

# John Mervyn Jarvis

**23rd May 1933 ~ 3rd March 2019**

John's story begins in Portsmouth in 1933. He was the only son of Kathleen and Jums. Sadly, he lost his father at just 7 years old. Jums was a submariner and his submarine went missing in the Bay of Biscay in 1941. There was no grave, no funeral, no chance to say a proper goodbye. But in Debbie's words, John was a 'glass-full' person. There were never any half measures. He grieved for his dad all his life, but it made his own family even more important to him. And he had a very good relationship with his mother and step-father, too.

His step-dad, Victor worked as an accountant at the Theatre Royal in Portsmouth and was able to get John in to watch all the shows. Little did Victor know then, that he was helping to sow the seeds of a lifelong passion for magic and that John would one day go on to perform in theatres and help to create special effects for the stage shows of some of the greats in magic, including Paul Daniels.

In 1952, John joined the Royal Air Force beginning at the RAF college in Cranwell and so began a distinguished military career lasting 27 years. He was always very proud to serve Queen and country. His first overseas posting was to Gibraltar. Whilst home on leave, he took the opportunity to add to his burgeoning record collection.

It may have been the lure of the vinyl which kept taking him back to the record shop...or it may have been the lovely young woman who worked there! They began talking and when John returned to Gibraltar, he and Debbie wrote to each other every single day. After just six weeks they became engaged. They were married when John was 22 and Debbie 19. Debbie had an early glimpse of what life with John would be like. Their first car had a crank handle to start it, fitted through a hole in the floor. Driving out on wetter days, John would shout "puddle" giving Debbie just enough time to raise her feet to stop them getting wet.

John and Debbie's love story spanned the next six decades. Rarely did they miss an opportunity to share a G and T and dance together at home on a Sunday afternoon, to the music they loved; and they never missed singing along to 'Land of Hope and Glory' on Proms night, proudly waving their Union flags. As John once remarked to Paul Daniels: *"I've got my own Debbie, you know!"*

In 1957, they welcomed their daughter, Jackie to the world and two years later, Tim arrived completing their family. In some ways, theirs was a typical forces family. They moved around England, to live on various airbases as required but the nature of John's postings overseas meant his family were unable to accompany him. Of all the songs they loved together, Ella Fitzgerald singing *'Everytime we say goodbye'* took on a particular significance for Debbie and John during these years.

But family life with John was anything but typical. Childhood for Jackie and Tim was one big adventure. When their Dad came home from work, it wasn't from a factory or an office, it was from Borneo. And he returned from the jungle with all kinds of weird and wonderful artefacts, many of which had magical properties. He told stories of daring tales. He made them shiver with excitement and cry with laughter in equal turn. Jackie and Tim had no need to enter the make-believe world of the movies. They grew up with their very own Caractacus Potts from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Their dad was full of fun, alive with adventure, dazzlingly different from all the other Dads.

He once had all four of them form a production line in the kitchen, with a huge bag of marbles which made their way into a jar. They were heated on the electric coil of the cooker and then plunged into water to make the inside shatter to glorious effect. Although he may also quite easily be likened to Heath Robinson, Tim will always remember the electric motor his dad built for him, neither will he forget the spectacular explosion it made as it set off at great speed on its inaugural launch.

If that was every-day life, then birthdays and occasion days were even more special. Jackie remembers her dad, the brilliant magician, astonishing her friends at her birthday parties. Tim remembers being taken to the end of the runway, gazing up in awe at his own flypast and getting to sit in the cockpit of a Phantom jet on his birthday. And every fireworks night HAD to be better than the last, even if it meant John running around the garden at full speed trying to set off more and bigger rockets to beat his own record.

John's creativity and his unending quest for discovery continued as the family expanded. He once digitally re-edited the classic scene in King Kong when the beast has Fay Wray in his hand at the Empire State Building. John's version featured the voices of all his grandkids!

I wonder how many people can count the Bishop of Papua New Guinea amongst their friends? Well John could. And there is more. He once had him in his underpants, blindfolded and riding a bicycle along the sea front at Hunstanton with John running alongside to guide him. It was for charity I am told! It was in fact when his friend was still a vicar in West Runcton. They were both a member of the West Norfolk Magic Society.

John took his magic very seriously. As well as his theatre work on and off the stage, and children's parties, he wrote extensively on magic and had his work published in the United States as well as in Britain. John was granted membership to the Inner Circle of the Magic Circle, something which is limited to only 300 people at any one time. It was a considerable achievement.

John ended his RAF career at Honington and the family made their home in Thetford. John joined the Home Office, working in Newmarket. He was popular with his new colleagues, some who even today remember him as an inspirational mentor.

Retirement offered John and Debbie the opportunity to travel. They visited far-flung countries such as Mexico, Canada and Hawaii but John was especially keen to return to some of the places he had been stationed, this time with Debbie. Gibraltar was a favourite of them both. John was outgoing and gregarious and would invariably get chatting to people, continuing to make new friends on their many holidays as well as valuing his older friendships.

He had time in retirement too, to pursue his many other passions. He was a talented painter and a good photographer. He collected stones and polished them before turning them into pieces of jewellery. He loved nature and the countryside and would go walking and swimming whenever he could, and he especially loved swimming in the sea. Jackie has precious memories of her dad carrying her as a little girl on his shoulders, far out to sea; her mum and brother sitting on the beach, watching and eating marmite sandwiches.

Just nine years ago, Jackie, John and Debbie went to Kefalonia on holiday together. John was ducking and diving in the waves having the time of his life. And Tim, do you remember that time in Corfu? Picture the scene if you will. John and Debbie were on holiday with Tim and his wife, Jackie, when their daughters were young. One afternoon, Tim and the girls were together on the beach. There was only one other family there, sitting enjoying the tranquillity, with a rather sedate and elegant picnic, complete with a silver tea service.

Their peace was shattered when John crashed through the olive grove hinterland onto the beach with a booming *"Hello"* comically delivered according to the family tradition. He took one look at the sea, proclaiming *"Oh, that looks bloody good"* before stripping to his underpants and running into the waves. One can only imagine the look on the faces of the other family. It could easily have been a scene from a classic British comedy.

John had so many interests. He embraced new technology with his customary gusto and was fascinated by the emergence of computers. In the very early days of home-computing, John spent hours loading floppy discs onto two computers until a primitive form of chat-box appeared enabling father and son to say 'hello'. Computers gave a new dimension to his art too. He used graphic design programmes to enhance his photography to such a standard that he was able to sell his pictures, professionally.

That he loved life and embraced all it had to offer, is undeniable. But he had a more serious side too. He had a strong moral code and would always stand up for what he believed in, for fairness and justice. John achieved more in his lifetime than most of us can only dream of. He had a distinguished RAF and civilian career, he was a brilliant magician, a talented artist, a computer whizz, an inventor, a storyteller, a natural comic, a traveller, a naturalist and so much more.

And above all else, John was a great family man, a good friend, a decent man. I will end John's wonderful life story with a wonderful quote from Debbie:

*"Life with John was never dull. Every home should have one."*

Debbie has asked me to read a poem to John on her behalf. This is from Debbie: