

## ROBERT JAMES "JIM" BLYTHE (K48-54)

*The following was kindly written by Jim in January 2008.*

I was born on January 9<sup>th</sup> 1938, just before breakfast, weighing in at just under 8lbs, in transit at 8 Pier Avenue, Southwold (in transit because my Father had sold our house and the next one wasn't quite ready). That month saw the greatest showing of the 'Northern Lights' that had been witnessed in living memory. The Adventists in the family had high hopes – but seventy years later the jury is still out!! I do try.

The youngest of three boys, my early childhood was dictated by WW2. Evacuated to Warsop, Nottinghamshire (don't remember), back to Southwold, Suffolk and then to Walsham-le-Willows, Suffolk (do remember). On return, soldiers were billeted in the house and the only other properties we had copped a homeward bounder bomb from Coventry. This destroyed totally one of them and shattered the next-door one. My Father put the survivors of the destroyed one into the only remaining habitable one and we were farmed to relatives until repairs had been effected to the middle one – quite some time as, obviously materials were hard to come by.

My Father, who also went to Fram (James William Blythe 1916) with his younger brother (William John Blythe 1916), had a traumatic childhood. His Mother ran the King's Head Hotel in Southwold for her parents, as had his Grandmother for hers, though they were only related through the fact that for three generations the Blythes had fish and game shops in Coventry and successively the Blythes had married various Landlords daughters whilst buying the fish. My Father was thus born in Coventry. Alas, the consumption swept through the family. When my Father was only nine he lost his Father to the illness – only 33- and a sister at 6, and a brother at 1 and his Father's brother at 37. All this in a space of just a short time prior to 1910. Thus the family decamped from the Midlands back to Southwold and Father and his one surviving brother went to Fram. Although the younger brother stayed clear of the TB, my Father was confined to Sanatoriums during and after the end of WW1, with venues as various as Oulton Broad and parts of Switzerland, where sleeping outside on the hillside was de rigour.

It was evident that my Father would be unable to undertake much in the way of physical work, because of his impaired lung capacity, and in 1921 the family sold The Kings Head and bought The Assembly Rooms, which they turned into a cinema. He ran this until ill health forced him to retire and sell in the late fifties. He died in 1965, being buried on his birthday.

During WW2 he was the Chief Observer of the Royal Observer Corps and his district boss was the OF Leslie Draper (1922-24).



In 1948 I gained a County Scholarship and was duly shipped off to Brandeston for its first term. I was the second boy to arrive, P. M. G. Stewart (K48-53) being the first. Any apprehension at being away from home was fairly quickly dispelled (I guess the evacuations helped). My two older brothers were boarding at St Giles High School in Norwich – which later moved to Langley. My oldest brother had not been accepted for Fram in 1940 when apparently a second language was required at the age of eleven. I imagine that this coincided with the evacuation, shortage of staff etc.. Next brother went with him later for ease of

logistics, as being at one school helped, transport, petrol shortages and the like. I vividly remember Mother trading our sweet coupons for clothing coupons just to get the Cashes nametags!

I loved Brandeston, with the excitement of the exploration of the Hall and grounds. Newly repatriated from the Army, 'treasures' were to be found everywhere. Spiral staircases, secret passages, hollow trees and the ponds with the most beautiful dragonflies there were properly organised games and swimming in the river and the



amazing loco parentis of D. D. Kittermaster – he understood that boys will be boys, and he encouraged that. Discipline was also firm when recommended by other masters and he meted it out with the back of the billiard table brush, or the eighteen-inch ruler. I complained to my Father and he mentioned it to D.D.K. who replied that one or two masters had never been boys.

Doodie Day was a grandfather figure (I never knew a grandfather) with a twinkle in his eye and desperation in his voice as he tried to impart skills to untrained fingers. Peter Arbon, the gardener's boy, kept me in fresh fruit when available. He knew my eldest brother through bell ringing.

I appeared to lack skills in team games, but on reading the mags of the time I seemed to do well at chess, billiards and table tennis (although Johnny Rankin (K47-56) was the real hotshot).

In the winter term of '49 mag "the most promising boxers were A J Martin (G47-55) and R.J. Blythe", I have to believe it; the written word is there. In the summer term of '49 I won the form prize and unusually choose an Agatha Christie book which was frowned on in some circles – but D.D.K. had a full collection of hers and used to lend them to me. He knew why I chose it. The three years slipped by and the College beckoned. 1951 sees one back at the bottom of the pecking order – a shock to the system! Rather too many beatings for minor offences – that was from the prefects – lots of PDs (pump drills on chapel organ) in the chapel and untold logs. The latter seemed to be a bit easy for me – I possibly knew them parrot fashion – and provided me with extra income as I sold the surplus.

1952 saw the Bob Gillett production of *A Midsummer's Night Dream* in the Castle. It was great fun until I found out that although I thought that I was Peaseblossom, in the programme I was listed as 'Other Fairy' – the shame of it!

I sat a couple of O levels early in '53 and topped up the rest in '54. My next brother up had joined the Merchant Navy and appeared to be having a great time so I followed suit. My Father bought me an indenture for £400, and this was repaid to me over four years as wages !! (I later found out that my brother's first voyage was 27 months and then he got three weeks leave); I fared better, only 13 months and then nine weeks leave. In 1956 I was in the last convoy to clear the Suez Canal before the invasion of Egypt, following the Crisis. The next convoy was stuck in the canal for 4 ½ months. We witnessed much aerial activity but had no idea why.

