

Former rector was a stalwart of community

By Pat Scott

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A FORMER rector of The Gordon Schools whose sphere of influence extended far into the wider community of Huntly died peacefully last week, aged 94.

Ewen McDonald came to The Gordon Schools in 1961 and retired from the post in 1982, but during his working life and well into his retirement he took an active role in the community which honoured him in 2003 with the title of Citizen of the Year.

The top citizen award was well deserved recognition of the part he played in the local Youth Training Scheme which provided school leavers with a work placement supplemented by off-the-job training.

Mr McDonald then became the founding chairman of the Huntly Educational Trust, created with money raised from the successful training scheme, and which continues today to provide one-off grants to help young people with their education. He was also the first chairman in the 1980s of the local development company Huntly Limited, a justice of the peace and chairman of the children's panel in Aberdeenshire.

An arts graduate with a degree in English, Mr McDonald was an acknowledged authority on Dr James Legge, the famous son of Huntly who went to China as a missionary and translated Chinese classics into English.

In his retirement he found time to write a history

of Strathbogie Church and a similar book about The Gordon Schools.

But Mr McDonald kept much of his earlier life story private, and few would have been aware that he was one of the last living inmates of Stalag Luft III, setting of the classic war film 'The Great Escape'.

When war broke out he was a student at Glasgow University, studying divinity. But he was determined to sign up. He joined the RAF and was given command of a Wellington bomber, which was shot down over Heraklion Harbour.

He had a crew of four, three of whom were killed. He was badly wounded, but was eventually rescued from the Mediterranean by the crew of a German boat.

As a prisoner of war he was involved in escape plans, though considered too tall to attempt an escape through the tunnels that featured in 'The Great Escape', a film he always dismissed as Hollywood nonsense.

Eventually freed by Soviet tank crews, he made his own way back across Europe, witnessing many horrors and occasional acts of kindness.

He received no counselling and just got on with life, although forever haunted by his memories. Eventually he talked about his experiences to close family.

He returned to Glasgow University after the war, not to study divinity, but arts. He taught English in Blairgowrie, Aberdeen and Oban and was co-author of the textbook 'Work in English' before his appointment at The Gordon Schools.



Ewen McDonald, who died peacefully in Scott's Hospital last week.

After retiring in 1982, he returned to the site of Stalag Luft III, now in Poland. By chance he met a visiting school group and was persuaded to talk to them about his experiences. The children were in awe, adopting their own real-life war hero.

Mr McDonald is survived by his wife Mae, whom he had met before the war and who was also a teacher, three children, five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.