

PETER ARBON: 80 UP

The following is the text of the tribute paid to Peter, by Bob Williams, in the course of proposing a birthday toast at the special celebration lunch, held in the Village Hall, on Sunday, 14th January, 2007 -



Ladies and gentlemen, members of the Arbon family...and Patriarch Peter

Thank you for allowing me the privilege of paying a personal 80th birthday tribute to this remarkable man. They may be, for the most part, my words.... but they are offered on behalf of all who knew and worked with Peter over his 44 years' close association with 'Framlingham College Preparatory School at Brandeston Hall', to use its official, current, rather unwieldy title. We have to be P.C. in these matters!

I find myself the bearer of messages of congratulations and good wishes, from all points of the compass, from folk who are unable to be with us but who very much wanted to be associated with the occasion. So, I'll briefly refer

to these first, if I may. I think you'll agree they paint a picture very familiar to all of us.

From Paddy & Judith Newbery, from Somerset (Paddy was Head at The Hall in the early 80s): *Reaching 'Four Score' years is a great achievement. Delighted to hear that Peter's archival memory remains as sharp as ever. Some days I wonder whether mine still is, says Paddy! We shall be thinking of you all on Sunday.*

The only gardener I have ever come across who wore an Austin Reed pin-stripe suit to hoe his cabbages! We always think of Peter as a true gentleman and a lovely bloke. Please give him our very best wishes.

John & Ann Richards, from Southampton (both on the teaching Staff in the mid-1970s, John being Head of English)

I still have treasured photographs of Peter at work in the now long-forgotten vegetable garden. Peter is, and always will be, fondly remembered by me and my family. Congratulations on your 80th.

From Michael Baic, now living in Carlton Colville. (Michael ran the Modern Languages Dept for 22 yrs, from 1971- 1992.)

Nigel and Judi Johnson also want to be remembered to you, Peter. (Nigel was Master of Brandeston from 1985- 2000 and is currently Head of Terra Nova School, in Cheshire):

Peter, so sorry that we can't make it to Suffolk to join with you BH has always been a very special place & much of that is due to your love & care for the estate over a working lifetime..... One of the real pleasures of my 15 years at Brandeston was being able to enjoy those wonderful grounds each and every day. All our love. Nigel & Judi.

From Tony and Mary Lawrence. Tony served 12 years at Brandeston in the 70s and 80's before moving on to Framlingham where he has been an outstanding Deputy Head for some years now:

Tony has a message that, I think, might make you smile... He simply wants to couple birthday good wishes with his repeated thanks to you, Peter, for not shooting Milton on the numerous occasions that you had ample opportunity to do so!. (Milton was Tony & Mary's hyperactive Springer Spaniel).

Joyce Jones sent a brief message just before I left Suffolk recalling how fond Ron was of Peter and how he never failed to include Peter's wonderful vegetable garden when showing prospective parents around the school. **Ron Jones** was Master at The Hall from 1974-1980.

And from Michael and Debbie Anderson (Mike was Head of History in the late 70s, latterly Head of Kings Ely Junior and now Head of the Junior School at Kings, Taunton: *Mike fondly remembers both Peter's dahlias and Brandeston Bonfire Nights when it was always your solemn duty, to screams of delight from the children, literally, to trigger the conflagration by peppering an old can, full of petrol, with your shotgun. As Mike rightly surmises, a custom that inevitably, finally fell foul of the Health & Safety Thought Police!*

From Robin Williams, Head of Maths, First XI Cricket coach & the Brandeston Queen's best customer back in the 70s and 80s: *I still have a remarkable rake, given to me by Peter, that I use to clear vicious scrub. It is as enduring as he. It looks as good as it must have done when new with perhaps a little ruggedness marking a busy & helpful life ... I call it 'The Arbon'. My love of Suffolk has always been very much what I experienced at Brandeston, the school...and Brandeston the village. Peter is the spirit of the village. I will always be grateful for his kindness and support.*

And, finally, from Roger and Stella Dixon. Brandeston Hall Chaplain &, of course, Parish Priest here for the greater part of 20 years.....now living in Cardiff.

