

fig 1: John and HRH The Princess Royal at King Edward's School, 1988. *Photo courtesy of John Wroughton.*



fig 2: John with Nick Hewart and the BBC team at Lansdown battlefield recording 'Who do you think you are? 2013. *Photo courtesy of John Wroughton.*

John Wroughton

Elaine Chalus

I first met Dr John Wroughton through his publications. I read his edited volume, *Bath in the Age of Reform (1830–1841)* (1972), while researching my doctorate and his *Documents on British Political History: 1688–1815* (1971) and *The Longman Companion to the Stuart Age, 1603–1714* (1997) are still part of my teaching library. It was only after I took up my post at Bath Spa University College (as Bath Spa University still was at the time) and began to develop undergraduate courses on the history of Bath that I came to appreciate the breadth of his research interests and the depth of his local knowledge. His careful research into Tudor, Stuart and Commonwealth Bath has done so much to recover the city's rich and varied past; what is more, it serves as a telling reminder of how important it is for historians to look beyond the popular fixation on Bath in the Roman or Georgian periods.

It was therefore with genuine delight that I took the opportunity earlier in 2015 to meet Dr Wroughton in person and interview him for *Bath History*. I was warmly welcomed and soon found myself seated in his sunny living room overlooking Orange Grove, with a cup of coffee at my elbow, in a flat that testified quietly to his intertwined – and highly successful – careers as an historian and educator. This 'quietness', I soon realised, was much more than a statement of taste and décor; it was a mark of character. Dr Wroughton is softly spoken, a man whose achievements speak for themselves and are the more remarkable for not being flaunted. His passion for history remains undimmed and his ability to communicate his excitement vividly speaks powerfully to his lifelong commitment to education in its best and broadest sense. Future historians of Bath will owe much to the work of this gentleman and scholar.

The Interview

EHC: *Although many of our readers will associate you with Bath from your publications, I understand that you're not a Bathonian by birth: would you mind telling us something about your childhood and education?*

JW: I was born at a cottage hospital in Ashby-de-la-Zouch and was brought up in Swadlincote, South Derbyshire. It was a mining and pottery town, and I recall the kilns belching forth filth. My grandfather, who was a painter and decorator, had moved his family to Swadlincote from Repton in 1902. The town was quite prosperous at the time, as the clay in the area was particularly well suited to manufacturing the sanitary ware and sewage pipes demanded by late-nineteenth-century sanitary reforms. My grandparents decided to set up a shop in the town in small rented premises, but by the time I was born, the business had moved to a new shop on the High Street. There my grandmother sold embroidery goods and crochet yarns on one side of the shop; while my grandfather had his wallpapers and paints on the other side. Eventually, my father took over from his parents and, like Margaret Thatcher, we lived above the shop. Unfortunately, he contracted rheumatic fever and died in 1937, when I was only three. My mother had to work hard to support two children, but it was a tightly knit community and both sets of grandparents were always there to give support. Those early years left a deep impression on me and I grew up with a strong appreciation of the importance of community, something that I would later take with me to King Edward's School.

I started my education in the local council school on Belmont Street during the war. It not only provided me with a solid grounding in the 3Rs, but it also resulted in probably the most important moment in my life, for it was here, during a History lesson, that Miss Lambert told us the story of Hereward the Wake: I was enthralled and so excited that I ran home to tell my mother that I was going to be a History teacher. This decision meant that I would need to attend grammar school, something that no one in my family had ever done. Most of my friends, the sons of miners and potters, stayed on at council school until the leaving age of fourteen, when they left to start work while I moved on to grammar school. Fortunately, the timing was perfect, as the 1944 Education Act made secondary education free for all. I passed the '11 plus' and enrolled at Ashby-de-la-Zouch Grammar School. The teachers at the end of the war were rather a mixed bag, but two were especially influential: George Eckersley, a spell-binding history teacher who could bring the past to life, and Mr Morgan-Jones who, in sixth form, taught me how to research, analyse problems, substantiate arguments and write fluent essays. These skills have stayed with me to this day.

Ashby Grammar School wasn't all about study, though. I made lifelong friends and played a good deal of sport. I had always been passionate about sport — a keen supporter of Derby County — and represented the school at both athletics and 1st XV rugby. Later, at Oxford, I would play rugby and soccer for Hertford College, while also captaining the badminton team.

Sitting the entrance examinations for Oxford was quite the ordeal. I went up to Oxford for three nights and felt rather over-awed by it all — all these other young chaps



fig 3: John is extreme left in picture of Hertford College, Oxford, rugby team.1955. Photo courtesy of John Wroughton.

with posh accents and loud voices. I'd been competently taught, so the papers went well, but the interview at Hertford College was a challenge. I remember being ushered into a room with twelve fellows and the master around a table and facing the questioning with some trepidation. When, however, it was the History tutor's turn to interrogate, all he asked me was, 'Well, Mr Wroughton, how is Mr Woodcock [then headmaster at Ashby Grammar]? And that was effectively the end of the interview: I was in. I should have gone up in 1953, but was caught by national service, so Oxford offered me a place for 1955.

