



# - MEET A TOWNIE -



## FROM PORT TO PORT AND HARBOURING MANY A STORY IN BETWEEN!

**A**ny old port in a storm goes the saying but for John Baird, master artist and a man with a laugh that could power a ship, it was his home port of Letterkenny that inspired both a career as a merchant seaman and his work with pen and paint.

From the age of ten, he was sketching the vessels that were a frequent sight in the mouth of the Swilly back in an era when they offloaded cargo on the river banks and generated a bustling business scarcely comprehensible to those townspeople of today who can now only view the faded and grass strewn remnants of this once thriving enterprise.

Born in Gate Lodge number 62 in Drumnahoagh in August, 1948 - "the Gillens were in Gate Lodge 61 and the Fishers in number 60" - John was reared by his grandparents, Willie John - a ganger on the railways - and Susan. He attended national school at the Parochial Hall on the Port Road where teachers included Delia Harris, May McClintock and Sadie Bonner.

Indeed his first piece of art work was a drawing of a map of Donegal, initiated by Mrs. McClintock.

"I sat beside Christine Patterson who would go on to bigger and better things with The Pattersons. I was good friends with Ronnie and I remember Dorothy used to work in the station café."

John's uncle Billy worked at the port and he developed his own interest in all things shipping early on. "As a nipper I'd bring them down tea to the port. The tea would be in something like an old stout bottle corked up with a bit of newspaper and it would be cold by the time they got to drink it."

After leaving primary school, John would travel on the bus to the Raphoe Royal but realised from early on that secondary school was not for him.

He credits achieving a mark of 98 out of a 100 in a mock geography examination as down to reading books about boats and learning from the crew members who would arrive in the then flourishing port of Letterkenny. "I learned all I did from the Port and the people who worked there and the sailors who came in from overseas."

"And A.D. Kelly was very good to me too. A real gentleman."

### Leeds Utd

John's passion for sport - and in particular Leeds United F.C. and Connacht rugby - is known to all but at Raphoe Royal it was confined to hockey and tennis. "I played goalkeeper in the hockey team. I remember we played Prior in Lifford and some opposition player got past our centre-half but I managed to take him out," smiles John. It was his one and only appearance in the team.

He recalls playing soccer in Pattons field. "We'd have the traditional two coats for goalposts and half-time would be when ten goals were scored and full-time when twenty were scored. Jimmy O'Donnell and Dessie Harkin and a lot of the local lads would be playing. John Duffy was a great wee player and Frankie McNulty a very good goalie."



"Peter Patton christened us the Wellington Rovers," laughs John. The true boot boys of their time.

He remembers the infamous Hurricane Debbie in 1961, and the damage it inflicted. "When we raided orchards that time there was no need to shake the trees!"

But a life on the sea continued to beckon and it was on the Dutch registered 'Uranus-B', that the young John was recruited by the ship's captain as a deck boy.

"We were supposed to be going to Derry but we ended up in Preston in England!"

John worked as a cook on board this and other vessels, keeping the crew well fed and nourished on their travels.

In 1966, he joined the ship, the 'Silver Thorn' in Coleraine and travelled to Liverpool.

"The captain, Hugh Cully, was a very religious man and every Saturday he would take us to listen to preachers."

"I sneaked away to Goodison Park to watch Everton playing Leeds United who had the great Bobby Collins in the side and Don Revie who would go on to manage them. Everton had the likes of the left-back Ray Wilson, who that year helped England win the World Cup, and Brian Labone. I think Wilson ended up as an undertaker in Shrewsbury."

"Anyway, I started supporting Leeds United from that moment but I always kept a look out too for Everton's results and still do."

And if those frequent calls to ports around England coincided with a match involving Leeds, John would amble along to watch his heroes in action.

A footballing highlight for him, even though his beloved team lost, was the European Cup semi-final at Hampden Park in 1970. "Jimmy Johnstone was brilliant that day and ran the legs off Terry Cooper in the Leeds full-back position. And Cooper was no slouch." John had attended the first leg at Elland Road but couldn't afford to travel to Glasgow for the second encounter.

