

In Baird's Footsteps

Written by Donald Fullarton - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 February 2013 17:41



THE snow lay deep and crisp and even in Helensburgh in February 2009 . . . but that did not prevent broadcaster John Beattie from exploring the footsteps of TV pioneer John Logie Baird.

His guide — recommended by an expert on Baird's work, Dr Douglas Brown of Strathclyde University — was Stewart Noble (below right), chairman of Helensburgh Heritage Trust.

Accompanying them and wielding the microphone was a very experienced features producer for BBC Radio Scotland, Debbie McPhail from Portobello.

They were preparing the last of six programmes in a second series entitled 'In The Footsteps Of', in which well known personalities learn more about the lives of famous people in whom they

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have a particular interest.

Others featured in this series have included mountaineer Sir Hugh Munro, J.M.Barrie, and the painter Joan Eardley.



Debbie said: "John Beattie has a degree in civil engineering from Glasgow University and originally thought his career would be building roads and bridges. But it is John Logie Baird's invention that still astounds him today.

"Whether he's in the commentary box at a rugby match or watching live events on his television at home, the fact the he can watch events on the other side of the world as they happen he finds amazing.

"He wanted to find out what inspired a boy from Helensburgh to make television and the first step in his journey was to go to the house where Baird was born and where he carried out some of his first experiments."

Stewart Noble is very knowledgeable about Baird, having written a number of articles and given several talks about him.

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A few days earlier John (below left), the former Glasgow rugby player who earned 25 caps for Scotland, was twice a British Lion, and is now a radio and TV sports presenter and commentator, was in Canada on rugby business and took the opportunity to interview the inventor's son, Professor Malcolm Baird, who is also president of the Heritage Trust.



The walkabout began in West Argyle Street at The Lodge where Baird, son of St Bride's Church minister the Rev John Baird, was born and spent his early years.

Beside the front door there is a small plaque which reads: "John Logie Baird, Born in this house, on 13th August 1888."

Stewart was asked about many of the well known incidents of Baird's youth as well as his later life. "I am happy to talk about these things, so long as they are non-technical," he said.

Tales from Baird's days in Helensburgh included his ill health from the age of two, his schooldays at Larchfield, his telephone system to friends houses including Jack Buchanan's home, and his three-wheeler bicycle with a seat at the front.

Stewart said: "I also spoke about the time he built a glider on the roof at the back of the house.

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He was sitting in it when a friend decided it would be fun to push the glider which nose-dived into the ground. Baird never flew again!”

John, who retrained as a chartered accountant before becoming a broadcaster, said: “I was particularly interested in Baird’s time at Larchfield, where I gather he did not like sport and the cold showers were not good for his health.



“When I was at a small prep school called Drumley House at Ayr, we used to come to play rugby against Larchfield — and I can remember the cold showers too!”

The walkabout continued with a look at Baird’s bust on the seafront at the foot of William Street and at a plaque in his memory on the Municipal Buildings, another interview standing outside the former Larchfield School, and a visit to the Baird family grave in Helensburgh Cemetery.

John also went to Strathclyde University where Dr Brown and a team of engineers have patented an idea for 3D television based on one of John Logie Baird's inventions.

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The programme was broadcast on BBC Radio Scotland on February 16 and 22.

- *Photos by Donald Fullarton*