

John Bernard Hawkins

12 October 1932 - 19 July 2017



When I first met John, his name was Jim. That is because I knew him through his naval activities and the Royal Navy has a long-standing tradition of changing the name carefully chosen by parents to one felt more suitable by shipmates. Naturally in the Navy, J Hawkins must be Jim Hawkins so Jim he became.

John was born in Worcester in 1932, a brother for Anthony, to Bernard and Amy Hawkins. Amy was formerly Amy Simmons from Athlone in Ireland.

In their primary years both boys attended St. Mary's Convent School in Worcester where they were taught by the nuns. John moved on to Worcester Grammar School for a few years and then at age 13 went to Bryanston School in Dorset.

Bryanston was followed by National Service in the Royal Navy. His talents were quickly recognised and following a period as 'Mr Midshipman Hawkins', he was commissioned. He loved the Royal Navy and its traditions and people.

On completion of National Service to keep in touch with the Navy, he joined what was then the RNVR. This was when our paths first crossed

and for me was the beginning of a 50-year friendship with him and his lovely hospitable family.

At this stage, I would like to talk about John's naval reserve activities before returning to his civilian life. He was talented enough to find time for the Naval Reserve alongside family, education and professional commitments. When I read the details of his non-naval activities I am amazed and wonder where the energy and time came from.

I first met him aboard HMS Venturer which was the sea going minesweeper attached to Severn Division. I was a very junior officer, hundreds of years younger than him of course. He joined the ship from Birmingham for a passage from Bristol to Portsmouth as the Navigator. I learned that he was ex proper Royal Navy and clearly very knowledgeable.

The first thing I noticed about Jim was that he was clearly impoverished in that he was unable to afford a belt or braces. He held his trousers up with an old bit of rope. I was later to learn that he just liked it that way and continued to do so throughout his career. To this day I meet old friends who enquire after him with the rider "Does he still hold his trousers up with ginger string?"

I took an immediate liking to Jim. He taught me a lot about navigation, he was a master of the art. I admired his gentle and witty manner. There was no side to him and he treated all as his equals. It was always a pleasure to do a long middle watch with him, there was never a shortage of things to discuss or, most importantly, to laugh about. The Ships Companies held him in great affection and esteem.

He did not want to practice medicine at sea so forgot to mention to their Lordships at the Admiralty that he was a qualified doctor. He wanted to serve as a navigator and do seamanlike things. Of course, the crew knew the truth which lead to some very strange things being heard. "Quick Able Seaman Jones has crushed his finger, where is the Navigator", or "Where is Doc Hawkins, I need to know the time of high water and moonrise at Falmouth?"

Always popular was Doc Hawkins Jew's Harp which was something he could play with great skill and was always in demand at ships company parties.

On one memorable occasion at the height of the cold war we were alongside in a high security naval dockyard. Jim went ashore to check on landmarks and leading lights to aid our safe departure. He was dressed in a three-quarter length leather coat, Astrakhan Hat, red towel as a muffler and carrying a pair of binoculars. He wandered round the entire establishment looking every bit the stereotypical spy scribbling in his notebook. He returned an hour later to say that he had been challenged by nobody!!

The highlight of his RNR career was when in 1973 he navigated HMS Venturer across the Atlantic to Canada to join the celebrations for 50 years of the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve.

I did have cause to doubt his bedside manner on one occasion. He was staying with me in my bachelor house in Bristol to attend a mess dinner at HMS Flying Fox which was our headquarters. Unfortunately, I drew the short straw and had a bad Mussel. I will not describe the illness that followed but it is not an experience I wish to repeat! Jim bundled me into a taxi and took me home. Shortly after getting home we were sitting in my lounge. He was reading and I was just feeling miserable and wondering what I had done to deserve it. Suddenly I started the odd twitch which I found quite alarming. I said, "Hawkins you are supposed to be a doctor, why am I twitching?" He said "Look you have been poisoned. There is nothing left inside you so taking you to the BRI for a stomach pump would be a waste of time. At this stage, you are either going to die or not" and with that he coolly continued flicking through pages in Readers Digest.

I did not die and am happy to realise that I was probably one of his early successful cases. After all he correctly diagnosed the problem and considered what action to take. The decision to do nothing was obviously the right one because I am here 40 years later to tell the tale.

Before leaving matters nautical I should tell you that after retirement from the Naval Reserve he found time to navigate and teach in Jubilee Trust Sailing Barques on several occasions. These vessels are 30% manned by handicapped persons.