Stella and I are very sorry we cannot join you for the party, but we are away on a previously booked treat, to see the Merry Wives of Windsor, at Stratford. In this play Falstaff says 'Let the sky rain potatoes;... let it thunder to the tune of Greensleeves. I'm not sure about the singing, but you can certainly grow potatoes! So many memories... but just one to share with you for now. Thank you, Peter, for your loyal attendance at the eight o'clock service. I can thank you now though I never got the chance even to say hello as you were always out of the door in a flash. It must have been the call of breakfast!..... Many congratulations and much love from us both.

And **Richard and Cynthia Broad** would, I know, have sent a message in similar vein had they not decided to go one better and travel all the way from Honiton in Devon to be with us today. Richard was the second Headmaster that Peter served under, following the late David Kittermaster, back in the late 60s and early 70s... and he and Cynthia are making a rare return visit to Suffolk to be part of Peter's special day.

Indeed it is so good to see a number of former colleagues here, 'in the flesh': **Margaret Doe**,



with David. Margaret, of course, a long-service veteran in her own right and, as a team, they were - for those of us who lived on site - sometimes our only contact with the outside world, for days on end, ensuring that we had our regular newspaper drop at 'the crack of dawn'. And Peter's colleagues on the Ground Staff; **Ray & Tiger** ... and, perhaps most important of all, all those fine ladies, from that very important area accessible by the side door, who help to keep Peter on an even keel! And it's a delight to greet again a number of well-known former 'veteran inmates', **David Risk, Tony Martin & Jim Blythe** who still assures anyone, whose ear he can readily bend, that HE was the very first new pupil to enter the portals of Brandeston Hall! And, of course, **Andrew** who has enjoyed a lifelong friendship with Peter and much of whose produce we have enjoyed with our lunch today.

And a special mention, if I may, to **John and Wendy Pemberton**, whose association with Peter really beats the rest of us 'hands down'. They go all the way back, together, to the opening of the Junior school, in its new, superb location nearly fifty-nine years ago. The first pupils took their place in September 1948 and, if I'm not mistaken Peter, you officially started work there on 2nd May 1949 ... then proceeded to clock up a record of service of 42 years, 8 months & 14 days...at least those are the official figures! Being Peter, he put in another 18



months after his official retirement date...and, of course, as a lad, had already been assisting in the kitchen garden when the army were in occupation during the war years. In all something approximating 48 years in one place of work. Quite incredible.

Peter has seen Headmasters, Teaching Staff & Estate Workers come and go but the 'Head Gardener' seemed to go on for ever. He worked under five Junior School Heads...and he has kept a beady eye on three more at the helm since retirement and he once told me that he had overseen 24 different Ground Staff colleagues over the years!

A little local research reveals another interesting statistic: **Mary Moore** and I have calculated that, over the 62 years that he has, legally, been able to buy himself a drink, Peter has been served a decent pint by no fewer than 10 different landlords at The Queen!...and no doubt could tell a tale or two about most of them! One of the best... (which I *believe* to be well grounded and often told by **Joan Rix** when in 'story mode') possibly being the night, during the war, when a young German pilot who had baled out adjacent to the village and was bundled into the Queen virtually on the sharp end of half a dozen pitchforks. **Frank Ablett**, the then landlord (no doubt still remembered as Joan's Step-father by a number of you, apparently started reading him the riot act about the 'evils of Adolf.'...at which point Joan's mother intervened and thrust a glass of Adnams into the poor lad's hands, in the firm belief that it would do more for post-war relations than strong words from Frank! I think you'd have been 15 or 16 at the time, Peter, and probably on orange juice!

One of Peter's great gifts was his natural rapport with children (which always helps when you choose to work in a school in whatever capacity!). Footballs lost in the river or stuck in a tree...a quiet peep at a clutch of eggs on a nest in an obscure hedge...then Peter was your

man. In the days when his kitchen garden was the envy of all, a hungry youngster could always be assured of a fresh carrot, usually of astonishing size!. Any child who had been eliminated from a group game or was perhaps a touch homesick was invariably spotted by Peter and swept up to assist in feeding the ducks, or Fred – the raucous peacock, ...and being given Dillon to cuddle, Peter's giant white rabbit, was always the highlight of any child's day back in the 1970s. Infinite patience and never a cross word without due cause. All of us, young and not so young, regularly felt the benefit of his generous allocation of interest and time and were a great deal better for it.

