

S61 Chippies and Clankies Mini Reunion 2015 at Arcachon, France - Report of Proceedings

Prologue

It was an innocuous little article, tucked away on page 5 of the Vale of Leven Gazette, in amongst the usual reports of day to day life that you could find in any small town Scottish newspaper; wife beatings, arson, stabbings, cattle theft - the usual stuff. A local man, of good standing, with no known enemies, had been found beaten to death on the shores of the Loch. The police were mystified. Nothing unusual about any of that. But the final sentence made my blood chill, and I reeled away in horror. It had finally crossed a line and was out there, amongst us, spreading!!

Our man had been reading a book at the time of his demise: the title of the book: "Joe Dagnino's Book of Dits"!



The Setting

Why France? Why Arcachon? The far-flung reunions of the previous two years, at Steve Southern's home in Southern Spain, and on the Carnival Freedom in the Caribbean, had both been a raging success, and an unforgettable experience for the lucky few who had been able to attend. So we decided we'd stick with the exotic location, but make it a bit closer to home, and easier to attend for those classmates who still work for a living! France was the obvious choice, especially the area around Bordeaux, where we have representation.

As for Arcachon, no-one had ever heard of it, apart from Ken Morrison, who lives just up the road, and who recommended it, and Trev Payne, who once spent a holiday there with his young family, in a borrowed Pusser's canvas tent. I laughed when Trev told me that his holiday had been ruined, and cut short even, by constant rainfall! I should have taken note!

Arcachon turned out to be fabulous. Not for nothing is it called the Jewel of the Gironde. Glorious sandy beaches, lined with restaurants, pubs and cafes, all spilling out on to the pavements, and brimming with joie de vivre and the gastronomical delights of La France, and markets crammed full with stalls groaning under the weight of the very best agricultural produce that those nice, loveable French farmers can supply. And all basking in, er, glorious French sunshine. All in all, we couldn't have chosen a better setting for our 48th reunion - and what a reunion it would turn out to be!

The Cast



Top Row: Pete and Sandra Bellamy, Eddy Calvert, Wally and Wilma Clelland



Second Row: Joe Dagnino, Mike Deveria, Dave Lenton and Carolyn McIntyre, Ken Morrison



Third Row: Trev and Lindy Payne, Steve Southern and Anne , Al Trusler



Fourth Row: Dick Wainwright

Arrivals

Our journeys to Arcachon were not without the usual mix of enjoyment and histrionics.

Mike Deveria's daughter defied all the laws of gravity and managed to delay the birth of Mike's third grandchild well past its due date, until Mike's and Toos' attendance at the reunion became a moral dilemma. Mike hung on until the last moment, but loyalty to his old classmates saw him dashing hundreds of miles through the night - alone! - in his motorhome to meet up with me and Carolyn in our's at Vendome, just north of Tours. We drove south together and spent that night at Wally and Wilma Clelland's house, in the lovely little village of Le Breuil, near Civray, where we were entertained royally, and managed to keep the whole village awake as we ate, drank and talked, loudly, outside, until way past the witching hour.

It was while we were at Wally's that a new aspect of conversation, that will no doubt increasingly feature in our reunions, became noticeable. The word count ratio had shifted away from descriptive terms associated with runs ashore, both near and afar, toward the morbid and the medical. The nearest we got to talking about the Gut was about colostomy bags!

At lunchtime on the following day we set off, in convoy, for Arcachon, with Wally in his motorhome in pole, Mike close behind and me bringing up the rear. Two gleaming, state of the art, Continental Uber-Vans, purring along, like Panzers charging through the Bocage, with me chugging along behind, in my plucky British Bren Carrier! We pitched up at the campsite at the top of the hill, in a pine forest on the outskirts of Arcachon, pulled our wagons into a circle, and awaited news of the arrival of the rest of the troops.

Left: Mike relaxing at Vendome, after a long night drive and 4 hours sleep. With Carolyn.

Middle: Calm before the storm. Thursday evening at the campsite bar.

Right: Three Amigos. On the way to check out the venues - it's a good job we did!



Steve Southern and Anne arrived safely and on time, and pitched their tent nearby, at the same campsite. Mind you, nothing less than a tsunami could ever interfere with Anne's timetable, given her meticulous preparation for every eventuality. She'd even brought a miner's helmet to guide the way back to the campsite at night! In fact, she never seems to go anywhere without map, compass, aluminium foil blanket and at least two pairs of shoes! No wonder Steve is so laid back and relaxed; Anne's always thought of everything!

