

John Dixon Leefe OBE

My brother John summed it up precisely when he said ~ you know ~ the Old Man lived his life at full throttle. He certainly did and the story of his doings would probably fill a book. Indeed if we pulp and re-use all the files and paper he left behind we would have enough for the first print run.

With such a wealth of material it has proved quite a task to pull together a précis of his life, I can't tell you about Selby, The Great Lakes or Bermuda, the Chapel or The Barge, they were mere side shows, but I can touch on essentials:

John or Jack Dixon Leefe was born on 17th November 1924 in Scarborough, the only son of Lewis Dixon and Mary Anne Leefe, just six years after the end of the first world war.

As far as written records can show, John traces his family back over three hundred years into deepest Yorkshire to Crayke, near Easingwold.

By all accounts John was a true Yorkshireman and Scarborian, something he was proud of.

SCHOOL & SCOUTS

School boy years revolved around Scarborough School for Boys where John was a diligent pupil leaving with the expected school certificate, and as a chorister at St Martin's Church which gave John a secure grounding in the Anglican faith to which John adhered throughout his life.

Through St Martin's Troop, John was also introduced to the world of Boy Scouts which proved a major influence on his approach to life and others. The fun with a sense of purpose and adventure, and the fellowship which lead to lasting friendships, undoubtedly instilled in John the importance of giving focus to the lives of the young and it is not surprising he was drawn into education, training and mentoring in his later professional life.

Leaving school John started working life as a junior clerk at the Scarborough Town Hall but preferring the open air life soon moved on to work as a trainee with the Forestry Commission at it's Wykeham Forest Nursery on the edge of the Yorkshire Moors where one of his tasks was to climb pine trees to collect the cones for seed.

THE ARMY & MARRIAGE

At 18, during 1942, John was called to National service in the army and after initial training was commissioned into the Royal Engineers as a second Lieutenant in the bomb disposal division.

Army training nearly brought matters to an early end when one winter, John fell into the icy waters of the river Trent while manoeuvring pontoons and contracted pneumonia and pleurisy. Seriously ill he was hospitalised and fearing for his life the doctors sent for his mother.

Fortunately John survived and took his place clearing unexploded bombs and mines from the North Norfolk coast.

Clearly in his element, and based in an HQ in a pill box on the beach at Cley Next The Sea, John commanded a quite large detachment of German prisoners of war drafted in to help in the work . Reflecting a popular radio entertainment at the time, the pill box was immediately called " Arn't we Hall" (Something to do with a song about ~ aren't we all having a jolly good time).

One of John's characteristics was his unswerving honesty and straight dealing. This clearly shone through and at "Arnt we All" John was elected by his fellow soldiers and German charges to oversee the weekly sale of bomb casings and other wartime scrap iron collected on the beaches and taken by army lorry to a Norwich dealer. The proceeds were divvied out amongst the soldiers and prisoners alike.

It was at this time John met Sybil Philpott then at teacher training college in Norwich.

In due course after John had left the army, John and Sybil were married in Sybil's home town of Loughborough in Leicestershire with John's friend from scouting days, Desmond Mosely as best man. John and Sybil then went to Aberdeen where John had secured a place at the university under the ex-serviceman's scheme.

ABERDEEN

It had not been easy and John has always acknowledged the debt he owed his army colleagues who helped him through the interview panels and get the necessary maths passes, without which the

University could not have taken him.

At Aberdeen, while Sybil supported the couple through her work as a teacher in local schools,(a task not made easy by the contrast between Aberdonian and Leicestershire accents), John threw himself into University life. He played football for the college, became Deputy President of the Union and distinguished himself academically by the award of the Sutherland Gold Medal for best all round student in his year.(Incidentally John was the last recipient of the medal struck from the late professor's gold watch as the gold then ran out).

During this time tragedy struck John and his parents when his younger and only sister, Mary, died of a brain tumour aged just sixteen. Although several years younger than John, she had provided a softening influence on the household and her loss cast a very long shadow over his parents and Johns relationship with them, his father in particular, who was not an easy man.

FOREST OF DEAN

After Aberdeen John was appointed Junior lecturer at the Forester Training School at Parkend in the Forest of Dean, Gloucestershire.

Foresters are a lively bunch and with John close to the ringleaders there were many enjoyable incidents as the dents in the Cromwellian armour still hanging over the bar at the Speech House Hotel, the old court in the forest, bear testament.

John became assistant scout leader to the Parkend Troup and was closely involved in the building of a magnificent scout hut , Beaver Lodge on land donated by the Forestry Commission. Finished in 1956 Beaver Lodge still stands and has served many generations of Scouts, Cubs and Guides from the village.

It was in the Forest of Dean that John and Sybil's three sons were born .

CYPRUS First time

In October 1956 John was appointed by the Colonial Service as Principal to the Forestry College in the mountains of Cyprus where he was head of many staff and some forty to fifty students.

As well as his Greek and Turkish students, John was responsible for the training and welfare of men from such places as The Lebanon, Libya, Iraq, Jordan and British Somaliland.

