

The Watsonian Club Open Meeting President's End of Term Address presented at The Watsonian Club Open Meeting held on Tuesday 24 February 2025

Introduction

As a former pupil and now current parent at George Watson's College, it has been an honour and privilege to serve as President of the Watsonian Club.

Our vibrant and thriving Watsonian Club is only made possible thanks, of course, to the support of the School, but also the many individuals who give their time - as volunteers - to ensure the success of our sections and branches. Together, we maintain a vibrant programme of events and opportunities that keep the Watsonian community connected here in Edinburgh and beyond.

Highlights of My Term in Office

My tenure began with a very special evening at the Watsonian Club Dinner in February 2023, when I received the Presidential Chain from Gillian Sandiland (Class of 1978) - a very memorable moment for me and my family.

2023 continued to be marked by a series of significant milestones:

- The Watsonian Swimming Club celebrated its 90th anniversary with a celebratory lunch at The Pavilion at Myreside
- The School hosted its inaugural Foundation Day, celebrating the positive contributions Watsonians have made to the world. A key highlight of the event was the awarding of the first Honorary Fellowship to Fadwa Affara (Class of 1961). The 2024 Honorary Fellowship was awarded to The Rt Hon The Lord Smith of Finsbury (Class of 1969).
- The Borders Watsonian Club marked its centenary in the beautiful gardens of St Mary's School, Melrose. My sincere thanks to Liam Harvey (Class of 1986) for hosting, and to Jack Docherty (Class of 1980), also known as Chief Commissioner Cameron Miekelson, for sharing entertaining insights into his latest work.
- After a five-year hiatus, the Usher Hall Concert returned in March 2023, coinciding with the launch of the Patrons of the Arts Programme, designed to support Music and Drama productions and individual pupils. The Junior School received funding towards the purchase of Steel Pans. Pupils have gone on to perform at a number of events.
- The Big Reunion Lunch continues to be a highlight in the events calendar. The upcoming event in September 2025 promises another wonderful opportunity for former pupils and staff to reminisce, reconnect, and tour the campus.

June 2024 was a particularly poignant moment, as I had the privilege of bidding farewell to Principal Melvyn Roffe and his wife, Honorary Heritage Officer Catherine Stratford, and welcoming our fifth Principal, Lisa Kerr. Lisa joined Watson's during challenging times as the impact of VAT affected many families. I have been impressed by her swift integration into school life and her collaborative work with her leadership team and governors to develop an ambitious strategy for a successful and vibrant future.

New Initiatives

I was delighted to be in post, as we saw the introduction of two new events designed to engage more individuals in Club activities:

- A Christmas Event for recent leavers continues to be popular, with the aim of encouraging younger Watsonians to actively participate with the Club
- The monthly 'Come for Coffee' gathering launched. Held at The Pavilion at Myreside on the last Tuesday of each month, Watsonians are warmly welcomed back for a relaxing, informal morning of convivial chat and friendship. Everyone is welcome, so please do mark this in your diaries!

Governance and Council Work

Beyond events, the Watsonian Council plays a crucial governance role. It works closely with sections and branches to ensure constitutions, service agreements, and legal documents are regularly reviewed and updated. I want to extend my thanks to all the volunteers and office bearers who dedicate their time to keeping our network vibrant and, importantly, compliant.

If you are interested in learning more about the Watsonian Council or joining as a member, please contact the Development Office.

