

AN OBJECT OF INTEREST FROM HUNSTANTON HERITAGE CENTRE

This time we are very happy to present an interview with Hunstanton resident, John Maiden. As you might expect, this interview reported by our member, Margi Blunden is having to be spread over more than one part published in our Newsletters August – October 2022

JOHN MAIDEN

DO DIFFERENT (THE WORD SMITH – IN AND OUT) PART 1

The story I am about to share is one of creativity, individuality and words born out of a mixed heritage; one which brought with it the culture of Ireland and the independent spirit of an East Anglian grandmother who was a suffragette.

The determination to follow his own road and be guided by the love of his birthplace and his talent for words, has led John down paths he has wanted to share with others through his individual voice.

He was born on February 2nd 1938 at home at 79 Westgate Hunstanton with Nurse Cook from Hill Street on hand to prevent him from strangling himself in his umbilical cord! And there with his arrival I will leave this new born infant for the moment and build for you a picture of all the people in his family who had such an influence on him and his life.

If you look up Fellows Hall, Armagh in the North of Ireland you will discover that this house and land have been in existence since the 17th century. John's grandparents worked here. His grandfather George a huntsman, who couldn't write his own name, had come from Yorkshire to Armagh, whilst his grandmother, Elizabeth Conroy, was a local lass.

Ireland however was not destined to be the home landscape of this new family. They crossed the Irish Sea in 1910 to work for the Earl of Gainsborough who owned Exton Park in Rutland. When Norah the daughter of the Earl married Count Robert Bentinck, George and Ernie (sons of George and Elizabeth) moved with Norah to Grange House, Heacham, where George was employed as a chauffeur.

In an unfinished autobiography their son, Henry Bentinck (who later became the 11th Earl of Portland) described George as his "childhood's dearest friend - Irish, singer, teller of tales, remembrancer - 'Podge' we called him and the relationship which existed between us is too rich and deep for the disciplines of psychology and sociology to properly fathom."

Sadly, in 1932 when Henry was only 13, Robert died and the Bentincks left Heacham.

By this time George had married Kathleen Garner in 1929. The couple had two children, Paul and Patsy, and were living in Victoria Avenue. They had met when singing in the choir at the RC Church in Sandringham Road. While on the lookout for chauffeuring work, George sold ice cream for Crown's dairy (where Sowerby's is now). Another job involved painting Hunstanton Pier, before he became chauffeur to Mrs Elgood who lived at the Gables in Austin Street.

Kathleen's mother, Judith Ann Garner was a woman who could be said to have been ahead of her time. She owned and ran The Crown pub in Peterborough. She had four children, Annie, Ida, Willie and Kathleen and was capable of combining parenting with business and politics. Her husband William was not always there – he went off to Canada as a lumberjack. He then became an engine driver, but it seemed that Judith held the reins of the partnership. Her commitment to the cause of women gaining the vote, took her to a London rally (along with 6 year old Kathleen) where she met Theodore Roosevelt on his visit to the UK in 1910. Kathleen was given some florins (two shilling pieces) by the former President, which never got spent, but were kept proudly on the kitchen dresser throughout John's childhood.



Life was to change radically for the Garners when Judith sold the pub and bought 4 houses in Hunstanton. They all moved into 2 The Shields in St Edmund's Avenue, whilst the other houses were rented out. It was only after Judith's death in 1936 that Portland House, 79 Westgate became home to the Maidens, along with widower William Garner and Judith's live-in maid, Susan Haverson.

It was here that John grew up, with Sue replacing the maternal grandmother

Very early memories are still vivid in his mind. Having been baptised into the Catholic faith in infancy, he recalls one of his earliest visions being two stained glass windows: one depicting St Edmund being shot with arrows, and the other being Our Lady; two impressions which fired his imagination.

His strong voice became evident in the following incident: he was only about 4 when, being pushed in a push chair by his older brother - pretending it was a tank - along Alexander Road (which is still an unmade road), the chair folded up. John was squashed. When Dr Cottu put iodine on his wounds John cried out: 'Damn it, damn it I can't stand it!'

A bombing raid on Church Street during the war caused all the windows of the family home to shatter. He recalls the sound of the bombers and like many people the family sheltered in the cupboard under the stairs.

Life at home provided John with values enriched by cultures which were not local. Right from the start he was exposed to messages from a world beyond West Norfolk and at the same time he was becoming attached to his geographical surroundings.

When the time came for him to go to the Infant School he resisted. He even remembers holding on to his grandfather's chair and pleading with the old man to save him from the ordeal. He did not enjoy much of it apart from story time. Listening to stories was one of his favourite activities and his older sister Patsy Ann would read to him until he could read himself. Then Biggles books became his reading of choice, while listening to the radio exercised his imagination.