Only twelve months wed, and still all loved up, Trev and Lindy Payne drove down from Surrey, where they live in an old folks home, apparently. Their neighbours must find their behaviour shocking! Lindy was, as ever, immaculate, but Trev was utterly dishevelled; odd socks, lipstick smeared all over his mouth, hair in a mess, and his shirt buttoned up incorrectly. We all knew exactly what he'd been up to, the jammy git! Well, we thought we did, until Trev explained that he'd had severe problems with one of his eyes recently, requiring a number of surgical operations. And let's face it; Trev always had trouble with his lipstick anyway, even in the boys!

Eddy Calvert, meanwhile, had found himself still in a Taxi, bogged down in horrendous traffic on the M25, almost an hour after his flight from Gatwick was scheduled for take off. Upon his arrival at the Terminal however, Eddy discovered that his flight had been delayed, and that he hadn't missed it after all. Eddy, being Eddy, didn't know whether to laugh or cry, as he'd been looking forward to an extended PU in the airport lounge while he waited for the next flight!

And who was patiently waiting to pick Eddy up at Bordeaux Airport? None other than Bury's best; the inimitable Joe Dagnino! Joe had flown to France earlier in the week, and was staying with friends, close to the Spanish border. Joe would always be the first name on any guest list of mine, as he completely eliminates the risk of any of those dreaded awkward silences!

Pete and Sandra Bellamy had already breezed in from the West Country; a jaunt like this would be nothing to a pair of globetrotters like them; or so they thought! Unfortunately, they have a SatNav with a vindictive sense of humour, which decided to throw in a trip to Paris on the drive home! Pete's presence meant that there would be three massive players on a small stage; Bellamy, Calvert and Dagnino. Two born raconteurs, and the man who is probably the subject of more dits than any ex Caley boy in history! Whatever happened, this weekend couldn't possibly be boring with those three along!

And talking of characters! Me, Wally, Mike, and Carolyn had walked down to the beach on Friday afternoon, expecting to meet Al Trusler, wading out of the surf, covered in lard, and with all his belongings in a plastic bag. As it was, he appeared before us, like an apparition, having emerged from the same hotel that Eddy and Joe were staying in. The stuff of nightmares! True to character, Al was in sparkling form, and by the time we left him, a few very entertaining beers later to walk back up the hill, we knew that we were in for a great weekend!



Wally, Dave, Carolyn, and Al; waiting for the first beer of the weekend!

We got back to the campsite to find that our circle of wagons had been extended. Dick Wainwright had arrived to attend his first ever reunion, and with a petite blonde on his arm too. Well, not exactly ON his arm; more IN his arms! The cute blonde was Holly, a West Highland Terrier, and a right little cracker! Dick had a cautionary tale to tell too! He'd hitched up his caravan to his Nissan XTrail before leaving home in Guzz, and had parked it on the road outside his house, taking care to point the towing car uphill on the slope. Whilst giving it the final once over before getting going, Dick thought he saw one of the parking lights on the rear of his van flicker. Being a highly trained ex Artificer, Dick knew exactly what to do. Thump it! Which he did - expertly! His Nissan, being 90% robot, knew exactly what to do too. It immediately shut down its electronic braking system! In hindsight, it was probably lucky that one of his neighbours had parked his beloved Volkswagen outside the front of his house too, as Dick didn't have too far to walk in order to retrieve all three and a half combined tons of his rig, which had by now stove in the front of said Volkswagen! I dunno; they have so much fun down there in the West Country! Happily, no-one was hurt, apart from the reputation of every single Tiff that ever lived, that is, and Dick made it in time to attend the reunion in full. And very welcome he was, too!

Last, but by no stretch of the imagination, least, I have to give a Honourable Mention in Despatches to our glorious leader, Herr Gruppenfuhrer Morrison. Ken was billeted well away from the front line, in Hotel Posho de Swank, halfway up the hill, where he could survey the battlefield, and plan a hasty retreat if the rounds started landing a bit too close - or got too expensive. In true shoot through Staff Officer fashion, Ken, despite being virtually a bleedin' local, was unable to attend the reunion dinner on the Saturday night, so could only make it to the preliminary PU on the Friday night. He certainly cut a commanding figure though, as he wandered through the lines, chatting to the troops, - and their wimmin' - boosting morale prior to our going over the top for the big one the next night. He was ever so slightly less dashing as he staggered back up the hill, in a state of loll, and shipping it green, having copped more than a few below the waterline. By the next day, no trace of his presence could be detected, other than a discarded bar bill (unpaid) and a crunched up Battlefield Will, leaving everything he owns to the S61 Reunion Fund!

