



The Sailor's Tale

A short biography of

Roy Basil Dawkins

By Keith Morris

Prelude

Messing about on the water is what Roy Dawkins loves doing most, whether in his sailing boat Felicity, or in a rowing skiff on the Thames.

The beautiful home he shares with wife Freida, Oak Tree Cottage, in the posh end of the private Linersh Wood in the Surrey village of Bramley, is covered with sailing memorabilia from his sailing and rowing exploits, of which more later.

We sat in the summerhouse of the long garden which leads down to a tributary of the River Wey (not navigable, even by Roy though he has fallen in a couple of times), with the captain wearing a sailing T-shirt, of course, with his eldest daughter Nicky (my wife).

At my invitation, Roy waxed lyrical, for several hours, about his long life, with an amazing memory for detail from many decades ago. So, anchors away and here goes...

Keith Morris

Let us begin

On April 18, 1928, a 7.0 magnitude earthquake shook Plovdiv Province, Bulgaria, killing 127. Meanwhile in a nursing home in Blackheath, Roy Basil was born, the first child of Albert Victor and Evelyn (nee Drown) Dawkins – a little tardy coming into the world – starting how he meant to go on!

Evelyn was a privately-educated secretary who worked for a stockbroker in London, and Albert was an electrical engineer working for Newcastle consultancy Merz and McLellan, which had offices in Esher.

Sister Patricia Anne completed the family in 1933.

Albert played double bass in a dance band in South London and the family lived in a semi-detached house in Wallington, south London,

near Croydon, on Demesne Road leading to Beddington Park (I told you Roy is a details man).

“My main memories of Wallington were of fights, arguments and flying saucepans – my mother took no prisoners,” said Roy.

“I was regularly evacuated to family friends, the Guthries, at the other end of the road where dad Wallace was a church organist at the local Methodist church. The son Alan was my best friend.”

Roy went to Banstead Hill School: “I hated it as I was shy and I had hairy legs – I was very self-conscious in shorts and long socks. I never liked going to kids parties because of said hairy legs.”

Another early memory was in October 1930, of the R101 airship flying very close over the house – powered by hydrogen gas – it was a majestic sight, very slow and quiet.

Unfortunately, the flight Roy saw ended in disaster the following day in northern France when it crashed, killing 48 people on board and putting an end to airship development.

Other memories were of being parked in strange beds in other people’s houses when his parents went out for a party, then being woken up and taken home in the middle of the night.

“We had a car, which was quite unusual and I remember being in a car crash,” recalled Roy. “But I have no real happy childhood memories. My father was a tall chap, with no interest in his children. I can’t remember one physical contact with him, but I imagine his life with my mother was not very easy.”

Albert left without warning when Roy was six or seven, never to be seen by him again. All the family knew was that Albert was in the West Country somewhere. Many years later, Roy learnt that Albert started a second family there and he made contact with them (of which more later on).

“Divorce was a dirty word, but Mother sought a legal separation, which she eventually got, but no money was ever sent,” said Roy. “I never enjoyed family life - the only family I had was when I joined the Pursehouse family through my first wife Mary.”

After his father left, the family had to find somewhere to live and they went back to Harlesden in North West London where Roy's maternal grandparents lived.

Grandfather William was a master builder and, in the end, quite a well-heeled gentleman: "I have a picture of him in an open-topped Bentley – the family car. Grandfather built much of Harlesden, NW10, great estates and streets – we moved into one of the homes he had built. Grandmother liked her drink a little too much."

Roy's mother Evelyn had been a late addition to the family and was the apple of her father's eye, with older siblings Bill, Edmund and Alice.

"Bill was in the building trade and had alcohol problems. I was not encouraged to consort with him," said Roy. "Edmund went to live in Canada and I know no more. Except that he fought in the Spanish Civil War. Alice never married."

The Dawkins family subsequently moved into one of the homes built by grandfather William, in Cholmondeley Avenue - a ground floor flat. Rent was paid to Aunty Alice, who by this time had inherited the properties. She lived in a double-fronted house called Trinidad, at 121 Wrotesley Road in Willesden.

"Alice wanted to raise the rent, which we couldn't afford, so we became homeless for a day – not a nice feeling. Then she took us in and we became tenants in Trinidad. There was no room for me to sleep in, so I ended up in a camp bed behind the sofa in the sitting room," said Roy.

Roy attended Furness Road School: "If I was lower than sixth in the form placings, I was flicked on the back of my legs by my mother – and it worked!