Although principal, John did not have control of the college kitchens whose output was a very basic Greek diet with beans and olive oil with everything. To the students from Africa accustomed to a much plainer food this was sometimes a real difficulty and John and Sybil regularly entertained overseas students at home to give them a break from college fare.

This generous, open house to strangers, especially of other nationalities, which began in Cyprus was an enduring feature of John and Sybil's life throughout their many years overseas and has given rise to an astonishingly wide network of friends and acquaintances throughout the world.

Life in Cyprus during the troubles when Englishmen were the target of EOKA terrorists made John's position risky and he was appointed a special constable which with a uniform entitled him to carry a revolver for protection.

For a time at the peak of things he was provided with an armed escort, initially an armoured car but quickly scaled down to a couple of soldiers in the back of the car.

The uniform and revolver always remained in the cupboard, but on one memorable occasion there was an unexpected late night knock at the door. There had been a spate of shootings and John suggested to Sybil it might be better if she opened the door while he stood behind her with the gun, on the grounds that it was him they were after and they would not shoot her. History does not record Sybil's original words.

Fortunately the caller was a friend but the threat had been very real. Years later, one of John's ex colleagues who had been a junior lecturer at the college mentioned that he had been instructed by EOKA to shoot John should a suitable opportunity arise. Fortunately he somehow never found that opportunity.

There were also fun times. It was College tradition that after the summer graduation there was a cross country run for the students over an adjacent mountain, which ended in a great barbecue amongst the trees. The Salti race.

One year with the governor of the island to be present John suggested that each of the different Student nationalities should add to the celebrations by demonstrating a national dance or singing a traditional song.

John always lead from the front and drawing on his experience in Boy Scout Gang Shows opened the proceedings with a splendid solo rendition of the Happy Wanderer's Song complete with props and movements including hiking dress, hat, staff and ex commando rucksack.

Cyprus gained independence and the family returned to England in 1962.

BRECON & GRANTHAM

Eventually John was posted to Grantham where he was in charge of the forests of Rutland and South Lincolnshire.

A legacy of this time can be seen today as he was responsible for advising the highway authorities on the planting regime of the new Stamford and Grantham by passes. He also assisted in directing some of the new planting around Peterborough New Town.

This was when he acquired his modest collection of woodlands, including those at Stretton which became so important to him in early retirement.

LINDSEY PIE

Reflecting on the now acknowledged importance of conservation, especially of the countryside, John can be said to have been a pioneer in the movement.

During 1970, European Conservation year promoted by the Carnegie Trust, John engineered secondment from the Forestry Commission to become project officer for the Project for the improvement of the Environment in Lindsey, Lincolnshire. The Lindsey Pie.

His job was to promote conservation of hedgerows and trees in the countryside and to offset the bad effects of commercial farming by creating wildlife habitat in those parts of the field missed by the plough.

With Arthur Arbon, John published his book "Trees for the Farmer" and embarked on numerous other publications and lectures promoting these things. The results of the project were presented in London to the Trust before the Duke of Edinburgh and have now become accepted practice in Countryside management.

CYPRUS second time

From Lincoln John went briefly to the Forestry Commission in Basingstoke where he was in charge of running education and training courses before events in Cyprus intervened.

The heightening political tensions between Greek and Turk were so bad that the then principal of the forestry college, a Turk and also a graduate of Aberdeen, was forced to flee the island with his family at just a few hours notice.

The UN, with support of the Foreign Office, asked John to step in and take over the running of the college. So in 1972 John and Sybil were back in their old house in the mountains where his predecessor and old friend's clothes were still left hanging in the wardrobe.

The political situation worsened and while Sybil was at home sorting out the welfare of their teenage boys, John was caught up in the events of the Turkish invasion and partition of the Island.

John was uniquely placed to do good during the aftermath of the invasion when people could not travel. John's UN Diplomatic status gave him considerable freedom of access and he used this to the full visiting Greek, Turkish and retired English he knew to be trapped by the restrictions, assisting with ordinary things such as prescriptions, and generally providing a lifeline to the outer world.

John was a principled and courageous man, but he could be stubborn and this is reflected in the very tart note at the time from the head of the Cyprus Ministry of Agriculture who had got wind of what was going on and instructed John, firmly, to confine himself to running the college and not interfere in matters which did not concern him.

Of course John just carried on.

At this time John's Royal Engineer connections stood him well, when he was to liaise with a detachment of Sappers from the English base, brought in to open up new roads in the mountains and start the process of re-afforestation of areas bombed and burnt during the fighting.

John subsequently returned to England and was found a job planning the opening up the government forests of East Anglia to public access for recreation.

OBE & LIBERIA

This was when with Sybil and his very proud mother Mary present John was awarded his OBE at Buckingham Palace, for “services to Forestry”. Many would say the true citation should be wider, for services to his fellow man in a very difficult time.

Planning car parks is not much of a challenge and when the opportunity arose John immediately took the chance for another job abroad, this time to the Ministry of Overseas Development implementing and developing a training programme for foresters in The Mano River Union between Sierra Leone and Liberia, West Africa.

