

JOHN NOBLE, AS I REMEMBER HIM.

I first met John when I started at Godalming Grammar School in 1949. He was my form teacher and also taught us mathematics. He had only just left school himself and was doing some teacher training before going to University. He was a quiet man and the boys in the class did lead him quite a dance, as eleven year old boys do, so I suspect he was probably relieved to be going off to start his University degree course in Cambridge.

We were all very excited to learn later that while he was at Cambridge he had come into contact with Vaughan Williams, the composer, who was very impressed with his voice and who I believe wrote a special piece for him. After that, and no doubt with encouragement from Vaughan Williams, John made the decision to become a professional singer. He did, however, still come back to school to appear at various soirees for retiring teachers and also to take part in Gilbert and Sullivan productions. I have fond memories of playing Phoebe in Yeoman of the Guard when John played the part of Jack Point in 1954.

I met him a few more times at special school occasions but then didn't see him again until years later. I was living in Broadstairs and noticed in the local paper that he was coming to a theatre in Ramsgate to sing with his wife, Angela, and a military brass band. I booked tickets for myself and my husband and as I knew the theatre manager I contacted him to ask if he would get a message to John for me.

It was an excellent show and afterwards he and Angela came back to our home where until the small hours of the morning we heard many stories about events that had taken place during his career. He had travelled all over the world, singing in oratorio's and concerts in countries which included Russia, America and much of Europe. He often sang at the Albert Hall but on one especially memorable occasion he sang there at 'The Last Night of the Poms', with Barry Humphries as Dame Edna. It was, of course, a typical Dame Edna take off of the famous annual 'Proms' event. Apparently John and the other lead singers had been instructed to be entirely straight and treat it like a normal serious professional performance but to expect anything to happen, and it did. John was announced for his solo and went down to set up his music on the podium as is normal with oratorio singing. The orchestra had started playing his intro when Dame Edna suddenly stopped them. He turned to John and asked him why he needed the music and why he hadn't taken the trouble to learn the words. Of course, Barry Humphries knew that it was traditional to use music but John had to keep a straight face and enter into an off the cuff conversation with the famous comic character in front of the huge Albert hall audience. It must have been nerve wracking and difficult not to laugh but John loved it. Hours and many stories later he and Angela returned to their home in London and I didn't see them again for some time.

After the death of my husband I moved back to Guildford and when I had settled in I went to visit Ward Needham, the teacher who had been the main instigator of the successful musical productions at the school. After a pleasant trip down memory lane with him I decided it would be nice to invite him and Mrs Needham to my home to thank him for all he had done to encourage us with our singing. I asked Colin Beattie

to help me and it was arranged that he would drive them from Godalming to my flat in Guildford.

I then contacted John and asked him to be the guest of honour. He was delighted as he, like us, felt that he owed a lot to Ward for the encouragement he had given him during his younger years. It was at a time when he was travelling all over the world and he had few spare evenings in his diary, the first was two weeks later and then nothing for three months. I chose the earlier evening and it was duly arranged.

We knew that Ward hadn't seen John for many years so as we wanted it to be a surprise for him, we didn't tell him that John was coming. On the day it was thick fog and as John and Angela had to drive from London I didn't think they would make it but they did and were sitting in the lounge when Ward arrived. He was over the moon to see John and during dinner John relayed all his interesting experiences for Ward's benefit. We then drank a toast to Ward for all the encouragement he had given us.

The evening was a great success and I had a lovely letter from Ward thanking me. But then two weeks later another letter arrived, this time from Mrs Needham, telling me that sadly Ward had died. Obviously she was shocked and distressed as although he was in his eighties he hadn't seen a doctor for years. She was so pleased that he had seen John again and that we had all thanked him for the influence he had had on our lives. It was fortunate that I had arranged it for the earlier date or we would not have managed to give our final thanks to Ward.

I moved again after that and once more lost contact with John and now it is him who has gone. I regret so much that I didn't make more effort to keep in touch. He was a kind man and it was a privilege to have heard his wonderful rich, velvety baritone voice.

Godalming Grammar School must be proud that one of its pupil's was a very successful singer who during his lifetime gave so much pleasure to so many people throughout the world.

Joan Palmer (nee Charleson)