"I had to sit the 11+, which was called the Scholarship. I passed and got a place at Willesden County Grammar – a large mixed state school. The headmaster was Mr Wallace, a Fabian and a socialist - my family were staunch liberals," he recalls.

War breaks out

But before Roy could attend the grammar school, the Allies declared war on Nazi Germany in September 1939.

Roy and sister Pat were evacuated to Northampton for six months during the ‘Phoney War’ period, when not much happened.

“We lived in a village called Far Cotton where the master of the house was a shunter – an engine driver - who regularly beat his son with a belt. The mother was a very nice lady of good stock. My pseudo brother was a good chap but when my mother came and met them, she said ‘you cannot live there any more’ so we were brought back after six months.”

When the war proper started, Evelyn became an evacuee officer and Roy and Pat were sent to Ogmores Vale in South Wales, a mining valley with three mines.

“The whole of the valley turned out to welcome us at Ogmores railway station, it was like a football crowd, being hugged and kissed – I have always had a soft spot for them,” said Roy.

“My mother told me not to agree to being separated from my sister. We were put with a marvellous family - Bryn and Elsie Davies. He was a drift miner, a big chap, who worked on surface mines on the side of the mountain. They lived in a terrace house in Suffolk Place, at the foot of the mountain.

“They were childless and presented with two children, and we were ‘adopted’ by their large family.”

Roy was eligible to go to a grammar school, so attended Ogmores Grammar School where Jacob Jones, a retired sea captain, was headmaster and he ruled it like he was in charge of a ship.

“Jacob Jones stood me up in class one day and said: ‘Here is a boy, dragged from his home and here he is top of the form’ – this did not go down well with my form mates,” said Roy

“I became a complete Welshman – I even spoke Latin with a Welsh

accent. It was where I became a rugby player and sprinter, although not by choice!”

“My top subject at school was chemistry, with Mr Prothero – who unfortunately committed suicide. He told me ‘you are a born chemist’ – but it would have meant going to university which was out of the question.

“If I had stayed in Wales, I think I might have gone to university,” said Roy. “I got enough good exam results to matriculate, which meant automatic entry into a university - probably Cardiff.

“I loved it in Wales,” said Roy. “Chasing sheep, picking wimberries (or blueberries) and rolling down the bracken in the mountain. Every weekend was spent in a small hill farm with stone-flagged floors, cattle and horses, at the top of a mountain.”

Pat stayed there for the whole war, but to his deep regret, Roy was there for only half of it.

“I think my mother was jealous that she was losing her son as well as her husband, so mother took me back to London after a couple of years, which was bad news,” said Roy. “I went back to flying bombs and sand bags.

“Back in London, I had half-day schooling at Willesden Grammar School – it was not safe to go in the afternoons.

“I remember one particular girl who came into school one morning and had become an orphan overnight, her parents were killed by a bomb - and she was not the only one,” recalled Roy.

At the grammar school Roy remembers playing the violin and appeared in a school concert (only once!). Other wartime memories for Roy were of his mother Evelyn being a civil defence ambulance driver and of going round collecting the rent for Auntie Alice, who owned a dozen houses.

“The house opposite was bombed with a land mine, which was dropped by parachute, glass panes were cracked and the plaster fell down,” said Roy.

“We had an Anderson shelter in the garden, large enough for two people. It was a hole in the ground with corrugated iron sheets and turfed over. Later we had a Morrison shelter – a reinforced metal box in the basement of the house.

“I was in the boy scouts – and one of our good deeds was to build these Morrison shelters for old ladies,” he recalled.

Engineering a career

Roy left school at the age of 16 and never went into the sixth form.

“My mother had arranged a five-year electrical engineer student apprenticeship with a firm, British Thomson Houston (BTH), in Harlesden,” he said. “She said electricity will always be needed so it was a secure job – but I knew within me that I was never an engineer.

“Mother paid money to get me in (indentured) – it was a legal document so I was bound to stay. But it stood me in good stead, finally working for the National Grid.

“Out of choice I would have gone into chemistry or journalism or been a surveyor, but not engineering – I was never really good at physics. Engineers are good with their hands and improvising – I am not really like that,” said Roy.

“I went to an apprentice school to learn how to bend metal, use machines and lathes and also studied at the same time. I went round each office, heavy and light engineering, drawing and the purchasing office. I earned 33 shillings and thruppence a week and gave 30 to my mother. I ended up after five years at £5.50p per week.”

Roy finished the apprenticeship in his early twenties with a Higher National Diploma.

“Being an engineer was a real dirge for me,” said Roy.