Seriously though, it was great to have Ken with us on the Friday, and if it had been even remotely possible, Ken would definitely have joined us on the Saturday. As always, I owe Ken a huge debt of gratitude for the invaluable assistance he gave me in organising, (I use the term loosely, of course!), the mini reunion, and it would have been a hell of a lot more difficult, and onerous, without him. Cheers, Ken, from all of us!

Friday Night - The Au Gambetta

Months of meticulous planning went into finding the perfect venue for the Friday night. We eventually ended up with a shortlist of three, based on cast iron recommends from impeccable sources. All I can say is, thank heavens the advanced guard had decided to carry out a recce beforehand!

The number one contender turned out to be totally inappropriate; a dark, dingy, cramped hole, full of noisy, foul mouthed, drooling drunks (well, it would have been if we'd chosen it!). It's location, which was out of the way, and devoid of any atmosphere, was remarkable only in that it was slap bang next to the Hotel in which Joe was staying. And no, I'm not going to be so unkind as to name the blithering imbecile who recommended it!

Number two on the list turned out to be a shop, selling children's clothes. Number three was closed for refurbishment, and looked as though it had been for some months. Sold another pup! So, two hours before the function started, we had no venue! And we hadn't come across anything that suited our needs all afternoon!

They say that fortune favours the brave. Well, good luck to 'em. As for us, we were heading away from the seafront, and about to start our trek back up the hill, with our tails between our legs, when we heard a huge crash, as a body came hurtling through the window of a bawdy tavern across the street. Phew; we'd found our venue, in the nick of time: the Au Gambetta!





Rolling back the years; the Good Old Boys!

Friday Night - All Good Friends and Jolly Good Company

The evening began for Wilma with a white knuckle ride down the steep hill from the campsite; hanging on for grim death as the flimsy trolley hurtled around bends and over bumps at breakneck speed, risking life and limb at every turn. For those of us with her, it was a pleasant ride in an oversized golf buggy, down gentle slopes to the Au Gambetta. Wilma was never an adrenaline junky!

By 2000, the Au Gambetta was throbbing, or rather, the pavement outside, where we'd all gathered, was. There were even tables and seats available, that we could have used if we hadn't wanted to completely block the busy pavement, and get in the way of all the other Friday night revellers who wanted to get past. By 2030, we were making so much noise that no-one wanted to come anywhere near us! It was like PMQs in the House of Commons, with Pete Bellamy and Joe Dagnino taking centre stage, and the rest of us braying and laughing, and waving our order papers and having a thoroughly good time. It didn't take long to bring the submariners up to speed on terminology; like "run ashore", "bronzeying", and "upper scupper", after which the dits flowed like wine, and we laughed till our jaws ached!



How to block a pavement in style!

After a while, some people naturally started feeling peckish, so Trev detailed his new wife off to go to the bar and get some grub for the lads. Luckily for Trev, Lindy never heard him, and in any case, she'd already grabbed the initiative and had organised a steaming pile of Italy's finest. She only just managed to get her hands out of the way as the feeding frenzy began, and half a dozen large Pizzas were reduced to a few crumbs in about two minutes. And that was just Calvert!

Mike swirled amongst us, like the poor man's Lord Lichfield, taking photos from every angle. He certainly looked the part, handling his great big, eff off camera (penis substitute?) like a professional. I thought I even saw him change his shutter speed at one point; very impressive!

One of Mike's photo ops came close to wrecking the night though, when the girls, in an alcohol fuelled outburst of feminist angst and penis envy, tried to sabotage a group photo of us classmates. Scuffles broke out, and punches were thrown, but eventually the photo was taken. If you examine the photo closely, you'll see that poor old Wally doesn't look too happy. That's because, as the Alpha male, he'd borne the brunt of the female's fury, and had taken a bit of a pasting!



Don't be fooled! A right bunch of hardnuts!