A record European attendance of 136,505 crammed into the ground to watch that game - sadly John Baird cannot lay claim to being part of it!

John's all-time favourite players wearing the white of the Yorkshire side include the midfield duo of Billy Bremner and John Giles.

"But Giles was a dirty player at times. He was in the Mount Errigal Hotel a few years back and I went up to him and told him that and he just laughed!"

Football continued, meanwhile, to play its part in John's time in England and after securing a job working on the Thames Barrier in London, he sought accommodation in the city and asked for the attic room. "I asked for it deliberately because the nearest football club was Charlton Athletic and from that room I could watch all their home games at The Valley for free!"

In the mid-seventies, John returned home and secured employment with Alan Wylie, working alongside people like James Harkin and George Nee. "I worked at so many different things to earn a few bob and keep me going."

While his book and website depicting the Port has long been regarded as the definitive history of it and the boats that sailed into it, John has also compiled a publication on the old Fiesta Ballroom where, attending a Johnny McEvoy gig, he met his wife, Jane.

"I loved the showband era - there were some great acts about in those days."

Not least his personal favourites, the Capitol Showband who performed on the opening night of the Fiesta on October 5th, 1962. "I was there and they got me hooked straight away. Great times and a great era for music and real entertainment."

And if the odd Portuguese found his way to the famous old ballroom on the Port Road, it was probably thanks to John Baird. "These sailors would come in from Cape Verde on their boats - excellent seamen, good workers and always happy."

And happier still when John would take them along to the Fiesta. "Though I took one of them along and he was scared to ask any of the girls to dance in case he was refused!"

No such problems for the larger than life John. He

and Jane married in Fahan chapel in 1977. "We had twelve at the wedding and food afterwards at our house. I was lucky - I got a good woman."

And a solid son, Jonathan, born into their lives a couple of years after. "I wish I was as good a man as him at his age," John proudly proclaims.

They built a house at Drumnahoagh on the site given to them by his grandparents. "Paddy Harte and Bernard McGlinchey got me the planning permission."

While John has sailed to many parts in his days on board various vessels, his richly acclaimed artwork has also found its way to homes here and well beyond these shores.

From an early age he could draw and undertaking sign writing on the sides of rally cars for the likes of James McDaid's Sunbeam and Sammy Fisher's Mini helped move that expertise along quite literally.

As he points out on his Homepage, he places a great emphasis on detail, specialising on maritime subjects as anyone who has viewed even a selection of his work can testify. All of it stemming from sketching the boats from Holland and Scotland and elsewhere that would, in those halcyon days, surge up the Swilly River and provide John with hours and days of enthralment. And the art world and countless private collections with some maritime masterpieces.

His work has been exhibited both here and abroad and there is many a charity, both local and national, that has benefited from his drawings.

As any artist will confirm, drawing and painting becomes something of an addiction but in another life, a dependence on alcohol could have torn his artistic endeavours to shreds. "I quit seventeen years ago and have never looked back."

He does still recall the great pub atmosphere and the characters that frequented the likes of Blakes Bar and Peadar's, two of his favourite ports of call back in the day.

Illness - he is a diabetic - has forced John into hospital and he has nothing but high praise for the "exemplary care" he found at Letterkenny Hospital during his time there.

Nowadays, he travels to the Showgrounds in Galway along with his son to watch the Connacht rugby team while also revelling in Jonathan's involvement in other sports such as soccer and rallying. Last week, Johnny's LYIT ladies team advanced to the quarter-finals of the national cup competition with a 4-1 win over U.C.D. in Dublin. And at the weekend, the younger Baird headed off to Killarney to navigate for Wesley Patterson in the historic rally.

Meanwhile, John boasts a prized collection of photographs and images from the showband scene of the sixties and seventies.

In some of them he is pictured with a selection of the top musicians and groups who made up that scene.

But those surviving showband members, if they retain those same photographs, might have also been aware that the man in their midst is an artist of another calling and one of the true great characters to emerge from the town of Letterkenny.

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