

John Batchelor 1920-2017

John began his life in Sutton, Norfolk in 1920 - a post war baby - his father having returned home from the war – where he had been an expert on Bailey Bridges. John was a bright lad; his sister was some 12 yrs older than him and played a big part in his upbringing as a young child. His mother was the Headteacher of the primary school he attended in Catfield. He was a good pupil and won a place at the Paston Grammar School in Nth Walsham, which meant leaving the home farm, and becoming a boarder - an experience which he didn't particularly enjoy. A newspaper cutting found by his nephew Michael, tells us that he received a school prize for the most "best improvement", but sadly the date wasn't on the cutting!

But being born in 1920, he was just the right age to "join up" as the end of the 1930s came along. John joined the RAF in 1938, as a Motor Engineer. He did his 10-week basic training at Linton on Ouse in Yorks and then was posted in a variety of places throughout the UK. It was in 1944, that he was sent to Italy. His favourite story from that time was the day on which he was told to go up Vesuvius and investigate the remains of a plane, which had crashed. He would tell the story in some detail, remembering all the names of those involved, but essentially this plane had approached Vesuvius from the wrong direction and had literally flown into the side of the volcano - there wasn't much wreckage to discover!

He stayed on in the RAF for a while after war ended, by which time he had risen to the rank of sergeant but he returned to civilian life and returned to Norfolk. He couldn't return to his mother, who by that time, along with her sisters was living in Norwich and had already let all the spare rooms out, so John went to live with his nephew Michael in Diss. While there he met Hazel at a dance – it was Hazel who asked him for a dance - John was never keen on dancing and described his style as "shuffling in the corner".

Hazel came from Burgh, where her father was the blacksmith - she was teaching at Earl Soham Primary School at the time- the wedding took place in Burgh Church – John lodged the night before in a friend's house here in G - it was that house which he was eventually to move into and spend the rest of his life in; the room he slept in was to become in time Nigel's bedroom!

John worked at Barnards in Stowmarket for a time, then Botwards – it was there that he let a jack slip and sever his 2 fingers! But in 1963 he began work as a heavy goods vehicle inspector working for the Ministry of Transport. He had high standards, his handwritten notebooks were meticulously kept and the handwriting would have made his HdT mother very proud!

When not working his passion were two-fold - his garden and heavy machinery. He liked nothing better than a day out at a steam rally and indeed courtesy of his nephew Michael, quite probably his last trip out was to the Henham Steam Rally. As they drove up, John wound down the window and told the marshall/steward that he was 97 years old and a bit disabled and could they park somewhere closer – they were duly waved on – but no sooner had Michael parked the car, than John was out of the door and off like a rocket – Michael and his wife had considerable difficulty keeping up with him. Even after 2 1/2 hours and a bit of a picnic, he was still going strong, wanting to visit the trade stands – it was in his words "a wonderful day out".

But this past year was to be perhaps the hardest he had ever encountered, the death of Nigel knocked him for 6 – but in his usual fashion, he was determined to deal with everything

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properly – and began the mammoth task of clearing Nigel’s sheds and his vast collection of engineering magazines. But what hit John hardest was discovering that Nigel, who had lived with his parents all his life, was a very wealthy man, indeed a millionaire. John found it hard to get his head around the fortune that Nigel had amassed. He shared with me on a number of occasions, the challenge of what was to be done with this fortune – and one morning he rang me and asked me how much did the church need we had a conversation and what I can share with you now, is that this village will be forever indebted to Nigel and John Batchelor, who have left to the Scouts, the Church, the Chapel and the Gurdon Trust, money and property in excess of 1 million pounds. During his lifetime John wanted no public recognition for this benevolence, but after talking with Michael, it was agreed that the village should know of the legacy that we have received and be able to express our gratitude.

Clare Sanders