I made the most of those two years of National Service. I was stationed at a high



fig 3: John at an archeological dig at Bretby in Derbyshire. 1962. Photo courtesy of John Wroughton.

security training base on the edge of Birmingham, working shift work on signals and phones. As the night shifts were often very quiet, I could often get some sleep and then go into Birmingham during the day. This allowed me to enjoy what the city had to offer in terms of history, music, drama, and so on. I even developed my interest in archaeology during this period, as I took an archaeology course at the University of Birmingham (for which the RAF paid) and then took part in my first week-long dig.

Once my National Service was completed in 1955, I went up to Oxford — and I loved every minute of it. It was a wonderful place: you could develop the whole person there. I pursued my interest in History, joined all three political parties, played sport and travelled on the Continent in the holidays. It was a genuinely broadening experience. As a finalist in History, I chose to concentrate on the Commonwealth and Protectorate as my special subject: this was partly because the documents were in English, but I also thought that it was a period that would prove useful for teaching.

In 1959, I received my Diploma of Education from Oxford after a course that had included a term's teaching practice at Shaftesbury Grammar School. The head there was a kind man who had taught me Latin at Ashby Grammar and shared my interest in rugby. This was followed by a three-year stint at Dame Allan's School, a direct grammar school, in Newcastle-on-Tyne. There, I had the opportunity to work with a deputy headmaster, who was a fantastic person and another significant influence in my life. I taught History and Religious Studies, and coached sport. In my spare time, I explored Hadrian's Wall and led an expedition to explore Roman remains in the south of France. I was then offered a job at my old grammar school at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, where I taught for another three years.

EHC: *You seem to have been very well established in Derbyshire: what brought you to Bath?*

JW: I was looking for a position as head of department. King Edward's School in Bath advertised and I was appointed in 1965. I was promoted to second master in 1974 and then

headmaster in 1982.

EHC: *What was it about King Edward's that made it special?*

While it was an independent fee-paying school for boys, it not only offered scholarships and bursaries, but also took 25 per cent of its students on government direct grants. That appealed to me - it was much like the grammar school I had left. It meant that the parents were very interested in the school and were willing to work together with the staff to build a community. We had great pupils, but the 1960s and 1970s were a difficult time for young people. By the time that I was headmaster, we had a good, engaged staff and both the boys and the parents were very supportive.

EHC: *What was your approach to the teaching of History?*

JW: History is essentially a story, though some people ruin it by not capturing the interest of pupils through the excitement of the story. I've always believed in hands-on history. I think it's criminal that some students today study only modern history. The approach to teaching history at King Edward's was chronological, which enabled me to get boys involved in history from an early age, both in lessons and after school. I introduced them to primary source material and taught them how to work with original documents; they learned to read seventeenth-century handwriting; went on field trips; established history societies; got involved with historical re-enactment (setting up Alexander Popham's Regiment, for instance, in the Sealed Knot); and went on archaeological digs. There were so many opportunities to get pupils excited about history. With the sixth form, I drew on the skills I'd gained from my own education and taught them how to research, write and revise. I also created a special subject paper with the Cambridge Exam Board for the Civil War and Commonwealth period.

When I was Head of History in the early 1970s I had an outstanding group of 6th form pupils who researched various aspects of Bath in the age of Reform. The resulting papers were published locally, but the book is still in libraries around the country today and I am still in touch with some of those boys.

EHC: *Given the extent of your involvement in teaching, how did you find time to write and publish?*

JW: The school was always my top priority, but research and writing became an absorbing hobby. This provided a therapeutic escape from school pressures especially during vacations. Fortunately, the Bath Record Office - an excellent resource - was close at hand for much of my work. I was given a foothold into the world of publishing when I was introduced to the editors at Macmillan by a fellow teacher in the late 1960s and this led to my first publication, *Cromwell and the Roundheads (Sources of History)*, in 1969.

EHC: *What was it that turned your focus to the history of Bath?*

JW: The Bath Record Office had been not long established and I was looking for information on the Civil War. I eventually found my way into the extensive Bath Corporation Treasurer's accounts for the period, and that got me started. I continued to research over the years, as time allowed, and when the opportunity arose to pull my research together and present it as a doctoral dissertation to the University of Bristol, I did so. My supervisor was a most helpful and inspiring young man, who was later promoted to become Professor Ronald Hutton. I completed my dissertation, 'The Community of Bath and North-East Somerset and the Great Civil War', with the benefit of a term's sabbatical at Pembroke College, Oxford, and defended it successfully in 1990.

