

Society memories

Our alumni share their society memories. To add yours, please email alumnicommunications@contacts.bham.ac.uk (<mailto:alumnicommunications@contacts.bham.ac.uk>).

1950s

Martin Johnson (BSc Electrical Engineering, 1957)

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It's been a very long time since I was last anywhere near to Old Joe, but at that time you could actually go inside and climb him, as I did. After leaving the University, I did a two-year Graduate Apprenticeship with the BBC. I then joined Decca Radar and did (military reserved) radar development work with them, involving a wonderful six weeks at Woomera Range in South Australia. Latterly, I did some cutting-edge design and development for the Decca 101 small-boat marine radar. But living in rented accommodation in West London was not my idea of how married life should start, so in 1971 I left for Scotland, and took a post as Development Engineer with Ferranti. My main contribution to the company was to lead the Blue Fox radar programme – this was the radar in the nose of the Sea Harriers that did so well in the Falklands conflict.

I ended my career as Technical and Quality Director of the Edinburgh part of BAE Systems Product Support Department. I retired in 2000, to spend much more time with my wife Pat, and my two sons. Since then, my main interests have been amateur dramatics, management of the village community hall, and increasing involvement with St Leonard's Lasswade Episcopal Church (as Property Convener and Rector's Warden). I have also taken up playing the clarinet. Each of our sons has given us a grandson and a granddaughter, so we are much in demand as babysitters.

I was fortunate enough while at the University to live in Chancellor's Hall in Edgbaston, which at that time was run by Percy Hordern who was, I am given to understand, a brother of Michael Hordern, the actor.

I made many good friends there, oddly enough mostly from the Faculty of Malting and Brewing. We founded the Firkin Club, whose remit was at regular intervals to hire a room in a pub and set up a firkin (nine gallons) of a local beer, different every time, and pontificate on its relative qualities. At least, that was how the evening would start. After one such meeting I fell over in the Hall grounds and broke my wrist. I maintain to this day that I simply slipped on an icy patch.

One of those brewer friends was J R A Kendall (known as Robert), with whom I had many a good night out in London during my Decca Radar days. I was shattered to hear on the 8 o'clock news one morning that he and another friend had decided to swim across the Serpentine in full morning dress on their way to a wedding reception, but that only his friend had made it safely to the other side. Some of the other brewers were Brian Lee, Peter Chiverton and Brian Randall, all Chancellor's Hall inmates. Alas, Chancellor's Hall is no more - when I went to look for it, all I could find was a housing estate.

Other friends, also Elec. Eng. like me, were D E N Davies (who was to rise to great heights in the Post Office), Mark Sheppard and Terry Comelio. We, with others, were wont to play poker at lunchtime in the Union, ostensibly for chips but, of course, we cashed them up outside afterwards for real money.

2000s

Harkeet Sandhu (BSc Psychology, 2008)

My favourite memory of Birmingham is joining the Intervol Society at the Guild and volunteering in South Africa for eight weeks with another seven students. During this time, we stayed on a residential farm with people with learning difficulties, young people at risk of joining gangs and ex-convicts.

The volunteers and I built a staircase and a pontoon from scratch coming down from a tree house and drained a dam so that children could fish and swim there in their holidays.

Living with a few ex-convicts – bank robbers and murderers who were on probation was something we only learnt when at the farm a few weeks into our stay! One of the residents committed suicide (shot himself in the head) in his room while we were staying there as he was suffering from severe depression.

It taught me so many skills i.e. not to judge people, to be resilient and not to fear things out of regret. My experience opened so many doors to me. It was my first real 'travelling' experience and I conquered so many fears – world's highest bunjee jump, world's highest gauge swing, shark cage diving, sailed a boat, shared a cage with cheetahs, held a burmese python around my neck. It also opened up the rest of the world – I have now travelled to 20 countries by the age of 26.

After travelling in SE Asia I found myself hopping on a plane to Australia (a last-minute decision and planned to be there for a few months only) and I never returned home. I was offered a sponsorship to work with a charity to manage their volunteer programmes across two states. I now work for one of the best NGOs in the world – The Fred Hollows Foundation, with major donors and corporate partnerships, as a Relationship Manager.

I am also engaged to get married to an Aussie later this year!

My brother, twin sister and I were the first generation of my family to be born in the UK, and when travelling to India (where the family is originally from) we can see how important our education was. Not only did the University equip me with knowledge but it gave me the confidence to think outside the box and encouraged me to take risks to fulfil my dreams.

I'll never forget my three years at the University of Birmingham – the friends I made, the experiences, the laughter and the tears! Best years of my life!