

MEET THE MEMBERS

Alison and John Wicks

As we were cordially invited into the Wicks' lovely home, Marie and I had no idea of the fascinating story we were about to hear from our hosts. Alison and John are both English by birth. I expressed some surprise, assuming that John was Scottish having heard his mastery of the bagpipes on several occasions. I was told, very firmly, that John is a "citizen of the British Isles." In fact, he describes himself as a "sinner from Pinner," the village in Middlesex where he was born. He did, however, have a Scottish grandmother and has lived all over Britain.

John was educated at the local Grammar School, where he was a student of excellence in a school of excellence, and then at Bristol University. After qualifying as a vet, John did a lot of "James Herriot stuff" and continued to practise as a vet for the next 30 years.

Alison came from a family of 8 children and lived near Canterbury. She also attended the local Grammar School and, coincidentally, recently discovered that she was born in the same village as our own Ethel Sutton. Alison trained as a nurse in Bristol and worked as a post-operative cardiac nurse. She met John at a party and completely disregarded the ad\sound advice she had been given; "never go out with a vet student!"

After they tied the knot, Alison could not continue in general nursing with the responsibilities of the children, so she did school nursing for a while. She was one of the fondly remembered "Nitty Nora's." She then worked as a co-ordinator for a charity that provided respite for carers of handicapped people. After that, she became John's manager in his business. I bet that kept her hands full!

After a while, John became restless for adventure and had visions of going to Africa. He obtained a scholarship to work in Uganda and trained in readiness for the position. However, a certain Idi Amin came to power and suddenly Uganda did not seem like such a good idea. What to do? They had sold all their furniture and effects so they looked around for somewhere to go. Australia!! John saw a job advertised in Sydney and flew out, bringing the family over later.

An unfortunate incident which resulted in the electrocution of a chap in Port Macquarie saw another opportunity open up for the Wicks. They bundled everything into their car and set off, without map or directions, not realising how far it was. They loved Port Macquarie in the 70's and eventually bought the practice. During this period, they took Australian citizenship.

Unfortunately, Alison began to suffer from home-sickness, made worse by the death of her father. They also wanted to bring the children up British, so they decided to return to England. However, on their return, they were dismayed to find that everything had changed." Still, John kept busy. He had three surgeries, specialising in exotic zoo animals. He was particularly interested in raptors and worked considerably with falcons. He told me an interesting fact that the reason falconry is not an established sport in Australia is that there are laws here preventing the use of an animal to deliberately kill another animal.

It was at this time, around 1997, that John became interested in sailing. He was on holiday in the Algarve, when he came across a book entitled, "Sell Up and Sail." So he did! They sold the house and bought a boat to sail around the world. (Alison went rather quiet at this point of their story!) By this time the children were off their hands so they set off. In the first year they sailed across the Caribbean to the Bermuda's, the Azores and the Atlantic Triangle. They took to the lifestyle so well that they bought a bigger and better boat. In '98 they joined in the Millennium Odyssey, carrying the flame from Jerusalem around the world. The Wicks only did half the trip but they loved it. Although they were a crew of only two, they were not entirely alone on the long-distance sail and the parties in port gave them a chance to catch up on their socialising.

At one stage they did have a bit of a problem. John took ill, which left the boat in Alison's hands. She had to guide the boat but was not strong on navigation. The problem was solved by friends guiding the way by sailing in front of them - and Alison followed. On another occasion, the auto-helm broke so John notified the fleet that they were in trouble. A Italian boat had too many on board so they transferred two of their excess crew to the Wicks' boat to help out. Being generous souls, they brought copious amounts of pasta and tomato sauce with them. What was Alison's galley full of? You guessed it!

The Wicks then island hopped across the Pacific, taking the "warm weather route" to Australia. Alison had agreed to give John five years on the boat and that time was now up. They arrived in Coff's Harbour, decided to stay and ended up in beautiful

Bellingen. Although they loved it there, their children were now all settled in Melbourne. They took the boat to New Zealand, sold it and returned to live in Melbourne. After some time in Seville, they now live in Mooroolbark in a lovely group of homes. Their families are quite close, being in Mooroolbark, Wonga Park and Templestowe and they manage to see a lot of them.

By the time they returned to Australia, John had officially retired but had to work once more to access his superannuation. He worked part-time at Avonsleigh for two years and then retired in earnest. He loved working at Avonsleigh but "loves retirement more!"

It is obvious that neither Alison nor John could sit around doing nothing so they started doing voluntary work. Alison volunteers as a palliative care worker while John is a guide at Healesville Sanctuary. They both work with Burmese refugees who are learning English through the Migrant Education Service. The people are given a free six months course at Swinburne and the Wicks assist them. It is very hard, as some of the newcomers have very little education in their own language.

I asked John how he developed his interest in things Scottish. Apart from his Gran, his interest was awakened in the Pipe Band that was part of the school cadet force. He was a boy piper but lost interest and didn't do any more about it until he saw a flyer on a lamppost, many years later, at Lakes Entrance. This sparked his interest so he retaught himself to play. He is now a proud member of the Ringwood RSL Highland Pipe Band. This requires twice weekly practices and taking part in a lot of competitions from late November to March. He enjoys participating in the Highland gatherings and, of course, being our unofficial piper.

They are both enjoying their connection with Clocktower and John was our able President for the 2010 - 2011 year. John is also continuing his long-time association with Lilydale Men's Probus. John and Alison both appreciate the variety of activities available in the Club. Alison said, "There are so many good things in this club."

Unfortunately, they have both been experiencing health problems in the last few months. Alison has a very stubborn leg injury which refuses to heal, despite treatment and time spent in a hyperbaric chamber. John discovered, to his surprise, that he was in need of fairly urgent heart surgery, which was successfully completed. He maintained his strong connection with animals by having a pig's valve inserted into his heart. That could be carrying things just a bit too far.

We wish them both well and thank them for their contribution to our club.