Section Highlights

- **Choir:** The Choir remains one of our most popular Sections and is maintaining full capacity of 95 members and a waiting list due to high demand. This session's two concerts raised £1450 for the GWFF as well as £1450 for two local charities. This brings the total donations to the GWFF to £6796 since the Choir was established in 2018.
- **Cricket:** The Watsonian Cricket Club will celebrate their 150th anniversary in 2025 with a series of events and an anniversary dinner in October.
- **Curling:** The Watsonian Curling Club has a steady membership but is exploring ways to attract new players. There was good performance in the Midlothian Province League, though FP League results were less positive.
- **Golf:** Watsonian Golf Club players proudly represented the Club at the annual Halford Hewitt match but is now actively exploring new ways to attract new members. The Women Watsonian Golf Club continues to enjoy a healthy membership and a full calendar of sociable and competitive fixtures.
- **Hockey:** In 2024, the Watsonian Hockey Club made history with both the Men's 1st XI and the Women's 1st winning the Scottish Cup. No other Club side has won both the Men's and Women's Cups in the same year - a tremendous achievement. 2025 is an exciting year as the Club celebrates its 100th anniversary with a series of events and anniversary dinner in June.
- **Rifle:** The Watsonian Rifle Club continues to take part in training and competitions, and is working with the School to have a pupil design their centenary trophy as they look ahead to their 100th anniversary next year.
- **Rugby:** The Watsonian Football Club reached a milestone anniversary this year, celebrating their 150th anniversary, again with anniversary events culminating in a

dinner later in November with Sir Chris Hoy (Class of 1994) as guest speaker.

- **Squash:** The Watsonian Squash Club has recently won the Men's Scottish National League for the first time in the Club's history after only rejoining the league for the first time since the 1970s.
- **Swimming:** The Watsonian Swimming Club continue to host a series of social events in addition to their annual Crock's Cup competition.

Branch Highlights

We're seeing a shift in how some of our formal Branches operate, with many long-serving Presidents ready to step down but struggling to find successors. In response, there's growing interest in more informal gatherings, such as coffee mornings or drinks, where no booking is needed and everyone simply pays their own way. This removes the need for formal roles like treasurer and just requires a host. The Yorkshire Watsonian Branch has already held two successful coffee mornings, and although the Victoria Branch in Australia has formally closed, former pupils there continue to meet informally for drinks. These smaller gatherings have also welcomed former pupils from other Edinburgh schools, such as Erskine Stewart's and Edinburgh Academy, helping make events more viable. We've even seen Watsonians in areas without a formal Branch come forward to host their own informal get-togethers. There's clearly still a strong desire to stay connected, just in a more relaxed and flexible way.

Fundraising

Fundraising remains central to our mission of supporting pupils through Foundation Places, bursaries, and enhancing teaching facilities. I am proud to report that over £3.3 million has been generously donated during my term in office - a phenomenal commitment from the Watsonian community.

The Watsonian Benevolent Fund, of which I have been honoured to serve as a Trustee, continues to provide crucial support to Watsonians facing financial hardship, carrying forward its original mission of aiding those returning from the First World War.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

I'd like to acknowledge the passing of Alan Mackie (Class of 1984) on 19 March 2025, Past President of the London Watsonian Club and the passing of Donald Scott (Former Staff) on 22 June 2024, Past President of the Watsonian Club.

I want to note my special thanks to Laura Tyzack, who works in the Development Office, for her support over the past four years, during my term as Vice President and President. Her tireless commitment ensures our Watsonian Family remains a vibrant and connected community through regular events, reunions and other initiatives.

Special thanks to those currently serving on Council:

Sarah Barron (Class of 1974)

Tracy Black (Class of 1990)

Gordon Cameron (Class of 1976)

Ian Watson (Class of 1969)

And to those who completed their tenure during my term:

David Dewhurst (Class of 1982)

Kaveh Kheradmand (Class of 2006)

John Robertson (Class of 2006)

Gillian Sandilands (Class of 1978)

Janet Young (Class of 1974)

I would also like to acknowledge my thanks to Vice President David Macdonald (Class of 1992) - who will take over as President in July 2025 - for his help and support over the last two years.

Closing Remarks

It has been a privilege to serve as President. I look forward to seeing the Club continue to grow and bring Watsonians together across generations.

Thank you all for your ongoing commitment and support.

Ben Di Rollo (Class of 2002)

President

The Watsonian Club