

Together highlights of a remarkable life at the cutting edge of news

How did a poor boy from a working class home in Watford "with no qualifications or sense of direction" finish up with a top TV job, living in a magnificent house in a millionaires' enclave in East Sheen?

John Parkin, now 70 - expelled from school at 13 for wandering the fields when he should have been in class - concludes with self deprecating humility, "Fate smiled upon me".

"I was good with people. I was reared in a different world. I doubt if it could happen today."

John retired early at the age of 54 in 1992 after nearly two decades as senior film editor for ITN News and immediately turned his hobby, water colour painting, into a second career - and went on to sell hundreds of his works.

He attributes his rags to riches life to being streetwise.

"I was not good at anything when I was at school and failed all my exams. I played truant a lot as what I loved most of all was walking in the countryside and just wasted to be observing nature - the birds, the trees, the plants."

Interviewing John Parkin was a curious experience for me as we have so much in common.

A gay man who knew his sexual orientation from the age of seven, he too viewed a career in showbiz as a way of escape from a conventional upbringing as he knew he could not deliver his parents' expectations.

His father used to drive an open front bus around the Elmslee area with no windscreen and only a canvas apron to protect him from the elements.

"I remember it was not powerful enough to carry passengers up hills and so often they would have to get out and walk to the top. I still have his notification of a summons for speeding - exceeding 12 miles an hour."

When his father was seriously ill with stomach ulcers and the family had no income they survived with help from the neighbours who used to put small donations through their letter box. A different world indeed.

Because of his constant absence from school his headmaster suggested there was no point in him staying on any longer and he was better off being put out to work - even though he was not yet 14, the age at which you could legally leave.

"My mother accepted that and took me down to the youth employment officer. Apart from bricklaying, carpentry, plumbing, he could only suggest window dressing because of my love of art. But I could cope with mental arithmetic and spelling - and so finished up in the wages office of a local factory for 57s 6d a week. (Again a parallel with my own life as I worked in the wages office of the Wilmot Breeden factory in Bridgewater?)

"It gave me some money and I was able to help support my family but I hated the work. I used to hear the sound of the rehearsal of the Watford New Revue club coming from the hall above the Co-op and so one night I wandered up the stairs and was offered a job singing with the cabaret - which I enjoyed tremendously."

His ambitions to tread the boards were curtailed when he was called up and despatched to an RAF camp near Cambridge. Here the teenager with no qualification and no experience beyond calculating tax tables and putting banknotes into brown envelopes found himself in Air Traffic Control.

"I just don't know why I was given that chance but I proved to be quite good at it and I was soon plotting flight paths and involved in highly responsible decisions."

He enjoyed his two year as an airman - "The uniform was very glamorous and I was very popular

when looking for partners" - but when he found himself back in Civvy Street he faced a new dilemma. How to earn a living that would satisfy his creative urges.

He tried eight different clerical jobs - all of which he loathed. The smell of the greasepaint was still in his nostrils and because of the proximity of Elmslee he knocked on many doors to try and find an opening in the film business - but got nowhere.

Then at 23 he saw an advertisement in the Evening News for a clerical officer wanted by British Movietone News to book in the rolls of film, take them to the labs and then dispatch them - "It was a way of getting in and I jumped at it."

From that moment he never looked back. He quickly became friendly with the film editor who liked him and suggested he should apply for a vacancy - which he got. After two years as assistant editor in the cutting rooms working on cinema newsreels he eventually found himself as a senior editor - as the result of a United Press/ ITN merger.

"In those days you had to edit the black and white film from negative. You never saw a positive version as that process was at the end and deadlines would not permit it. There was no sound tracks as they had to be done separately. They were very exciting years and everything was moving forward rapidly."

He went on to be responsible not only for News at Ten but Roving Report, a news documentary circulated worldwide.

Meanwhile he had met his partner David, with whom he still shares his life, and they stumbled upon Richmond.

"We tried to buy a flat in the Finchley Road but were turned down because the Residents' Association did not want to be associated with two men living together."

A friend had moved into Teddington and so they

started looking around there and eventually found a flat on the Upper Richmond Road with central heating - a new feature for 1968 - where they met so such obstacle.

By the 1980s when they were both pursuing highly successful careers, they decided to look for a house. "A lady friend said there was something that would suit us in Temple Sheen Road. When she explained there were foxes in the garden and Rudolf Nureyev was a neighbour we decided it was right for us."

In fact the sale was never finalised as the owners kept delaying and they stumbled upon their present home in Christchurch Road which was the coach house of the mansion belonging to the Victorian architect Bloomfield who designed Christ Church.

The original house which is alongside has been converted into two huge dwellings. At one time it was occupied by Cecil Rhodes' nephew and his twin daughters. The women both contracted diabetes and were blind and had to sell.

John retired early because the scene was changing radically in the television world and "video editing became a matter of button pushing which was not for me".

"I got a chance to take an early pension and a lump sum and I have never had a moment's regret. I was in the newsreel business in its most exciting and formative years. After retirement I was able to spend more time painting and found it relatively easy to sell my work. I also could concentrate on my garden."

"I have been very fortunate in my life to have had a wonderful career, a beautiful home and loving partner."

"Like many others of my generation, I wake up each morning grateful for the opportunities I had. You could not really ask for more."

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