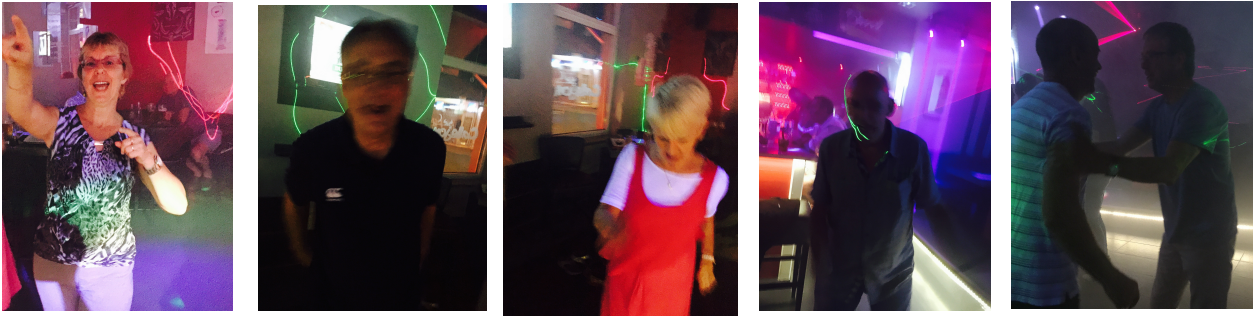
All too soon however, the pub had to close, though they did allow us to swing a wicked hoof on a makeshift dance floor for a while. Of course, that only got the dancing juices flowing, and so, after saying farewell to the sensible ones amongst us, the hardcore rabble set off in search of a night club.



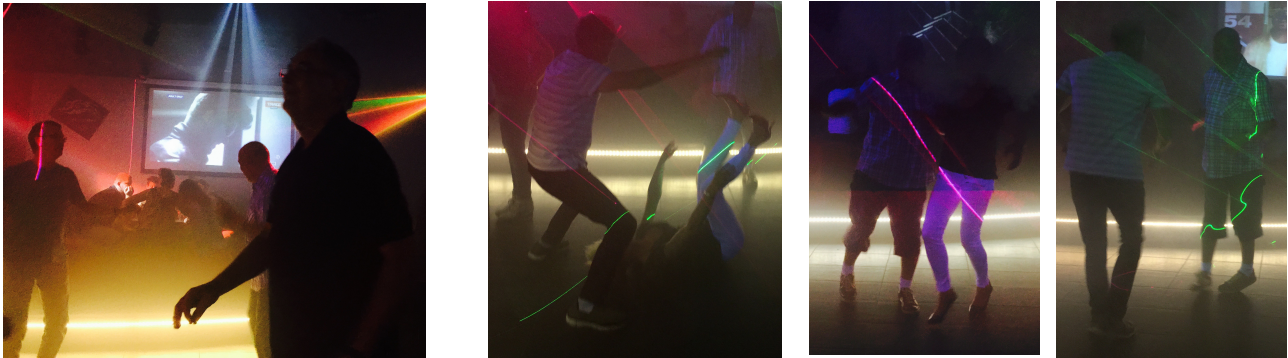
Not, Strictly, Dancing!



Following in the footsteps of Annie! Would you like to bump into this lot up a dark alley?



Like the one eyed man in the land of the blind, Anne became our leader, as she was able to ask for directions and *actually understand the response!* And so it came to pass that Anne led us to 'Le Club de Huitre Bleu'. I don't know whether it was the pulsating rhythm of the music, the cost of the beer, or the erotic soft porn beaming out to us from the giant screens on the walls, but within moments we were all strutting our stuff; like extras from the Thriller video - on fast forward. All apart from Eddy that is, who took care of the drinks - literally! With what little decorum we possessed having been shredded under the influence of the music, the drink and the imagery, our performance strayed closer and closer to the knuckle. Images of Anne, Joe and Al from that night will haunt me forever!



Strange goings on at the Huitre Bleu! No names, no pack drill; but you know who you are!

Eventually, even the world weary sophisticates behind the bar could take no more; the plug was pulled, and we spilled out onto the street. We said our goodnights and wended our separate ways back home. As per usual, the intrepid Anne was in the lead as my little group made our way back up the hill to the campsite. For once, however, Anne's internal SatNav seemed to have gone on the blink as she took us on a meandering tour of Arcachon and our normal 20 minute stroll turned into a 90 minute hike! Bless! Still; we'd all enjoyed a great night, and the prospect of crawling into our waiting pits was the icing on a brilliant cake!

And for one of us, it had been a night never to be forgotten! Our wannabe Wafoo Phot, Mike, discovered that he'd become a grandad - for the third time. Young Xavier had crashed into Mike's world earlier in the day, to become an annual dilemma on each reunion day; as if being born on 9/11 wasn't auspicious enough already! In a heartwarming gesture, born of selfless generosity, Joe produced a bottle of the finest bubbly, with which he, Mike, and the girls wet the baby's head, in keeping with time honoured tradition.

