



of Paris (L'Ecole Normale Supérieure) - one could be forgiven for thinking Professor Gibson was born with the proverbial silver spoon within hands reach, at least. Not so. Although originally from Scotland, his parents moved to London's East End when he was 3 years old. "We played in the streets and I can still remember the astonishment on the other children's faces when I spoke to them for the first time in my broad Scots accent," he says. "From then on I became a social chameleon, speaking with a Scots accent at home, Cockney for playing, and a posh accent for reading aloud at school. These childhood experiences led to a life-long preoccupation with conflicting cultures."

In the East End he was educated at a local primary school and then at the hugely successful grammar school, Leyton County High. Other Leytonians include Frank Muir, Derek Jacobi and Jonathan Ross. Entry to this school and indeed every other institution he attended was through scholarships. "I was lucky in being able to pass exams, in order to get me from where I was to where I am," he says. But he has never sought to distance himself from his roots and remains a firm supporter of his home team, Leyton Orient football club.

He retains fond memories of his school where he was an active all-rounder.

# Author! Author!

By Julie Willis

With stunning views of Lyme Bay from his cliff-top balconied writing room, prolific academic author **Professor Robert Gibson** is rarely troubled by writer's block.

**T**he author of 15 published titles, all written in longhand using a fountain pen, Professor Gibson, 78, has enjoyed a long and eminent academic career in French Studies, and is an authority on Anglo-French relations and the French novelist Alain-Fournier.

He has also enjoyed a long association with Sidmouth, first visiting the town as a young man while "courting" his wife. "It seemed to me there was no one here under the age of 102 then, so I thought 'No thanks!' but now I'm approaching that age I've warmed to it," he jokes. They retired to the town in 1994.

Professor Gibson's late wife Sheila moved to Sidmouth as a young girl after her home in Exeter was bombed during the Second World War. She lived at the

Bedford Hotel with her aunt, then Manager of the hotel, and her uncle who owned the Prospect newsagency in the town. Both were "Sidmouthians" born and bred.

When Sheila's aunt and uncle retired in 1960 they built a house in Cliff Road, the house from which Professor Gibson now spends long hours writing and researching his work.

Professor Gibson and his wife met at Cambridge University, she studying to become a teacher, he studying for a PhD. Both joined the amateur dramatics group. "She was a prompter and she prompted me thereafter" he smiles.

When reading the roll call of impressive academic institutions attended and qualifications achieved - University of London (King's College), University of Cambridge (Magdalene College), University

Consistently top of his form, he became Head Boy, Captain of Football and Editor of the school magazine. His writing career effectively began there. He wrote and performed in a three-act thriller as well as in his end-of-term satirical revues. He won various essay competitions and received a long personal letter of encouragement from A.A.Milne, then editor of PUNCH.

After completing his university studies he took his first teaching post at St Andrew's ("I didn't earn a penny until I was 27"), moving to become Head of the French Department in Dundee after only one year of teaching, then on to Aberdeen from where he was elected to Belfast as Chair of French at just 33. In 1965 he moved to the newly built University of Kent at Canterbury where he remained as Professor of French for nearly 30 years. He had many other roles at the university, serving on numerous committees, acting as master of one of the colleges and as Sub-Dean of Humanities.

Love of writing and public performance made him an obvious choice for the office