The family's Republican views and its Catholic faith were sufficiently unusual in those days to make John feel somewhat different to the other children at school. He was not allowed to develop a Norfolk accent His Irish father would correct him, having spent so much time himself listening to the gentry! He never felt totally at ease amongst his peers except for his closest friends.

By 1946 he was almost a school phobic and would sometimes get to the school gates then return home feeling physically sick. The Headmaster, Mr Crowther said John would grow out of it and he was almost right. What John loved to do instead was go with his father as he delivered cakes from the NAAFI bakery in Church Street to most of the RAF and army bases in Norfolk. As he drove along George would recite poetry to John and, in his lovely bass voice, sing the songs from the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. So before the age of 10 John became familiar with places beyond Hunstanton. He was gradually building up a deep familiarity with the area and expanding his understanding of words and music.

The 11 Plus exam was still in operation during John's boyhood and things were changing for John at school. It was now run by George James, who had spent 4 years as a Japanese prisoner of war. He was a kind and humane man who John recalls meeting later on in his life.

Two more ex-military men arrived at the primary school after training as teachers – Bill Lowery and Bob Knight. After narrowly failing to get over the line at 11+ and 12+ John managed it at 13+. This meant that he now qualified for a place on a three year grammar school course at Wymondham College on the other side of Norfolk, 12 miles from Norwich. At the time, this co-educational school consisted of Nissen huts, housing a five year technical course in addition to the grammar school course.

Unfortunately this experience was no better for John than his earlier days of schooling. Again he felt that he did not fit in to the system. The only subject he really liked was Geography. Despite encouragement from his parents and George James to complete the course, he left at 15 after completing five terms with no GCEs.

Back in Hunstanton he got a job in the warehouse of James Lambert and Son, Grocers and Wine Merchants, but was soon asked to serve behind the counter of the shop in Westgate (now Abbots). He joined the Seagulls Swimming Club and Tom Atkinson's Keep Fit classes at the new Secondary Modern School after its opening in 1954. He even went to evening classes in English and Maths taught by George James, primarily run for the benefit of police officers preparing for the Sergeants' exam.

After 18 months at Lamberts he thought about joining the merchant navy, to visit places where some of the more exotic products on sale in the shop actually came from. Instead, he spent the next 18 months

working for the contractors who built Hunstanton's new North Promenade. He claims that this was the best job he ever had.

Enforced education behind him, he was beginning to take hold of his life to suit himself. The man who was to become such a spokesperson for his home town, was beginning to lay the foundations for his own direction in life. Free to make his own decisions he started to connect with his thirst for knowledge, people, and the world at large.

JOHN MAIDEN - DO DIFFERENT PART 2

By 1956 the war had been over for 11 years but there were still danger zones in the world – the Hungarian Uprising took place in October/November and the crisis in Suez was still live. John had voluntarily joined the Royal Observer Corps when he was 16 and did duty from the top of Hunstanton Lighthouse. He wanted to go into the air force as he felt strongly that he owed a debt to those who had given their lives before him in World War Two.

On 28th November 1956 his time came and he joined up leaving Hunstanton for West Kirby on the Wirral. Despite wanting to travel abroad, his period in the air force was spent in England, at RAF Compton Bassett and then RAF Wythall, south of Birmingham. He trained to be an advanced wireless operator. By the time he left in November 1958 he was a SAC (senior aircraftsman).

Besides achieving this position, he had continued to educate himself via night school taking two GCEs (as they were then). He then took some more up in Stockport Cheshire. Why there? Well, John describes 1959 as the 'long, hot' summer! This is when Pat (his now wife) and her family came to stay at John's family home. Pat came from Stockport so when her family holiday was over, John followed her up there and found himself a job and some more night classes.

Do you hear wedding bells? September 1960 was the happy month and it was followed by a move to



London where John took his Teacher's Certificate at St. Mary's, Strawberry Hill, Twickenham. His eyes twinkled as he recalled that it was here that he had encountered Joe, Mick Jagger's father, who was one of his tutors!

Although teaching was the career that John had now embarked upon, his striking memories of it are often of the people he met along the way. One of these was Stuart Osborne the head of his first school in Lothingland Rural District near Yarmouth. Stuart was a man who had innovative ideas and John as the PE teacher appreciated the introduction of the trampoline which was a new idea in those days.

John enjoyed his time here, even working in a caravan park in the summer holidays. He was also to become a father with the birth of Caroline in 1963 followed by Nick in 1966 and Francesca in 1970 .

