

John Nicholas 1931-2017

John was a London lad who became an internationalist!

He was born at St George's Hospital at Hyde Park Corner, in the upmarket postal district of Kensington and Mayfair in 1931, and grew up in Battersea, not quite so upmarket in those days, but we couldn't afford to live there now!

His Dad worked for London Transport stationed in Tooting and that was where he came to the rescue of a lost and bewildered Yorkshire woman who later became his wife.

When war came, John and his sister Marg; 3 years his junior were evacuated, first to Liss in Hampshire, and most unhappily so, as Marg was bullied by the son of the house. They returned to London when John wrote to tell his parents of the situation.

In 1940 they were off again, to Venterdon in Cornwall, a placing with a family which lived in John's memory, with loving thanks, to the end of his days. He was delighted when a few years ago we were able to find and visit the house where the Sandicott family gave shelter to those two London children, and he continued to write to Mrs Sandicott until her death.

Back in Battersea, another sister, Audrey, had made her appearance and John loved taking her out in her pushchair, tearing around as though he was driving a racing car, apparently she loved it as well, nerves of steel!

From aged eight to fourteen he attended Lavender Hill School (one of the mob?) as did a certain Albert John Walker who became his dearest life-long friend.

On leaving school they both joined the Post Office as messenger boys. They were alike in so many ways, both sensitive and caring, and agreed on life's values, but totally dissimilar in other ways. While John did approve and appreciate the discipline and uniform requirements of the job, photographs show Albert always with his hat placed neatly, straight on his head as required, and John with his hat at a jaunty angle. That sums up the difference really.

John did his National Service with the Royal Engineers Postal Section in BAOR In Germany. At one time he was in charge of the station post office, at a posting on the German/Belgian border. His Sergeant told him that the job he was doing rated an upgrade to the rank of Corporal, but he would have to smarten up a bit, would he become a Corporal, or remain a scruffy Lance Corporal? John didn't hesitate "Scruffy Lance Corporal Sir".

On demob, he was promoted to Postman Higher Grade, aged 21 years, and continued his love affair with the post office. Particularly when he was approached to apply for service on the travelling post office (TPO), for John a dream job! He passed the Postal and Telegraph Civil Exam in 1952, but declined to take up the appointment being too excited about working on the TPO, a decision he never regretted.

In 1955 he married the girl he'd loved since their teens and their first child Susan was born, followed by Jane two years later and then Tony and Andrew in 1959.

During this time he was working on the South Western TPO Paddington to Plymouth, and Truro. On his rest days travelling on other TPO's from London, including to Carlisle. He loved the romance of the TPO, letters travelling through the night to far destinations connecting people. WH Auden's 'Night Mail' could have been written for John with its music by Benjamin Britten, words, music, travel, magic. Part of this enjoyment at the TPO came from the opportunity to walk and explore, particularly, Dartmoor and the countryside around Plymouth and the county we now call Cumbria. He never could understand why the rest of the crew would spend their 'stand down' time in the pub while he and another friend, Sid Drake, sought out small village cafes, or sometimes kindly ladies offering tea and cream scones!

However, John was always open to new experiences and in 1963 the family upended to become £10 poms and emigrating to Australia, Adelaide to be precise, aboard the Fairstar, a six-week journey which I know he enjoyed, I don't know about the children, but I never heard them complain?

John loved the Australian life-style, the sunshine, the feeling of open space and the lack of formality. I never heard him talk about 'the barbie', but he never was a natural 'he man'. Oh, and yes, he was employed at Adelaide Mail Exchange 2nd Class as a Sorter and then as a Postman at Seacliffe. He also bought his own milk round and enjoyed being his own boss.

However, his wife was missing her family and they returned three years later to settle in Cowes, I O W and then Southampton. Sadly, the marriage collapsed, and John moved in with his Dad at Wimbledon, returning to the post office as Reserve Acting Postman Higher Grade on all TPO's.

This was a most unsettling period of his life, missing his children in particular. He responded to an advertisement to share the driving and costs of travelling by Land Rover across Europe and parts of Asia, to Australia. He got as far as Delhi and was appalled by the poverty in India. He sold his share in the enterprise to make his way home.

Afghanistan fascinated him, it seemed like a different era, open fronted shops where men still worked

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out the bill on an abacus, and where when the long-distance bus ran into a ditch, the journey continued as though nothing had happened! The people, the prayer mats, the prayers, the hippies (this was the sixties) and it was them that persuaded him to try his first smoke. He hated it after that first tentative experience. And Kabul, it's situation in the mountains, he found it incredibly beautiful. He has grieved a lot about it lately. Returning to England with little (or no) money, he was always grateful to the people in Iran and Turkey who made him welcome.

