



A dip into my father Strahan Soames' archive

by Sue Soames

I have 16 scrapbooks compiled by my father containing over 300 of his published articles. He loved books and writing and read English at Oxford University after the war. While his working life was as a civil servant in the Pilotage Department of Trinity House, he spent a lot of his free time writing a variety of articles which were published between 1940 and his death in 2000.

I remember many Saturdays when he set off with his notebooks and returned home to sit in a quiet room, definitely not to be disturbed, to write up interviews. These were carefully typed up in double spacing and handed to my mother for proof reading and comment. He always insisted on correct spelling and I still have a well-worn copy of *The Little Oxford Dictionary* I was given at the age of eight, as well as various other inherited dictionaries of quotations and thesauruses.

Two thirds of the articles are profiles of dinghy sailors and yachtsmen and women. These started in *The Yachtsman* magazine in 1962 and included Jack Holt and Peter Scott. They continued in *Yachts & Yachting* from 1969 to 1994 and Crab Searl of Emsworth Sailing School and round the world racer Sir Peter Blake are included amongst some other well-known names.

There are also many personal pieces about sailing in Chichester Harbour firstly in *Emsworth One Designs*, then *Alchemy* the Albacore and *Yorick* the Mirror dinghy. *Alchemy* was built in Fishbourne on the Isle of Wight and my parents sailed her all the way back to Emsworth. I remember the relief of seeing her red sails appear as they slowly came up the harbour. We had many family days out sailing to East Head for picnics, and I learnt to sail in her. After many years she returned to the Island, to the Classic Boat Museum.

Yorick was often greeted with shouts of 'Alas, poor Yorick' but the name was chosen for the continuation of the quotation from Hamlet

"a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; he hath borne me on his back a thousand times".

Not all the articles are about sailing or Emsworth, as I found particularly when browsing through the earliest volumes.

The very first piece is 'Two enthusiasts and a Morgan' published in *Motor Cycling* magazine in 1940, for which my father was paid £2. 18s. and 9d! This three-wheeled car was owned by his older brother Martin and they had great adventures driving it on the then much quieter roads. Martin became a mechanic and racing driver, and also competed in RAC hill-climbing trials with my father and their elder brother Gordon squeezed into his Ford V8 as balancing weight.

Gordon and Martin joined the RAF and were sadly killed in World War II and my father would never talk about them. However, he did later search the South Downs near Petersfield and found the hills they had climbed and wrote a rather wistful piece for *Hampshire* magazine (published in 1994) about his search and describing the event held on Boxing Day back in 1937. I do have some information about the brothers – Gordon was a medical student training to follow in his father Dr R M Soames' footsteps, and it would be interesting to research more into Martin's car racing.

There are some articles giving glimpses of my father's boyhood in Emsworth such as 'Nostalgia is not what it was', and 'Last Holiday' about the summer of 1940 before

he was called up into the Army (the three brothers did meet on Thorney Island RAF base at that time).

My father continued to be interested in motor racing and cars. One of the earliest profiles is of Stirling Moss. Another is a report of the 1957 London to Brighton Veteran Car Run when he travelled in a 1903 White Steamer – yes, a steam-powered car, which completed the journey in three and a half hours! He also wrote about visits to Brooklands, and the 1960 Grand Prix at Silverstone when British cars finished first, second and third.

Other early pieces are a miscellaneous mixture: travelling from Euston to Manchester on the footplate of the Royal Ulster Rifleman steam engine, a family holiday in France, and profiles of Sue Ryder, Olympic showjumper Dawn Palethorpe, and Jack Bryce the test pilot who flew the VC10 on its maiden flight in 1962.

I am more aware of my father's more recent writing in the *Hampshire* magazine, which includes a report on the raising of the *Mary Rose* in 1982 when he had a grandstand view of events from the press boat a few hundred meters away from the giant lifting barge. He also wrote about *HMS Warrior* coming into Portsmouth in 1987.

Emsworth continued to feature with a piece titled 'The Emsworth rope trick' in 1985 about the rope shop that was in The Square and sold all sorts of things from macrame to dog leads to rope for boats. And, of course, information on Emsworth Museum – the opening in 1988, and a visit by American P G Wodehouse fans in 1996. My father was Chairman of the Emsworth Maritime & Historical Trust from 1994 to 1997.

It has been fascinating to look back through this archive and dip into some of the articles. I need to go back into the loft and read some more!

Sue is a steward and member of the EMHT committee.