At close of play, Al Trusler took it upon his broad shoulders to settle the bill using his credit card; what a man! Al was puzzled to see, amongst the items, a 60 Euro bottle of Champagne! There are no flies on Joe!

Saturday Lunchtime - Limbering Up



The wash up at the Au Gambetta on Saturday morning very nearly became a wash out, as the heavens opened just before midday, catching everyone in an almost biblical deluge. Showing real spirit and determination, however, most of the gang had already made it to the pub, and the Bellamy-Dagnino show was soon underway, with the rest of us joining them soon thereafter.

Everyone was having a great time, and the wash up was in full swing. A small group of us had ordered food, and were enjoying a nice meal at a table, when a real life emergency unfolded. Carolyn suffered a severe allergic reaction to something she'd eaten, and very rapidly went into a state of anaphylactic shock and distress, and it was obvious that she needed to get to hospital - quick.

Trev and Lindy were magnificent, and took total charge of the situation before anybody else realised that there even *was* a situation! It was like an episode of Casualty; Lindy diagnosed the problem, prescribed the drugs, (which Trev dashed away and bought, from Christ knows where!), calmed Carolyn down, and administered the dosage. Trev dashed off again, and came speeding back with his car, into which we bundled the alarmingly deteriorating Carolyn. Trev jammed his foot down on the accelerator, and off we sped, wheels squealing and tyres smoking, like bats out of hell.

Thirty minutes later, and, thanks to Trev and Lindy's dynamic response, Carolyn was beginning to recover, and I knew that we could start to relax. Except that we were still in the back of Trev's car, hurtling along at terrific speed, screeching around roundabouts and taking off over bumps, like a souped up Subaru in a Cross Country Rally. Wilma would have loved it! And as we passed, by now, familiar landmarks for the third or fourth time, I realised that we were hopelessly lost! I don't know who was the most relieved out of the four of us when Carolyn gave the all clear, and we were able to stand down from emergency stations and stow all gear!

So it was panic over, and time to move on to the main event!

Saturday Night - Reunion Dinner at the Diego Plage

I'd selected the Diego Plage from a shortlist of three, that had been very kindly provided by Ken who, despite knowing that he wouldn't be able to attend, had travelled to Arcachon earlier in the year for the specific purpose of researching the reunion venue on all our behalf's. Thanks, Ken, you did us proud, as the Diego Plage coped with all our requirements splendidly, and turned out to be a cracking venue.

Amazingly, despite the extended lunch time sesh, everyone turned up on time. On Friday night, Eddy and Joe had had hardly any time to prepare, and turned up looking like a pair of Vietnamese boat people. Tonight they looked like a million dollars, and smart as Guardsmen (not quite as tall!), making us campsite people look like the Trailer Trash we were!

The staff were terrific, and the food upheld the fine reputation of French Cuisine. Eddy was disappointed with the size of the rations, as he had been ever since setting foot in France,



but was happy to make amends with his usual liquid substitutes. There was the usual debate amongst the connoisseurs regarding the selection of the appropriate wine, though all most of us cared about was whether there was enough of it - and there was!

As always with our mini reunions, there were no formalities, and no speeches, other than a short and totally off the cuff one that the irrepressible Pete made - by special request. At precisely 2100 we made a special point of toasting 'absent friends' with special mention being made of Tom Taylor.

Tom knew that we were doing this, and why, and I'm sure he would have been at home, thinking of us too. In this way, we all felt Tom's presence, in spirit if not in body! Good on you, Tom, we all love you, mate!



Absent Friends, with a special mention to Tom Taylor!

As expected, we all had a marvellous time, and the evening flew by, so that before we knew it, the staff were lined up, glaring at us from the scullery, wanting us all to go home! They soon perked up, however, and even presented each of us with a *digestif*, when they saw how generous we'd been with the *gratuity* - though Steve might have had something to do with it, as he did go over and mutter something menacing to them in broken Spanish:



*Nor me hagas termar me bloody abrigor, amigor!
(This only works if you read it in a Northern accent!
And know a bit of Spanish, of course!)*

We must all have been tired out by the previous evening's shenanigans, as we called it a night when the restaurant closed at midnight. Even Eddy and Joe did the sensible thing - unless of course, there's something they're not telling us! Al looked despondent when he realised there would be no sing song on the beach - especially as he had already stripped down to his socks and nicks - at about eight o'clock! I think the very heavy rain which was falling sporadically as the night wore on affected us too, as we'd have been mad to have wandered the streets and risked getting caught in that lot.