Returning to life ashore, on completion of National Service he joined his father in the family timber/joinery business and was sent for training with Meggitt and Jones who were a large timber merchant in Cardiff. Whilst in Cardiff he played rugby for Glamorgan Wanderers.

On return to the family business in Worcester it became apparent that his heart was not in Timber Sales. His very generous father said, "You had better go to Medical School, it is what you have always wanted"

The next year or so was spent studying for A Level Physics to qualify for entry to Birmingham Medical School. Leisure time was spent playing rugby and bobbing about looking dashing in his Morgan sports car. During this time, he was fortunate enough to break 2 or 3 bones when playing Rugby. I am now quoting his wife Rosemary - "Sometime later whilst awaiting an X-ray at Worcester Royal Infirmary he met a slim radiographer called Rosemary Squire". Clearly there was some chemistry going on because following this meeting he "loitered with intent" outside Worcester Cathedral where Rosemary was at choir practice and invited her on their first date.

Apparently, the line was "I'm invited to a barn dance on Saturday and have no-one to take, will you come?". Rosemary says his sheer cheek (and the Morgan) won the day.

1958 Saw the start of study at Birmingham Medical School where he met several lifelong friends. He shared a body in Anatomy with 3 of them and won the Anatomy Prize.

In 1959, as he was now penniless he sold the Morgan and married Rosemary. They converted a narrow boat (a "Joey" day boat coal carrier) into a home. Moored behind Selly Oak Hospital it was a short walk along the towpath to Medical School. Although he won the Begley Surgery prize he opted to become a Physician.

In 1963, he sat and passed the Conjoint examination just in time to tell his dying father that he had passed and Qualified at Birmingham later that year.

1961 saw the birth of Pippa. She was a real boat baby who was frequently tied by her reins to the chimney when the vessel "Thrombus" was moved around. I am sure that John's naval training ensured that an appropriate and secure knot was tied on these occasions! However, I have scoured the Admiralty Manual of Seamanship and cannot find an approved method for tying baby's reins to a chimney. He must have used his own initiative!

In 1962 the family moved ashore to Selly Oak and the stork was very busy. 1963 saw the arrival of Catherine followed by Bee in 1964 and Abi in 1967

1964 - 1970 saw a variety of House jobs, SHO jobs and Registrar at Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Kidderminster Hospital, East Birmingham Hospital and Birmingham Children's Hospital and finally his Consultant Post.

In his years as a junior doctor he produced and performed in many Hospital Christmas Shows. One at the Children's Hospital and several at East Birmingham Hospital. "Ratman and Bobbin", "Ali Baba and the 40 Indian Registrars", "Babes in the Wood", "Jack and the Beanstrap" and, my favourite, "Pus in Boots" to name but a few. All these productions lampooned senior staff who had to sit in the front row and take their medicine.

John got his comeuppance when his turn came as the top man. The juniors had a wonderful time picking on this "Carnation eating, Morgan driving miniature power house"

With Brian Robinson John pioneered Renal Dialysis in Birmingham.

He was Consultant in Renal Disease and Hypertension and Consultant for Medical Disorders in pregnancy at Marston Green Hospital.

In 1992 aged 60 John retired from his Renal Medicine Consultancy not to play golf but to train as a GP. He wanted to spend more time

with patients and less time with clip boards and at meetings. This involved him having to start all over again as an SHO in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Heartlands Hospital to gain the necessary experience in that field for General Practice. He happily trailed as a junior at the back of ward rounds behind his former colleagues to achieve this aim.

He became a trainee GP at a practice in Lichfield and then joined the Kingsbury Practice.

The rules made him retire at 70 but again not golf and slippers for our man John, instead he had another ambition! He enrolled on a course in bookbinding at Leicester University.

Much to Rosemary's chagrin, when they went to the Symphony Hall she benefited as a Senior Citizen whilst he used his student concession card.

John and Rosemary also spent 20 very happy years singing with the 'Atherston Choral Society' and 'Light Harmony'.

It has been quite impossible to cover everything that this amazing man achieved in his lifetime. He had so many varied interests and ambitions and never wanted to stop learning. He loved life and was loved by all who knew him.

I had the pleasure of seeing him shortly before his final stroke when he and Rosemary visited us in Bristol on-route for a holiday on Exmoor. I was very pleased to see that whilst the first strokes had clearly left him a little shell shocked he was still his charming and witty old self. He wrote to tell us how much they had enjoyed their Exmoor holiday.

Extracted from Andy Harris' eulogy at Jim's funeral on 27th July 2017