He stayed with BTH for a little while then left to join the British Electricity Authority, a nationalised industry, as a general assistant engineer.

“It was like the Civil Service,” he said. “Automatic grades and promotion and a pension – it was very secure and appealed to me, as I had not had much security earlier in life.

“It later became the CEBG, and I went to Kingston as a construction engineer, working for a Mr Laurence Harding - an old-fashioned gentleman engineer who had trained at Faraday College – the top place for electrical engineers - which appealed to the snobbish side of me” said Roy.

“One day I was called into the office and told ‘we are setting up five new transmission districts in the SE of England to set up a super grid system’. I was asked, where I would like to go, with a promotion!

“I was in my late twenties or early thirties at the time and I thought, why not go to the Canterbury district (where there was a new transmissions district), lovely city, cathedral, dingy sailing, near the sea.”

The beguiling Mary Pursehouse

Canterbury was where Roy met his first wife, Mary Pursehouse, through their shared interest in tennis at Canterbury Lawn Tennis Club. Mary was a county level tennis and hockey player.

Roy lived in the White House in Canterbury, a white mansion stately home, where the rent was too high for him, “but I rather fancied it,” he said. It was in Addisham - in those days a mining town.

Mary worked at the girls’ grammar school in Canterbury, where she taught the two daughters of the renowned pacifist, socialist and campaigner for the poor, the Very Rev Hewlett Johnson, an avowed Christian Marxist, known as the Red Dean of Canterbury. He reputedly enjoyed friendships with Chairman Mao, Fidel Castro and Gandhi. Mary lived in a flat owned by the Red Dean.

“After 18 months, she asked me to marry her,” said Roy.

“She was a very strong character and she beguiled me. Mary had a strong family, which I never had, and that family have never changed really.

“My mother was not happy with the idea – but she would not have been happy with anybody who wanted to marry me!”

The couple were engaged for over a year, with banns called in Harlesden and Diss. They married in St Mary’s Parish church in Diss in 1959.

Initially they went to live East Molesey, in a flat near Hampton Court, not far from Kingston where Roy worked. Mary taught at Tiffin’s Girls School, and was head of the geography department.

“I think she would have made a headteacher, she could be very assertive,” said Roy. “I was always referred to as ‘Mrs Dawkins’ husband!”

The couple moved to 2 Locketts Close, Dedworth, Windsor. A detached house in a brand new estate.

“In those days it was just assumed that you would have children, there was no planning!” recalled Roy.

After two or three years of life in Windsor, Nicola (Nicky) was born in January 1962. “I remember the doctor who examined Mary after the birth saying ‘I want to make doubly sure there is not another one’,” said Roy.

After making a £1,000 profit on Locketts Close in a year, the couple moved to Linersh Wood Close (the rough end that is) in Bramley and paid £5,800 for Grey Sedges. Philippa (Pip) was born two years later in March 1964.

Pip’s birth was not straightforward, she was induced, jaundiced and anaemic due to Resus Incompatibility Syndrome. The doctor was actually a near neighbour in Linersh Wood Close.

“For three months Pip was in a very dicey situation, having exchange blood transfusions - one of the first baby’s to have them at St Luke’s in Guildford. Mary really struggled for a while after Pip was born, but she was “an excellent mother,” said Roy.

Roy became a commuter for a while in the last sixties/early seventies working in research and development with the CEGB at Paternoster

Square, next to St Paul's Cathedral in central London.

In around 1972, the whole transmission division, including Roy's department was conveniently moved to Guildford. They were mostly involved in building the "super (imposed) grid" to bolster the existing National Grid.

Mary was working at St Catherine's School in Bramley but the marriage was not really working out and, in 1976, when Nicky was 14 and Pip was 12, Mary and the girls left Bramley and headed for Mary's home town of Diss in Norfolk, where her parents lived.

Roy stayed for a couple of years in Linersh Wood but then sold the house, split the proceeds with Mary and moved to a flat on West Mount in Guildford.

Messing about on the water

Roy has always had a fascination for, and love of, boats and learnt to sail at Bisham Abbey, near Marlow.

When he lived at Grey Sedges in Bramley, he built his first boat, in the garage with neighbour, Bill Ellis. The 11ft Mirror dingy 4851 was built from marine plywood and named Romaniph (Roy, Mary, Nicola, Phillipa), it was bright yellow, with a snub nose and red sails and was Roy's pride and joy (but not so loved by Mary!).

Roy's sailing career has been eventful. "I remember capsizing in Richmond once – the first of many - and the Police launch came to our aid. That was in the flat calm," said Roy. "Not many people can do that – it takes skill."

