

SOME TAUNTONIANS I HAVE KNOWN

I wandered down Methuen Street the other day. My uncle Doug and aunt Kate lived at number 8 many years ago and, Proust-like, I return now and again to check how much has changed.

Those of us mired in the past seek connections with it via people and places. In my case this invariably involves Taunton's and the 1960's, though the link with Methuen Street - a mite tenuous, I admit - goes back much further than that. The Methuen Treaty, signed in 1703, favoured Portugal and, in particular, port.

The fortified beverage was not subject to prohibitive duties, unlike wines from France, whose exports suffered a major setback. This was hardly relieved some years later when ships part-owned by Richard Taunton intercepted two French vessels laden with bullion and precious metals - appropriation perfectly legitimate during the War of the Austrian Succession.

It's an easy step from Methuen Street to Belmont Road, where famous (some would say infamous) film director Ken Russell lived not far from off-course bookmaker Johnny Denton. With a name like that Johnny should have been a riverboat gambler falling slowly and fatally in love with Barbara Stanwyck but, sadly, he was just a bookie.

Russell may or may not have been the greatest British film director but he was arguably the most imaginative (*Women In Love*, *The Music Lovers*, *The Devils*, *The Boy Friend* etc) and unquestionably the most controversial.

And he was one of our own, of course, so we should cherish him. He once went back to 31 Belmont Road and from the car could see into the large back garden, where the horse chestnut tree was still going strong. Except that to Ken it wasn't a horsechestnut tree, it was 'my castle, my galleon, my magic beanstalk' as we learn from his autobiography *A British Picture*. He had his hair cut in Portswood. (I think, from the description, this must have been the Elite, where I had mine done as well. There were three barbers and the middle one was called Mr Shearing; I am not making this up.)

Ken loved the Palladium cinema and its 'baronial foyer beneath artificially faded murals of Arthurian legends', where he had tea with his mum. He'd pay strangers threepence to get him a ticket when he was too young to see a film with an 'A' certificate. And he made his way up Highfield Lane to school; it's a pity there isn't more about Taunton's in the book but there we are.

People get it wrong about off-course bookmakers. They were legitimate operators, it was the 'runners' bringing bets to them who ran the risk of police interception. Johnny Denton's main runner was a bus inspector called Ern, who stood outside the old Palladium cinema, slipping bets into his standard issue mac while ostensibly keeping an eye out for a late-arriving number 11 or 14.

Sometimes my aunt Em would hand over the day's optimistic selections and we'd see films at the Palladium - *The Man From Laramie*, *Shane* - which had been around for a while. I still love *Shane*. It's the way Alan Ladd says 'No, Joey, I gotta be goin' on' at the end, when he's been shot. All these years we're around and we never get the chance to say 'No, I gotta be goin' on' like *Shane*. A hero disappearing over the hill, that's the way to be.

When he ran occasional after-school films, Harry Spooner loved that one, making the point that Brandon de Wilde, who played Joey, was a far more engaging child actor than most. Otherwise,

Harry favoured the Ealing comedies, especially *The Ladykillers*. He was a man of many parts, gone too soon.

There was a touch of the entertainer in him, especially when it came to general announcements in assembly after Mr Challacombe and the other masters had left the stage. Someone called Mee had lost something, somewhere and Harry took his time before saying 'I'd like it back, and so would Mee'. It was simple enough but if you make schoolboys laugh you've got them for life.

A superb headmaster, Mr Challacombe permitted himself very few wry asides, though there was the day the sadly departed Martin Chivers became 'our most expensive Tauntonian' after signing for Tottenham for £80,000 with Frank Saul travelling in the opposite direction. Many years later I tried to track Frank down for a magazine article but no-one knew where he was. I even located a tailor called Frank Saul who had a shop on Tottenham High Road and he was charm personified, offering me a smart new suit with an extra pair of trousers for nothing ('because you sound a nice man') if I'd like to drop by. I liked him very much but he wasn't Frank, who I later discovered had returned to his Essex roots and was working in the motor trade.

Martin, only a couple of years ahead of me at school, was a fine player and when he was interviewed on the pitch at St Mary's not long ago he'd become a much better communicator, as well, talking with great enthusiasm about the early days with Ted Bates, Terry Paine and the rest. He wasn't always like that and went into his shell for a while when Jimmy Hill criticised him following a below-par England performance.

All these years on you appreciate how players with little in common still managed to perform in perfect harmony on the pitch. At Tottenham, Martin played alongside Alan Gilzean, a truly sublime footballer and one of the best headers of the ball there's ever been but an intensely private man who always said he didn't actually like football and would have nothing to do with it when he retired. He just about kept to it, too, and even disappeared for a while, a determined journalist eventually tracking him down to Weston-super-Mare, where he lived quietly and alone. I wonder what he and Martin talked about in the glory days.

I was born in West End and gravitate back there fairly regularly, though with three stents in my heart and a pacemaker the long walk up Chalk Hill is a little demanding. Years ago I'd reward myself with a pint in the Bitterne Brewery before continuing to the top of Lances Hill. These days I drive that bit, thinking of Tauntonian Paul Bennett and his role as a director at Eastpoint Centre in Thornhill.

A while back I was writing a 'joint' piece about Paul and Martin for the Saints matchday programme and I have to say Paul was very helpful but neither of us doubted that the edited copy (and the photographs) would favour Martin. Such is life, but Paul was always a dedicated Southampton man, especially where Ted Bates was concerned, and followed the fortunes of the club very closely. He wasn't a bad centre-half, either. Put it this way, you wouldn't want to try and dribble past him.