For the next three years John and Sybil lived amid a mining community in the Bomi Hills some way inland from the Capitol Monrovia. Aside from the physical privations of climate, the corruption and difficulties of day to day living, John was faced with huge professional challenges probably simply and best illustrated by the photograph of a forester felling a massive hardwood tree some ten to twelve feet across and, probably two hundred or more feet high just clad in shorts and flip flops.

Events became dark when the ruling regime was overthrown in a coup and the countryside left subject to roaming bands of soldiers, looting and terrorising.

With their European neighbours and John at the head, a plan was made to escape to Sierra Leone by commandeering a train and bulldozer from the iron mine to take them to the border.

Fortunately the soldiers pulled back but in an irony that John very much enjoyed, years later, his son Harry working for the United Nations refugee agency, commandeered a small fleet of Sierra Leone’s naval boats to take civil war refugees holed up in Monrovia back to their original country, Sierra Leone.

EARLY RETIREMENT & BURMA

John and Sybil returned to Cambridge in 1981 when fortunately he was offered early retirement and became free to take short term overseas contracts with government agencies.

This was when John visited Burma to tour outlying forest training posts to assess their viability and calculate what aid might be given. This took him up the Irrawaddy river to places no westerners had been for decades.

The trip came to an abrupt end at New Year when with his Scottish enthusiasm for first footing and Hogmanay, he tore his Achilles tendon whilst Scottish reeling with the ex pat community of Rangoon.

SOMALIA

Then came another call from the Ministry of Overseas Development to go to Somalia and re-invigorate and develop forester training and introduce the skills of charcoal burning using mobile kilns thus providing a better type of fuel for tribe’s people to cook with.

It was a great delight to John when the first important official to greet him at Mogadishu was one of his ex students from Cyprus, now a deputy minister of agriculture for the country.

As with all his postings Somalia was testing physically, mentally and politically. John had great integrity and real sense of Justice. This brought him up against the authorities sharply when John was put under pressure to award top exam marks to a wholly undeserving student, over the heads of much worthier candidates simply because the student was the relative of a minister in the government.

The deeper implication was that the top student would be expected to secure a good job in the agricultural service.

Characteristically John refused to be cowed by threats and ensured a just and proper outcome. Somalia has some rare and unique flora and fauna and typically John stepped in with great energy and commitment to chair the Somali Ecological Society who under his guidance set up a national park, the Balaad Nature Reserve, where by excluding sheep and goats, and stopping the cutting of trees, there was some hope of protecting the natural inheritance.

John worked hard to achieve this and was deeply saddened by the later descent of the country into civil war and anarchy when it seems inevitable this work will be undone.

It was also in Mogadishu, a staunchly Moslem place that John began to lead the tiny English community in a weekly expression of Christian worship that closely followed the Anglican rite. News of this reached the ears of Bishop Gaius who possibly fearing a break away sect sent a delegate to investigate. Of course all became clear and they were instantly great friends, the Bishop’s worries were resolved by John being made a lay reader in the Diocese of Egypt.

STRETTON

John and Sybil then returned to England and Stretton where John was on hand to administer his woods and be closer to his sons and their families.

John threw himself into local affairs including joining the committee of CPRE and in time chairing the Parish Meeting. Among the ideas he pushed was the twinning of Stretton with Bienville a village in Northern France.

This arose because when at school, an enlightened language master had encouraged John's class to correspond with a French pen friend. Thus started a chain of correspondence and friendship between John and his friend Jean Courtet that began before the second world war and was to last until now, over seventy seven years later.

Jean Courtet has loyally kept tracks of all his old friend's movements and on hearing that he had gone to Liberia, but not knowing where, with typical French insouciance wrote simply to Mr John Leefe at The Best Hotel in Monrovia ~ the letter duly arrived.

FINAL RETURN TO SCARBOROUGH

Gradually John found he was more and more involved with his properties in Scarborough and, needing to prepare for a less active retirement he and Sybil moved to Burniston.

Here John again threw himself into local matters, undertaking chairmanship of the Scarborough Branch of the Royal Engineers Association, The 40's club and the CPRE, forging many new friendships.

He also stepped in to assist with the restoration of St Mary's Church Hall here in Cloughton.

John expressed regret that he had not returned to Scarborough earlier when younger, and with more energy, he would have liked to have become involved in local politics. This may be a regret that Sybil does not share quite so much.

SUMMARY

John Leefe was an honest and true man and a loyal friend. His readiness to stick his neck out, to take the lead and his determination and single mindedness to see things through were great strengths but these did sometimes carry a cost on those closest to him. John has said that he could not have achieved the things he did without the support, accommodation and commitment of his wife Sybil to whom he was married for 62 years.

John could be stubborn and although quite willing to be challenged, was at times, more than a little forthright on matters that might perhaps have been better left unspoken or perhaps put more sensitively.

But over all of this his life's experience, made him a wise, generous and worldly man who was not afraid to step in with practical assistance and sound judgement and advice when needed.

This was especially true for us three sons and we are fortunate and proud to have had such a father.

John said he was lucky to have had the opportunities he had. That may be so but he certainly grasped and made use of those opportunities to touch the lives of many many people for the better.

We mourn his passing but are given great comfort from the legacy of a full life well lived.

William D Leefe
(eldest son of John D Leefe)