Further incidents happened at Frensham Pond, once with a very young Pip in the boat much to Mary's consternation. Roy has been a member of Frensham Pond and the CEGB sailing clubs, where he raced Victories.

Romaniph was followed by Marie Clare 1, a 21-foot Corribee and Marie Clare 2, a 23-foot Virgo Voyager. His current boat is a Francis 26 named Felicity, birthed at Gosport. All his boats have given Roy

hours of pleasure.

Roy raced in Victories at Cowes regattas for many years, with third place being his best result, and in the round the Isle of Wight race in 2002 and 2003, winning his class for two years in succession in his own boats.

Always keen for adventure, Roy sailed for 22 days in the South Atlantic ARC (Atlantic Rally for Cruisers) race from the Canary Islands to Barbados in a 42-foot catamaran Katachuk, with Mike Smith, the owner, and Peter Pilkington, and then for some relaxation from Barbados to Grenada – quite a jump from his previous longest sails from England to France!

“Being on watch alone at night in the middle of the ocean, knowing that if you went overboard no one would notice, took some getting used to, as did going overboard when conditions were calm, to clean the boat knowing that there was seven miles of sea beneath you!” said Roy.

He also claims he learnt how to cook at sea, even catching the food. On one occasion this involved a duel with a shark which felt that the rainbow fish that they had caught should be its lunch, not Roy’s.

Rowing is also a passion of Roy’s and he has been a long-term member of the Dittons Skiff and Punting Club. He admits that his initial interest had more to do with the club’s reputation for providing a good social life rather than the actual rowing, but over the years, his love of rowing has increased.

He took part in the Great River Race in 1993 coming 15th out of ‘hundreds of boats’. He still rows on the Thames on Friday mornings as bow man in a four and in double skiffs on other outings, still enjoying the physical challenge this provides.

Dressing up with the Masons

Another long-time interest of Roy’s is the Masons.

“My proposer was Len Rosser and my seconder was Bill Rogers. My

mother paid the joining fee, which was quite a sacrifice for her as money was tight (a three-figure sum – which was quite a lot in those days).

“I would not stop anyone joining the Masons but I would not enthuse,” said Roy. “For me it was take it or leave it - for some it was their life. Father-in-law, Ron, and, brother-in-law Chris Purchasehouse were both masons, although not particularly active members.

“They do a lot of good in raising money and it is very much charity focused,” said Roy.

“You meet a complete cross-section of people at ‘Festive Board’, you never knew who the person sitting next to you would be. You get to know all sorts of people - sometimes influential people and sometimes just the reverse. There is a degree of networking.”

Roy was initiated into the Cama Lodge at Hampton Court Hotel opposite the Palace.

“I went through a ceremony which, on the face of it, sounds a bit strange but is not really that strange at all,” said Roy.

“You go into the ceremony bare-footed (socks only) and blind-folded, you wonder what is going to happen next. You are asked in a formal way, your age, ‘are you over 21?’ ‘Do you believe in a supreme being?’ is one of the questions – not ‘Which religion do you belong to?’

“The ceremony is in very old English, and takes an-hour-and-a-half. During this vetting, you do various movements and are presented to other lodge members barefoot (hairy legs came in handy then, it proved I was a man!),” said Roy.

“The initiation ceremony is the same the world over. It is not a church, but each lodge has a chaplain. It is not a religion itself - its main aim is charity. You wear regalia including an apron and sash.

“Mary could not stand it, she said it was a load of ‘squit’ even though her father and brother were part of it. She went to the ladies night dances though,” recalled Roy.

He is now in a sailing lodge called Compass Rose, which is growing

in size. Lots of members are widowers, so it is a way of meeting other people with a lot of Asian members now.

“I don’t regret joining, but would not enthuse about it too much, unless people were interested in it for the right reasons.

“I introduced three people to the Masons, one died, one defaulted and one is now very high up in masonry - Dennis Foddy,” said Roy.

High flying in Kuwait

In 1976, Roy was offered a secondment to Kuwait with the National Grid to help with electricity transmission security. Huge electricity plants were needed to power machinery needed for desalination plants in the desert.

“Their electricity system was not proving very reliable and our role was to make it better,” recalled Roy, who lived next door to the British embassy in Kuwait City.

Roy remembers being the fourth fairy in A Midsummer Night’s Dream. “They flew out a West End producer to do it along with large bits of scenery in huge BA airplanes, no expense spared.”