Did I say mad? Me, Mike and Steve were about to hail a Taxi, when Anne fell us in and marched us back up back the hill, setting a brisk pace. No meanderings tonight; the Light Brigade would have been proud of us! When we arrived at the circle of wagons, soaked through, Mike muttered something about inviting everyone in for a wee dram, making sure, of course, that his words would be carried away by the wind. It seemed to have worked, as Steve and Anne bid farewell without breaking step, and continued marching to their tent.

The experienced submariner chuckled to himself as he stepped into his gleaming Motorhome, not realising that he'd broken the first rule of all those sneaky patrols he'd been on; he'd forgotten to look behind him, and he'd been slipstreamed - by a chippy! Two hours later, eyes glazed, ears pounding, and grief stricken over having to share some of his finest single malt, Mike managed to close his door behind me. He'd had a harsh lesson - and not just about the military annexation of Scotland by the English Parliament in the seventeenth century either!



Sunday Morning - Oh, we do like to be beside the seaside!

Fare thee well, but be back soon!

Once again, we all managed to gather together at the Au Gambetta on the Sunday morning, to enjoy each other's company, and to bid some fond farewells to those who were leaving that day. Mike, naturally, had already dashed off eagerly to see young Xavier, but Pete, Sandra and Al came down to see us all for one last hurrah. I don't think that I was the only one with a tear in my eye as we said goodbye to the Bellamys - Joe would have no competition at all now, and would be uncontrollable! I thought it was really nice too, that one of the young waitresses, who had looked after us all weekend, was calling after Al to give him a wave as he strode off down the road; he'd made as good an impression on her as he always has done on the rest of us!

The rest of us then took advantage of the lull in proceedings to go and see some of the local sights, or to go for a pleasant stroll along the tiddle-om-pom-Prom!



And it was lovely and sunny for a change too! We left Eddy and Joe discussing the merits of DQs - at the time we left them, they seemed to be in agreement that it would be a damned good thing for all school leavers today to do a spell in RNDQs!

Mike in a huff; "I thought I was meant to be the photographer!". And two more of his nice photos!

But the weekend wasn't done yet! We'd all agreed that it was time for the town dwellers to join us camping types at the top of the hill for a taste of the best that the restaurant at Camping D'Arcachon could offer.

Sunday Night - Chez Camping D'Arcachon



Us happy campers had already enjoyed a meal together at the campsite restaurant, so we knew what to expect. It can't have seemed much of a prospect for Trev, Lindy, Joe and Eddy, though, as they walked through the grim barriers, and into the twilight zone inhabited by us travellers!

They loved it! The restaurant was really a glorified canteen, there were a few other bemused travellers at other tables, and the service and staff were basic - no airs and graces here! But the atmosphere was friendly, there was a well stocked bar, and the food was hot, plentiful and delicious. It was actually quite quiet until Joe arrived, upon which the whole campsite was entertained to the life and times of the boy from Bury - whether they wanted to be or not!

Eddy had had enough of Arcachon's small portions by now, so he demanded to be given anything, so long as it was big! Even he was gobsmacked when the chef came struggling out, under the weight of an enormous steak and a huge pile of chips. Wha-hey!



We all really enjoyed ourselves, and it made a fitting end to a truly memorable weekend. It was really touching that each of the men stood up, without planning or prompting, to say a few words about how they felt about the weekend, and about being in such glorious company, if only for a short time. The intervening years had fallen away, and all of us were being seen exactly as we were all those years, and lifetimes, ago. Even Wally was getting a wee bit emotional!

And to cap it all, Joe really did lay on the bubbly, and completely redeemed himself! On what better note could you end our soap opera in the sun - and rain!

Epilogue

Each one of these mini reunions is unique, and each one has been tremendously enjoyable, and an unforgettable experience. Arcachon was fabulous, and everyone who attended is so glad that they made the time to fit it into their busy lives.

Next year, we're bringing the mini reunion back home for the first time since 2011, when a happy few of us had such a brilliant time on the Isle of Wight. It's going to be held at Balloch, on the southern shore of Loch Lomond, not far from the stomping grounds of all the S61 boys who served at Faslane.

It's going to be great; I hope to see you there!

Dave