John spent a lot of time in the Hunstanton Blue Lagoon, well, perhaps in mid-air!

Life never stood still for long and after a brief spell in Huntingdon Technical College he had a temporary job in St Gallen International School in Switzerland. The outstanding memory of this time was the German he learned – including swear words to do with soccer!

While civil unrest rocked France in May 1968 for several weeks, the family returned to East Suffolk, where John turned his hand to sorting peas in a canning factory in Lowestoft. His main task was to spot any unwanted dandelion heads!

This however was not going to keep the family going for long and the next move was back to Hunstanton Primary School and a class of 42 pupils in first year juniors.

If you had been one of John's pupils during his career as a teacher, you would have realised that here was a man who was not conventional. He wanted to encourage his pupils to think for themselves and to be aware of the events going on around them. Does anyone out there remember John taking them onto the footbridge to witness one of the last trains leaving Hunstanton Station?

Although questioning the status quo has often led him into uncomfortable situations, his belief in its importance has not faded over time.

His headmaster, when John was teaching English and RE in 1970 at Hunstanton Secondary Modern (now known as Smithdon), was Mr. Bolton. Here was a man fluent in French and German, part of the Pathfinder Squadron in WW2, shot down in occupied France, passed as a French peasant and so evaded capture, who questioned John's request to take a year out to do a degree in Middle Years Education.

John however was determined to take the risk and moved the family up to Ambleside where he attended Charlotte Mason College.

Armed with this new qualification he returned to North West Norfolk teaching English and Liberal Studies in Gaywood Park School in Kings Lynn.

Ever a man to believe in the rights of workers he joined the Transport & General Workers Union. During a spell at St. Martha's RC School in Kings Lynn where he had moved on to after Gaywood, he went on a course at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the UEA in Norwich. This was the Humanities Curriculum Project which he enjoyed and was to prove instrumental in changing the direction of his working life.

He was now motivated to do a Masters degree in Applied Educational Research. Underscored by his investigative skills his interest turned to why some pupils just don't get on at school. Interestingly his own childhood experience of school must have fed this desire to try to understand why some children had an aversion to school.

This of course is still relevant and we will see in Part 3 what part John played in attempting to unravel some of the reasons behind this difficult issue which manifests itself in society today. And furthermore how he went beyond his academic studies to help ameliorate that situation for children who were involved in the struggle with the demands and complexities of our educational structure and system.

JOHN MAIDEN - DO DIFFERENT PART 3

We now join John at a turning point in his working life when he was researching why school doesn't necessarily fulfil a child's needs. That not all education takes place in school was John's belief and it was firmly reinforced when he read R.F. Mackenzie's book 'Escape from the Classroom'.

Mindful of the University of East Anglia's motto – Do Different – and thinking outside the box, he persuaded the BBC to make a documentary on home schooling. This was part of his UEA Masters degree. The BBC actually made a half hour programme on this subject as a result of John's actions.

After his return to the classroom at St Martha's in King's Lynn, he developed another idea. Whilst escorting coach loads of pupils and parents to football games at Carrow Road in Norwich he realised how he could help to improve the experience of families attending football matches. He helped to start 'Junior Canaries' and he thought that if parents and children from a young age went together to football matches this might stop the children from becoming football hooligans later. He called this project:

Soccer As Family Entertainment – S.A.F.E.

His idea blossomed with funding which he gained from the National Dairy Council (he was not yet a vegan). It sponsored the Milk Cup. Freight Rover provided him with a Sherpa minibus. This idea worked well; for six years John promoted the scheme through schools, football clubs and the media throughout England and Wales.

The very first Family Enclosure was opened at Wembley Stadium for the Freight Rover Trophy Final in 1985 - the very same year that Norwich won the Milk Cup!

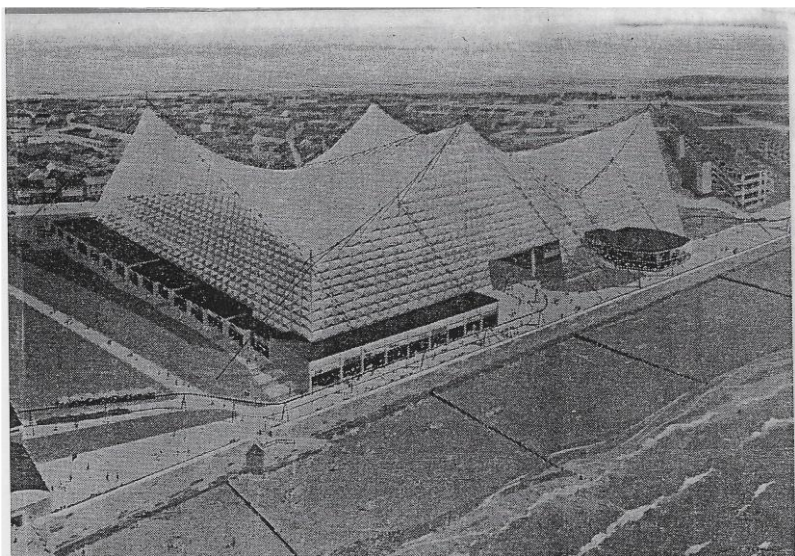
Other family enclosures were installed at Norwich and Millwall amongst other places.

