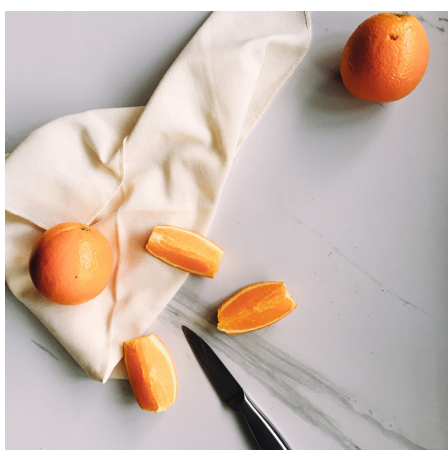
“Would you like a piece of orange Jack?”

“Yes please Amy.”

It was a well-orchestrated and important part of the school day.



One day some students from the Netherlands were visiting Struan and learning about the characteristics of autism. The teacher was explaining about how they encouraged the pupils to converse in meaningful phrases and words and how important it was that they became confident in communicating.



One of the students pointed to Amy and said, “That girl there seems to have quite a few words”.

The teacher responded, “Well yes, but most of the words that Amy uses are words that she is repeating from others – it’s called delayed echolalia. Someone has said it just before her and Amy repeats it”.

Bang on cue, Amy shouts out, “Jack, put that bloody orange in your mouth!”

Teacher rolled their eyes and ushered the students out of the room.

### **....And who are you going with?**

At Struan, one pupil was being engaged in conversation about his family.

"Ilan, who is in your family?"

“Mummy and Daddy.”

"That's right but Ilan, you have new member in your family."

“Yes, new member in the family."

“Who is the new member?"

“Baby brother.”

“That's lovely. And the family is going on holiday together. So who are you going on holiday with Ilan?"

“Lunn Poly.”

## **The Forth Road Bridge**

One of the things that we have to deal with is obsessive behaviour.

One pupil at Struan was a very good artist but insisted that every single drawing he did was of the Forth Road Bridge. This is a very difficult drawing as the combination of the catenary arcs of the twin suspension cables, the curve of the deck and the perspective creates a challenge to even accomplished artists.

Ken (not his real name) was able to draw the bridge – cables, deck, cars and all – with just a few swipes of his pencil. He had been to see the bridge many times as the view north from the car park was his favourite spot.

However, the school decided it was time to try to explore other subjects. The problem was that Ken would happily draw something else but always drew a small drawing of the bridge in a lined-off corner of his drawing.

Undaunted, the staff embarked on a course of encouraging Ken to keep drawing but to omit the Forth Bridge. He was asked to draw what he saw from his window and was told that that did not include the Forth Bridge because he lived near Stirling!



One morning the teacher burst excitedly into the Head Teacher's office to show the drawing of the Wallace Monument in the distance with back gardens, fences and roofs of houses in the foreground....and no sign of the Forth Road Bridge.

Wonderful. One small step for the staff, one giant leap for Ken!

The drawing was returned to the classroom and a few weeks later it was sitting on the teacher's desk.



Gazing at it in admiration she saw Ken's back garden with the washing hanging out – the line looking suspiciously like a catenary arc but, well, it was a washing line. On the washing line were drawn various clothes hanging upside-down, including a tee-shirt with – yes, you guessed – a picture of the Forth Road Bridge!

Ken -1, Staff-0.

## What a Change

Our daughter Amy had just celebrated her sixth birthday and we were almost at our wits end. The next day she was going off to a new school – Struan House in Alloa. No diagnosis had been received for this small, blonde, intensely blue-eyed, hyperactive, almost non-verbal young lady who ruling our lives.

She had been born in Trinidad and when we returned to the UK everything was fine until a Child Development Clinic Nurse suggested that Amy might be 'retarded'. Horrible word that.



After appointments were not made by clinicians and then made, tests made and results gathered we discovered we had an undiagnosed Phenylketonuria (PKU). We also discovered that the Pediatrician in Trinidad had forgotten to carry out a simple test for PKU. Amy's brain was damaged. "What is the prognosis?" we asked. "We are not sure," they said.

So off went our little PKU to Struan for a first week of residential schooling – it was tough to see her go and many tears were shed. Was she going off to the right place? So many of the children that we had seen at Struan seemed very unlike Amy.

The week passed with daily calls to Struan to see how she was doing, wondering if staff would be kind to Amy - would they love her the way we love her? And then suddenly it was early Friday evening and Amy was back home with her suitcase and homebook, explaining what they had been doing and what progress had been made.

Everything seemed very encouraging and then we saw the evidence for ourselves. For the first time our darling little daughter sat down at the table and ate a whole meal using a fork and knife and never once throwing her food or cup or plate or fork across the room, and not running around like a demented insect on Red Bull.

Now we knew that she was in the right place. They did love her, they were very kind, and they were determined that Amy would receive the kind of education that was suitable for her.

I used to say that my wife, Amy and I were in a race to see which one of us was going to end up in an institution first. None of us did and for that we will be eternally grateful to the staff at Struan and Scottish Autism.