I had long had an interest in the Battle of Lansdown and felt that it should be better known to visitors to Bath. The 350th anniversary of the battle in 1993 provided an excellent opportunity to raise awareness. I wrote a booklet on the Civil War in Bath, the Victoria Art Gallery held a commemorative display and I arranged for the Sealed Knot to perform a re-enactment. On the back of this, Stephen Bird and I set up a committee in 1993 to explore the possibility of building a visitors' centre at the site of the battle. Unfortunately, this became a most soul-destroying business and it wasn't until ten years later that the committee was finally able to mark out the extent of the battlefield with flags and erect some interpretive panels. To my disappointment, the plans for the visitors' centre simply fizzled out. I was most disappointed at the apathy shown by most members of Bath City Council.

I found this process frustrating and directed my frustration towards my subsequent research. I knew exactly what I wanted to do when I retired from King Edward's School in 1993. More than anything else, what had always interested me about the Commonwealth and Protectorate was its impact on ordinary people. I wanted to explore that in more depth. I began work on post-Civil War compensation claims, research that culminated in *An Unhappy Civil War: The Experiences of Ordinary People in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, 1642–46* (1999).

I then narrowed my focus to Bath in an effort to recover the stories of Tudor and Stuart Bath. I had long felt that the medieval and early-modern histories of Bath had been erased from the city's 'official' history. The resulting publications, *Tudor Bath: Life and Strife in the Little City, 1485–1603* (2006) and *Stuart Bath: Life in the Forgotten City, 1603–1714* (2004) were intended to serve as starting points for people interested in the history of Bath. To my satisfaction, they also had popular appeal and sold well.

EHC: *What are you working on right now?*

JW: I have just finished a book that covers my life in Swadlincote up to the time that I went up to Oxford in 1955. It is a blend of social history and biography, showing what life was like for a boy living through periods of mass unemployment, war and recession. It is based in part on contemporary sources located in 'The Magic Attic', an excellent archive of newspapers and photographs located in Swadlincote in one of the old pottery kilns. It also illustrates the social mobility made possible for boys from less affluent homes thanks to the 1944 Education Act. *The Little Boy from Swadlincote: Memories Blended with History, 1934–1955* (The Magic Attic, May 2015).

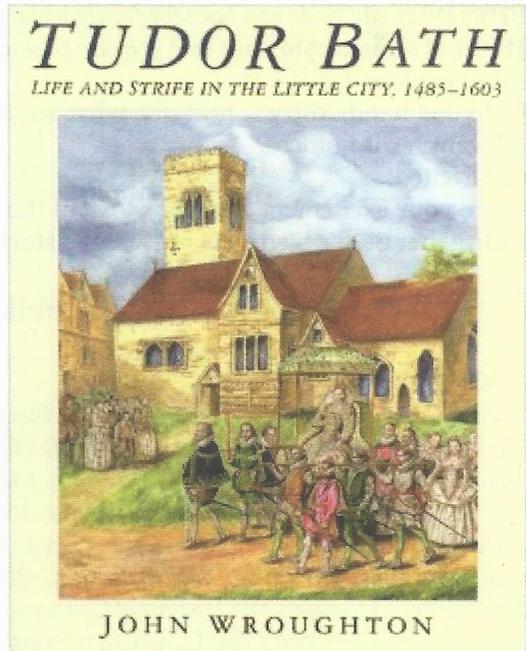


fig: 5 Cover of *Tudor Bath: Life and Strife in the City 1485-1603*, by John Wroughton, published 2006.

EHC: *What advice do you have for future historians of Bath?*

JW: Find an area of history that you are passionate about – feel the excitement that generates – and explore it in depth.

Get your hands dirty – find out what sources are available; explore the field. Visit the relevant record offices.

Get excited.

Share your excitement and your love of the subject with other people - and make people realise that Bath's history is not just the story on the city in Roman and Georgian times.

Publications

BOOKS

The Little Boy from Swadlincote: Memories Blended with History, 1934-1953 (Magic Attic, 2015)

The Battle of Lansdown: an Explorer's Guide (The Lansdown Press 2008)

Tudor Bath: Life and Strife in the Little City, 1485-1603 (The Lansdown Press 2006)

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SERIES GENERAL EDITOR

Documents and Debates (28-volume series, Macmillan 1980 on)

OXFORD DICTIONARY OF NATIONAL BIOGRAPHY CONTRIBUTOR

Articles on nine Civil War Leaders - John Ashe, Sir Edward Hungerford, Sir Lislebone Long, Michael Holdsworth, Alexander Popham, George Porter, Adrian Scroope, Sir John Stawell and Sir Thomas Wroth.

OTHER ARTICLES

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