I paid for a correspondence course whilst at sea to help top up all the practical work I was learning and after three years I was promoted to third officer and £70 per month – what riches!!

In 1958 I sat successfully for my 2<sup>nd</sup> Mates Certificate and changed shipping lines for the Union-Castle Line. There followed six very privileged years sailing mostly to South Africa on those beautifully streamlined, lavender hulled vessels, carrying the Royal Mail both ways, after all, planes hadn't got their act together then; bullion fruit and wool to England, spirits and machinery and manufactured goods to the Cape. The cherry on the cake was the eight hundred or so passengers each way. It couldn't have been, but it seemed they were all beautiful women. I fell in love with them all and us, in three different uniforms a day, seemed to have a reciprocal effect, particularly with weather as a catalyst. Hence I drifted from engagement to engagement – only seven times.



1963, alas, saw gin go up in price to 3/9 a bottle, and tonic to 1/- a big bottle. It was scandalous and possibly persuaded me to retire when my contract needed renewing in '64. It could be that the pace of life was too hectic for me physically; it certainly was for my 'tiger'!! Who wants a navigating officer on dry land?? I bought a new mini-van and an airbed and off I went to the Continent for 3 months. (Benidorm had only two hotels).

When I came back I joined the animal feed compounders, Richard Silcocks. I trained in Cheshire and was an assistant to the Agent covering Bedford and Northampton. I was then promoted to S. E. Essex and I met my wife who was running the family Nursery, but she also had 500 hens. Eighth time lucky!!

I was promoted to Acle, Norfolk with Silcocks (Edrich and Charlie Wharton (G44-52) country) and we were to be married and buying a bungalow in Blofield, Norfolk. June's father had a



tumour on the brain and her leaving the Nursery would have put the family in a very difficult position. Thus I resigned from Silcocks in September 1965 and became a nurseryman instead. We had met in the March and married in the September. Just nine months later my Father-in-Law died, and twelve days later our first child, Wendy, was born, followed fifteen months later by Fiona and then two further years saw James appear. (I then discovered what was causing all this and put a snip to it!!)

Fortunately I found being a nurseryman very agreeable and very interesting. It was amazing what I learnt in the next 40 years. Of course I had a good tutor in June who, after all, had only the one job – the nursery being started by her Grandfather in 1899.

Once the children were established at school (James (K79-86) the only one at Fram), June got the urge to grow individual plants to show standard, rather than the commercialism of mass production.

In the spring/summer/autumn seasons she exhibited with much success and we decided to go down the route of exhibiting nationally and selling young plants of new varieties for the collector markets. We started locally and then to the County Agricultural shows and finally the RHS shows in Westminster. All this time she was increasing the range of Fuchsias. We ended up with 400 good varieties, having trialled over 4,000.

Her plants were always superb, but nobody had trained me to display them en masse to advantage. I was the weakest link. However I soon learned the ropes and we started getting the awards that the plants deserved. The invitations to exhibit flowed and we showed at Chelsea in 1982 for the first time. By this time I was attending 40 shows a year, and apart from two, all on my own. She grew it and I showed it and sold it. It was the best advert one could have.

By the mid 1980s I was getting invites to RHS Committees and ended up on the Panels for Westminster, Chelsea and Hampton Court as well as the General Show Committee. In 1984 we sold the retail side of the nursery in Essex, which enabled us to concentrate more on the shows. Four years later we sold the rest to expand the retail side, and moved to Bacton, Stowmarket, within view of John Gooderham (K44-53). Here we purpose built a nursery for the two of us to wind down to retirement. It didn't quite work that way, as we had to expand to stand still. Ten years after the move we sold up and retired. A trained young couple took over and still have the business to this day.



We moved to Stowmarket in 1998 and after four further years we came to Reydon, Southwold – a stone's throw from where I was born.

In retirement I have helped the RHS at the Chelsea and Hampton Court shows, and the BBC Gardeners World Live. In addition, I qualified as a Judge (horticultural), so that I am able to put back into the trade I grew to love, some benefit of my experience.

Retirement isn't all it's cracked up to be – I'm just too busy. In the winter I play a little golf at the Southwold Club that I joined sixty years ago. In August when the family are down we sail our model boats in the pond as has happened since 1892 – no motors of course then and now either – relying purely on the wind. Alas, now I have the hang of it, I can't get round before the boat does (the boat isn't any faster!)



My main love outside the family is of course the SOF and the College. The Red Letter Day for me is Armistice Sunday at the Chapel to which I am privileged to be invited. It stirs the soul and continually reminds one of the debt that we owe to so many who laid down their lives for us all – including so many OFs.

In 1965 I gave up rugby when I got married, and a short time after became secretary of the OFGS. I held this post for some time and graduated to Council and then had the honour to be President 1983/85, following in the large shoes of Neville Bromage. My time was made easy and enjoyable by all the support I had from my predecessors. On moving back to Suffolk I was invited to join the Governors and thus started a further 17 years of fulfilment and challenge and this included being a representative on the Health and Safety Sub-Committee. These were thrilling times of development at both the College and my beloved Brandeston. 'Age concern'

(brought in by Jim Smith in 1983, I think) saw me retire in March 2005. I still watch developments with pride and glory in the success of the pupils.

I am a Trustee of the SOF, but modern Charity Laws need a sharper mind than mine and retirement from this must be just around the corner. I have done my best, and enjoyed it all.

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Finally, the photo below was taken at the Chelsea Flower Show and appeared in Hello Magazine in 1993 – note the OF tie!