Looking like an Asian Aesthete, he took a job at Lingfield Hospital School, for children with epilepsy and related problems. He quickly became a personality, involving himself in all aspects of life at the school, and as at everywhere he went, his laugh became famous. One of the Housemothers told me of the afternoon when she took a group of girls to the cinema in East Grinstead to see *The Railway Children*. A line from the Bernard Cribbens character set off a loud laugh. One of the girls turned to her and said 'Mr Nicholas is in the audience' not for the first time he'd been identified by his laugh in a cinema. It happened during his National Service days when the Sergeant ordered him out since no one could hear what was being said for the sound of John's laugh.

At Lingfield, he met and married Madge in 1972 and they emigrated to New Zealand in 1973. There he became, a postman. The New Zealand post office dress code booklet really suited John, it laid down what should be worn and with what, such as 'short sleeve shirts with shorts and walk socks'. Long sleeved shirts may be folded up to such and such a length' etc. Regulation hats are to be worn with whatever uniform applies at the time, nobody ever took any notice of it! They all wore which ever item of uniform clothing they chose. But not necessarily in the right order. It suited the scruffy Lance Corporal down to the ground.

Elizabeth was born in Whangarei (pronounced Fong Ah Ray) in 1975 and John was over the moon. My mother being terminally ill, we returned to England, living first with friends in Eastbourne and then moving to Aylesbury, where John's Dad and Audrey and her family lived. John's Dad loved him dearly, but was also very puzzled by him. How do you explain a son who sends you a message from Australia on half a coconut shell, perfectly covered of course by the correct postal charge!

We came to East Anglia in 1979 when I took a post with Suffolk County Council, and John began a new line of employment as a nursing auxiliary at Heath Road Hospital, working nights.

The post office was out. They'll only take you back three times!!

He thoroughly enjoyed his job at the hospital and made many friends and I've no doubt he contributed to the good work done there but I've always suspected that he really went there to have fun.

However, it was beyond the call of duty when Grunds(brr) was snowed in the first January we were here and he walked for three hours to get to the hospital for his shift!

John had always had a dream to visit South America. We had planned that he'd do it when he retired, but at that time we were renovating a Victorian house in Ipswich and money was disappearing at an alarming rate. We thought "He'd better go now" and he spent four months back-packing around Venezuela, Peru, the Amazon Basin, Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands and had a fabulous time. I'm so glad that he did it, the last of his long-distance journeys. I think it's fair to say that my mother was worried when John and I married. "He's a rover, he'll never settle down". But settle down he did in Grunds(brr). I really think he was never happier.

John embraced life and was always open to new experiences. He loved his family, the post office, cycling, travel and was fascinated by different peoples and cultures. He loved words and letter writing as those of you that have been on the receiving end of such missives can testify.

John's axiom was "Don't use a simple short word where a long complicated one would do". His other love was music, Jazz, big bands, all music from the 20s, 30s, 40s, all classics. They all moved him to tears at times. More than once we've had to sit quietly at the end of a church service while John recovered his equilibrium after the organ, the choir or both, had done their job.

John could not be described as a handyman, DIY was not his passion, although he would do what was necessary.

He didn't get on with gadgets, among which he included the telephone. He didn't care for cars, preferring buses and trains. He did have difficulty with modern life. IT was a mystery. He was not a sportsman although he loved walking and cycling and did occasionally enjoy watching a game of rugby on TV. He was a lovely person on whom to spring surprises. He was so naive on his 50th birthday for instance, he didn't notice, or question the amount of food and wine being prepared, or wonder why so many people turned up unexpectedly - one bearing a birthday cake!

A quote apropos of nothing, which I found in his diary.

"Also life is an explosion of joy, hilarity, happiness"

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He certainly made it so for the rest of us.

Madge Nicholas

Dad always believed that the journey was more important than the destination. Well I can't think of a better companion for that journey. Dad loved life, and I can't help but think that life loved him back. He was supportive welcoming, non-judgemental, and kind. But he also had a strong sense of playfulness which never left him, which is why he was loved by several successive generations. Dad had a real interest in people and places, which made him in a way, the perfect traveller. His methods were unconventional, his approach was individualistic, but his concern for others was genuine.

Dad explained to me once the philosophy behind happiness: 'Accept life in all its glories, the unknowns, the unexpected, the unplanned, the unexplained, the momentous moments. Do your own thing, remember your freedoms as a privilege, enjoy your friendships'.

Dad was a pathfinder, a pioneer. He usually took the road less-travelled, and he celebrated its every twist and turn. He showed me the way.