I think we're allowed to include Dave Puckett in this piece because his father, Ron, taught Physics at Taunton's, though Dave went to Merry Oak. A very handy forward with Saints, Bournemouth and the rest he scored for Totton and Eling when he was 53. Much earlier he made it to the top while others fell just short. There was a time when Julian Taylor, sadly no longer with us, looked very close to that sort of level.

I considered various walks in Shirley but always settled for Janson Road and still do now, past the tattoo parlours and the Polish stores and up past the house on the corner where the Taylors lived all those years ago.

They were an extraordinary family. The old man, Royal Navy through and through, saw three separate centuries. His wife, all perpetual motion and constant gossip, could never do enough for you, like eldest son Adrian. Melvin went off to teach in Birmingham, while Austin (my contemporary and great friend) was packed off to naval college and later sent us cards from Oman and elsewhere, and then there was the lad himself.

How do you describe Julian? Well, he was forever young, which is not a bad start. He was mischievous, very funny, no great respecter of authority, a shrewd judge of character and not one to sit on the sidelines when the beer was flowing. He died suddenly in 2021 and Roger Parsons and Stu Wilson attended a wake (more a celebration of life, really) at the Hop Inn by Woodmill Lane. Death, where is thy sting? People loved Julian and you really can't ask for much more than that.

We lived quite close to the Hop Inn. My dad, who came south when his brother Tom signed for the Saints from Blyth Spartans just before the war, worked shifts at Pirelli in Eastleigh. One rainswept morning when he was on early turn (6am to 2pm) his lift didn't turn up and he walked from home to Leigh Road in Eastleigh, making sure his steel-tipped shoes made plenty of noise as water rats the size of small dogs scurried around Woodmill itself. That would have frightened me but he was the toughest man I ever met with the possible exception of Lester Piggott. Cancer got him in the end and he dropped dead at the factory gates in 1970.

It's a funny thing but it was only the other day it occurred to me that he must sometimes have arrived at Pirelli at much the same time as Benny Hill was turning up at Hann's dairy. My mother sat next to Benny's when the Broadway became a bingo hall. Mrs Hill said he was very good to her - Taunton's a beneficial influence, no doubt. For as long as it lasted, anyway.

Starting from a quiet, minor road in Townhill Park which comes out not far from Chalk Hill, I could follow the Itchen all the way from the White Swan at Mansbridge down to the old Terminus station and the Platform pub and its wooden sign dangling from the ceiling which reads: 'Not all who wander are lost'. J R R Tolkien was quite right about that, as any 'flaneur' (and certainly this one) will confirm.

I'm not sure I could walk that far now, though, and I might settle for Little Lances Hill and Glenfield Avenue, where Paul Godwin lived when we were at school. He was probably the most talented musician ever to study at Taunton's, though I guess Mike Cornick, a transfer who played at the Bassett in its shady days, would have run him close. I wish I'd seen more of Paul after Cambridge, where he ran the university jazz club, but our paths diverged.

His business life outside jazz took him to Kuwait and he returned pretty well set up, as they say, but he lived hard and scotch was his preferred drink from a young age. He had a minor heart attack early in life and then, on the sort of long, solitary hike he enjoyed, the major one which ended his life over twenty years ago. He was a very, very gifted man and Alan Saunders did him just justice in his eulogy.

It's hard to stay in touch with everyone. Jim Corlett and I were close friends at school and Cambridge and shared one or two flats in London after graduation. Then we drifted apart until the remarkable day his son David met our daughter Susannah in a sports bar in Bristol. It was mild banter until they realised they were both Saints supporters. Research at home confirmed that a million to one shot had indeed come in. Marriage followed in 2014 and there are now three little Carnaby-Corletts in red and white.

Jim's mother Barbara died a while back, having made it into her nineties. She and Bob, who passed several years ago, moved into 222 Winchester Road around 1960, so by the time failing health brought a move to Jim and Doreen's in Nottingham, Barbara had lived there for 62 years. In that time they looked after countless people and Jim's friends were always welcome, as Roger Parsons and Bob Wells will confirm. Bob Corlett measured his words carefully, loved his football and cricket and it's just a pity that Michael Henderson's superb book *That Will Be England Gone* (a Larkin poem) about the demise of the county game in favour of T20 and all the other limited overs shenanigans, wasn't published in his lifetime because it might almost have been written for him.

If everyone stayed as loyal as the Corlett clan, organisations like the BBC would have no worries. Every night of their lives Bob and Barbara saw the day out with *Sailing By* on Radio 4 and it was played at her funeral. Just briefly, everything seemed all right with the world.

Gordon Lightfoot died a couple of years ago. A Canadian folk and country singer who let Alberta's wide-open spaces compensate for heartache - *If You Could Read My Mind*, etc - we played him all the time in the Cricklewood flat and even went to see him at the Albert Hall. I only mention it because Saints went down in 1973-74 and then, fifty years later, well, we won't dwell on that.

Gordy was always playing in the background and Derek Robinson's masterpiece *Goshawk Squadron*, about life expectancy (ten days? twelve?) and the gung-ho attitude of pilots arriving for the First World War, was open on the table. We could have formed a small Old Tauntonians' appreciation society - Jim, IC, Chris Pond and Geoff Woodling, with Alan Saunders, now Susannah's godfather, dropping in now and then.

Fifty years ago. Golly. Proust would have something to say about it. Scott Fitzgerald, too, come to think of it.

'So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past'. Amen.

Ian Carnaby (1960-67)