In 1989 he stepped down.

He was ready to quieten the pace of his life a bit and happily took on the job of night watchman at Docking Seal Hospital. This led to him becoming a branch co-ordinator for the RSPCA and then Education Officer for the East of England section of the RSPCA.

By now he was a fully-fledged vegan which did not sit well with the RSPCA's endorsement of 'Freedom Foods' which included meat and eggs. With a heavy heart he retired only to become a part time lecturer in Animal Care at the College of West Anglia in King's Lynn until his retirement in 2000.

Any hope of a peaceful retirement ended in 2002 when on 18th May after a huge fire all that remained of Hunstanton Pier was demolished. The damage from the blaze was estimated to be £1.5 million.



Thousands of residents petitioned against a major new development on The Green and John was convinced public opinion would win the day just as it had in the early 1970's. This was when the people of Hunstanton rebelled against plans to make the town into an all-weather resort by building a big bubble over new facilities on the sea front, following the untimely demolition of the swimming pool, the Sandringham Hotel and the railway.

On the 14th June 2002 a planning application was submitted to build a new pier-less building right where the pier had been.

Despite public protest (the uncluttered view of the Wash from the Green was delightful), the 'Hangar' was built. However, out of the decision to forge ahead with the new proposal the Hunstanton Civic Society was formed, brought into existence by a steering committee of which John was joint chairman.

Thereafter he served on the committee for several years. He gave his time and effort networking to draw people in. He was never short of ideas and a few years ago suggested to the committee the idea of creating a Heritage Centre. The support for this project and its culmination, has added immensely to the cultural offerings of our area, providing a central place in the town for people to see all kinds of artefacts relating to history of this special corner of North West Norfolk.

All these events have had a direct effect on John's life. The fire in 2002 paradoxically enabled him to fulfil one of his ambitions – to be a journalist.

He established himself as a contributor to the Lynn News and has written the column Turnstone for the past 12 years. His regular contributions have also appeared in Hunstanton Town and Around since its launch in 2005.

"I love writing" he said. "I like to present things in a way to challenge conventional thinking."

He also believes it valuable to set events in a context. You will find in his articles references dating back to the birth of Hunstanton allowing readers to understand current events from a bird's eye perspective.

The long arm of history has a way of reaching forward as well as backwards. John's article in the Lynn News on 15 June 2022 explains how his primary school teacher Mr Lowery organised American pen pals for his class in order to help foster good relations between the two countries.

At this time the 'Cold War' resulted in a vast number of American servicemen bringing their families to live in our seaside town and John writes about how Hunstanton became known as 'Little America' in the 1950's

The relationship between local residents and the Americans was strengthened in January 1953 by a shared loss of life and by joint rescue efforts, which saw two American airmen awarded George Medals for their outstanding bravery.

Nearly sixty years on from this tragedy, John was contacted by the official historian of the USAF squadron which had played a major role on that fateful night and RAF Flight Sgt Mark Service wondered whether Hunstanton would be interested in hosting events to mark the 60th anniversaries of both the USAF Special Operations and the Floods. John was very much involved in all that followed in terms of maintaining and strengthening ties with the USAF 67th Special Operations Squadron (SOS).

In 2016 the 67th SOS and Hunstanton were twinned. John's idea to acknowledge the help given to Hunstanton in time of need was now made concrete and this is proclaimed on the road signs welcoming visitors to the town.

If you ask John about his approach to life he will tell you :

“Do different”

His conviction and courage to follow his own instincts whilst responding to human need has steered his life on a very particular course. The consequences have taken him down some unusual pathways. Not for him 'the road less travelled'; his travelled roads were taken with certainty. The words of the singer songwriter, Phil Lynott of Thin Lizzy

“Do anything you want to”

have been embedded in John's bold and individual thinking.

Concerned to act for the benefit of society, his actions have impacted not only those in the world of education but also the people of our town, encouraging us to reach beyond the boundaries of small thinking.

Margi Blunden