Peter has seen the landscape of the Brandeston Estate change in so many ways; not always aesthetically for the better, but such is the price of progress. The All-weather courts replacing his beloved kitchen garden, a sea-change that Peter accepted philosophically & with good grace but I know that it hit him hard. And, of course, Peter's energies were in no way confined by the school gates. He always served as an invaluable link between the school and the village, in fact probably the only person who knew exactly what was going on within both communities! In a unique position to pour oil on occasionally troubled waters. I can recall the day that one incorrigible youth, on his way back from the P.O., helped himself to a handful of prize tulips from **Ruth Kidner's** garden! A situation that *really* did take some defusing! And, (a memory that I'm sure Richard Broad will share), in the years when the Village Fete was regularly held within the school grounds Peter could always lay his hands on even the most bizarre piece of equipment which was, suddenly – at the 11th hour, deemed essential to the success of the event! ...And, if he couldn't... then he always knew a man who could!

Bell-ringing; maintaining an immaculate churchyard & the gardens of the elderly; a fearsome reputation around all the local shows; playing a masterful hand at Crib ... all part of our enduring image of Peter.

For me, personally, Peter has never been short on offering sage advice. I well remember the occasion in 1986, when **Mandy** and I were trying to negotiate a substantial mortgage for a new home in Otley and the finance company concerned, not being well versed in the traditional, local, building materials, were being more than a little difficult - on learning that the property was of 'clay lump' construction. So I duly consulted the oracle on this. His response was emphatic: 'Don't you worry on it; it'll bend afore it'll break!' The Cheltenham & Gloucester promptly took his advice – and into The Firs we moved!

Indeed, among Peter's many 'honorary titles' must be that of Arborial Advisor to The Firs, for some 18 years,...tweaking and trimming and often wielding his trusty chain saw like a whirling Dervish. That chain saw certainly came into its own in the days and weeks following the '87 hurricane, in clearing the debris both on the School Estate and from the gardens and by-ways around the village – and again at The Firs. I believe we lost 36 trees around the school grounds on that dreadful October night.

In fact few would disagree that Peter is at his best in times of storm and tempest. Whatever the elements threw at him, over the years, Peter was always ready to do battle. The winter of 1978 was particularly fierce, as many of you may recall...which allows me to finish with my favourite story of Peter, the 'SOS Man'. My apologies if you have heard it before, as I have never tired of telling it over the years! In the February of that year we had experienced one of the two worst blizzards to hit East Anglia in 30 years, just as we were breaking up for the Easter Half-Term. Most folk managed to get away but, in the event, about 20 pupils – and the resident Staff – were snowed in, marooned for Half-Term. Not really what either the teachers

or the youngsters would have considered ideal but we made the best of it and managed to keep the kiddies amused. Finally, on the fifth day, with food and water running short, we decided to attempt a breakthrough to the College, in Framlingham, by tractor, the only vehicle that could cope with the deep drifts. I had to ride 'shotgun' on the trailer, trying to reassure anxious and shivering children, while Peter, wearing his motor-cycle helmet, wrestled with the tractor controls. We pulled out of the gate with Peter singing 'O God our help in ages past' at the top of his voice. Such is the power of prayer that his loud words of supplication, pleading for 'shelter from the stormy blast' worked a treat... We made it! A pity that Roger Dixon wasn't about in those days, Peter, to hear your solo. He'd have been left in NO doubt that you can sing....almost as well as you grow potatoes!

Before I sit down can I say what a delight it is to be in this elegant new hall; a magnificent asset for the village... something that the good folk of Brandeston have long wished for. Richard & Cynthia Broad, John Pemberton and I all did our stint on the old Hut Committee and, even thirty-five years ago, wondered quite how long 'chewing gum and sticking plaster' would continue to plug the holes and keep the weather out! This is certainly a dream come true..

On the occasion of his official retirement in 1992, I concluded a tribute to Peter with words that, 15 years on, I would in no way seek to change. Ladies and Gentlemen,...Friends and Family,...Would you join me, in a moment, in drinking a birthday toast to **Peter Russell Leslie Arbon.....** HORTICULTURAL GURU,... PURVEYOR OF WIT,... LOYAL EMPLOYEE...and...A TRUE GENTLEMAN OF SUFFOLK... And can we couple this toast with another, to Peter's great-great niece Harriet, who shares a birthday (her 10th) with him next Wednesday.

Peter: Good Health and Long Life.