

# Holt WI

Holt ladies reconvened after the enforced cancellation of the March meeting, thanks to the unseasonal cold and snow at the beginning of the month, with much business and planning to do. A report on a successful outing to the Hop Pocket in Herefordshire was followed by plans for a lunch at the celebrated Lord Morton's in Cutnall Green. Final selections were made for our team for the county quiz in April and two teams for the Shrawley Cup competition in May. Our preparations for the open meeting with the Pearl Lady in June are well underway and provisional plans for two coffee mornings, a theatre trip and a local floral creation / afternoon tea at Bonterre Farm were started.

John Butterworth, whose talk entitled "Hitting the Headlines" gave us a clue as to its content, was, nevertheless, a revelation. A vibrant and witty forty-five minutes covered his 44 years in journalism, mostly as editor of a whole of panoply of newspapers. It was a tour de force, encompassing personalities, anecdotes and stories, punctuated every so often with "But that's a talk for another night".

John, who started his training in the 1970s, extolled the virtues of on-the-job experience and the capacity to listen and relate to other people as the basis for a successful journalistic career; indeed he put down his initial selection as one of 8 in the Mirror training scheme (whittled down from 600) to his wandering over to engage a lone individual in a bar in conversation. Among the then "nobodies" John interviewed during his training in Plymouth were Sharron Davies, Dana and Sue Barker. And amongst those who were already "somebody", he identified as his favourite Cliff Richard, "a perfect gentleman".



Over the next three decades, John worked on papers in Leeds and Halifax, edited (and indeed sometimes owned) newspapers in Burnley, Blackburn, Leek, Stone, Bromsgrove, Droitwich and Shrewsbury. From that position, John's papers adopted charities, ran safety campaigns and received both awards for the papers and an MBE for his services to journalism and charity. One of the fascinating asides he shared of his experience editing the Shrewsbury Chronicle concerned the wonderful archive that existed in his office. The paper, started in 1772, had retained copies throughout those years, including reporting on the Boston tea party, the American War of Independence, the death of Nelson, the accession of Queen Victoria.

The rather sniffy presenter of the *Antiques Roadshow*, who deemed these artefacts “too provincial” to be valuable, was surely missing the point.



The energy that John put into his papers spilled over into various volunteer projects, which led to the adventures of driving a Land Rover from the UK to Nepal plus helping in a leprosy hospital when he got there. The anecdote of the patient who took the instruction of taking his tablets “with water”, as meaning “standing in the river”, added a sweet bit of local colour. John also embraced the opportunity of participating in a journalistic exchange with China when the country was first opening out and emerging onto the world stage after the end of the Cultural Revolution. What an eye-opener! His description of factories making steam engines with molten steel running down open channels in the floor would have given a Health and Safety inspector nightmares. Later, John had the opportunity of visiting Albania, after the demise of Enver Hoxha, the brutal dictator, who decreed that “God is dead”, as the country was emerging from the dark years of extreme communist oppression. The story of illicit religious broadcasting that was picked up in the country at grave personal risk, is the subject of one of his books. Another is the story of Lily Gaynor who arrived in Guinea –Bissau in the 1950s with little more than her nursing and midwifery training and some medicines, who then saw off the witch doctors and became known as God’s Needle for the miracles produced by penicillin. Or the story of the Lion Hotel in Shrewsbury, situated conveniently for what started out as an inn for stage-coaches, but soon rivalled the Chester route from London, later the route of the A5. Among its famous guests John listed King William IV, Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Darwin, Niccolo Paganini, the Beatles, Lulu, Morecambe and Wise – and an absolute roll-call of the famous for the last century and a half.

We finished the talk a little breathless, but determined to invite John back for one of the talks he promised “for another night”.

Finally, Holt ladies would like to remind all readers that we have an open meeting on June 7<sup>th</sup> and all are welcome. If you would like a ticket, please ring either 01905 621140 or 01905 621721.

