

John (Jack) Johnston

12th February 1922 – 10th October 2004



As Robin Hood lay on his deathbed, he called out for his friend,
“Little John, Little John, fetch me my trusty bow”. Little John obliged.
“Little John, Little John, bring me my straightest truest arrow”. Little John scuttled off
and brought back Robin’s finest arrow.

Robin hauled back his drawstring and with his final breath cried out,
“Whereverso this arrow may land, there shall I be buried”.
....So they buried him on top of the wardrobe!

(Don’t worry Uncle John – your arrow landed in Shiregreen.)

I was about six years old when Uncle John carved those words of laughter on my memory and to this day I have not met a finer raconteur. His stories of past and present, his jokes and tales and ability to recall happenings and situations with lavish embellishment is legendary.

At the tender age of six I had thought perhaps Little John was little but yet, in stature, my uncle was so much bigger than me. Why was he called little when he was so big? In name and in stature my uncle was big and strong and he could do anything. Both Johns, no matter the confusion of a six year old, were heroes.

My father once told me that Johnston did not mean ‘son-of-John’ but ‘strong John’ as in ‘stone’. The man we come to lay to rest today is deserved of that handle. A pillar of the community and a bright and shining example of the way we should all live our lives. Loving, caring, sharing. A brother, a son, a husband, an uncle, a great uncle, a godfather, a colleague and a friend to a long list of individuals. He was a great dad too. I say that because he became my rock after my own father died some twenty years ago.

John was born in 1922. In the days of the great depression his mother and father would have struggled to keep family and soul together. As good catholic parents they prayed that their son might one day become a priest. They sent him off to a seminary, St. Peter's, Freshfields near Liverpool. Not John's happiest days but nevertheless a valuable learning experience. He decided that the priesthood was not for him and, with the aid of colleagues and catapult, made his bid for freedom.

There would be some years of apprenticeship before he could call himself an engineer but the outbreak of war carried him on the fast-track toward this goal. Spanner, wrench and mallet at his side he gave his life to the Fleet Air Arm and proudly served his time aboard her majesty's ship in the far-east. All this time not knowing how his mother and father were coping back home during the blitz or how his little brother was faring in Burma. Fortunately reunited after the war it was a rebuilding process of family ties and friendships. John started work with the Railways.

It would have been as youngsters when John first gazed upon his beautiful Josephine who was to become his lifelong partner. As one put it to me, "Josie was the posh bird at your dad's school". They were married in 1951 and set up home in Burngreave Road, moving to Firth Park and then Norwood Road.

Uncle John and Auntie Josie became "the item". It always was, is and shall be. Josie worked in the bank while John fixed and built bridges. Aspiring professionals and so pedestaled by their nephews and nieces. We remember fondly their devotion to gardening but more vividly as children; the swing, the apple tree, home-grown fruit and vegetables, home made jam, freshly baked bread and, of course, the sweet tin. They really were the working goode-life.

John's career continued upward as did Josie's. Josie did branch away from the bank later to create 'Josephine' a shop for ladies fashion in Hillsborough where John was also gainfully employed from time to time.

John retired at sixty-five after an exemplary career with British Rail. As most would do...put feet up and take a well earned rest. Not John! A year later he was busier than ever. Industrial Tribunals, Children's Panels, Citizen's Advice Bureau, the allotment, the shop. There was always something to be done. Active, interested and interesting, John had boundless energy and would always be willing to go that extra mile to help someone or accomplish something. In particular his work for the CAB was a reflection of his values and the way he lived his life. He was renowned for his insistence on people treating each other with fairness and equality. However in exchange for this fairness, he would push that bit further with his own generosity. You could guarantee that he would be first at the bar to buy a round of drinks or to offer to foot the bill at the end of a meal. There was never a visit, in the old days, that went by without one of his special handshakes when he'd slip us a wink and a couple o' bob and whisper, "Don't tell your mum".

Josie's admiration for her husband is summed up in these words, which are quoted from her synopsis of 26 years of 'Josephine'.....

"... praise for the help given by my husband. Without being in any way connected with or interested in fashion, I could not achieve my modest success without his ever-present help. Not only can he do anything, mend anything, paint anything, but he does so willingly, which is just perfection in my eyes."

Over the last twenty years my friendship with both John and Josie has become stronger and deeper than would normally have been the case with uncles and aunts. They were just such lovely people. One can only admire their solid relationship, heap praise on their lives and observe in awe the love shared between them. My wholehearted thanks do go out to Auntie Josie for keeping John alive so long. He was very well looked after.

I'd like to take this opportunity to convey to you how much I have enjoyed knowing my Uncle John and to say that I'm glad to have been acquainted with such a gentleman. He really is my hero and true friend.

Let's take this moment also to reflect on his life and their lives and to celebrate both their achievements in this world knowing that their faith in God will carry them both safely into the next life.

I'd like to tell them both to rest now but I suspect that they will already be planning their next moves....

Simon Johnston
15th October 2004