Roy gained a promotion to second fairy and the grand production took place in the grounds of the British embassy, when Roy also played an heroic role in stopping a piece of scenery hitting the ambassador’s wife, twisting his arm in the process and for which she was very grateful.

Roy sailed in Kuwait, of course, and swam every afternoon in a sports centre pool. He also recalls watching Brian Clough and his Nottingham Forest team playing against Kuwait City – it was a diplomatic draw.

Alcohol was prohibited, but as long as the ex-pats kept it to themselves, the Kuwaitis turned a blind eye. All the ex-pats drove automatic Chevrolet cars and paid someone to clean them every day. “We didn’t pay for petrol or anything,” said Roy, “just our food from the supermarkets.

“I paid no income tax on my Kuwait salary and it was a plumb job really even though conditions were very testing.”

Roy returned to the UK after two-and-a-half years and was offered voluntary redundancy from the National Grid – which he happily took.

“It was a fantasy world really - I could have stayed there and earned enough money to buy two Porsches,” said Roy.

Roy bought Oak Tree Cottage, back in Linersh Wood, with the proceeds of his Kuwait sojourn.

A stint as a summer seasonal immigration officer at Heathrow and Gatwick airports turned into a full-time job for 12 years – with plenty of celebrity tales to tell to boot.

“I saw world champion boxer Mohammed Ali out of the country, with his minders all round him. He was already suffering from Parkinson’s.”

Snooker world champion Dennis Taylor was “very affable” according to Roy. He remembers a little chat with Mark Philips about his horse jumping career and seeing Mother Teresa in a wheelchair.

Other celebs to pass through Roy’s desk were musicians Yehudi Menuhin and Andre Previn, Boomtown Rat Bob Geldof, golfer Bernhard Langer (“a very nice chap”) and actress Julie Walters.

Cricketer Ian Botham asked Roy “Where can I get a beer mate?” So Roy took him to the nearest bar.

He met all of The Beatles and the Spice Girls and the first man on the moon - astronaut Neil Armstrong “who could not open his case because the latch was broken,” recalls Roy, who finally retired at the age of 70, in 1998.

The secret marriage

Back in his old stomping ground of Linersh Wood in Bramley (and

now living down the posh end), Roy bumped into former neighbour and friend of Mary's, Freida Walsh, who was now living in Godalming and working as a counsellor for Haslemere Counselling Service, having separated from her husband.

They hit it off like a house on fire and began a relationship. After a few years, Frieda moved into Roy's home in Linersh Wood.

In 2010, following the death of Freida's first husband Maurice, they got married 'in secret', in Winchester registry office, and used the park and ride bus to get there (Roy always was a bit tight!). The Registrar was not impressed! Roy was 82 and Frieda 86.

Mike and Sonia Chilcott were witnesses and Freida's son Sean was the official photographer (there, I told you Roy was tight) as he happened to be in the country at the time. Roy was even spared the expense of the big ribbon rose for the car which had been left at the Park and Ride, courtesy of Mike and Sonia who also provided the wedding breakfast!

Age being no barrier to newly-wedded bliss, the happy couple have spent their years together living life to the full. This has involved trips to Thailand to visit son Sean, Venice, two round Britain cruises, river cruises, holidays in Southern Ireland, including a stay with Chris de Burgh's mother in Waterford, and now regular rest and recuperation breaks at Howard's House near Salisbury. There was also a memorable trip to Barbados which resulted in Roy featuring on the front cover of Hello magazine, standing on the steps of a courthouse (ask him if you want to know more!).

Tolerance, love, a well-developed, if at time eccentric, sense of humour and being prepared not to take yourself too seriously are apparently the secrets to married bliss!

Family matters

Roy's eldest daughter, Nicky, is a GP in Norfolk and is married to Keith, a journalist. They have two children - Hannah (a junior doctor) and Tom (a software developer).

Younger daughter Pip is a lawyer, who lives in Nottingham with partner Simon, and has two children – Gabrielle studying linguistics at Edinburgh University and Ben studying medicine at Bristol.

Having himself missed out on the opportunity to go to university, Roy is very proud that both his daughters and his grandchildren have taken up this opportunity for themselves.

Frieda's massive extended family have welcomed Roy wholeheartedly into their midst and, with Nicky and Pip's children, they can count 14 grandchildren and five great-grandchildren between them, which they say keeps them young. They are a great source of joy and provide Roy with the 'family' that he always wanted.

Brother Peter I presume

In 2007, Roy surprisingly discovered that he had a half-brother, Peter, through his father who had disappeared from his life 75 years before, when he headed for the West Country.

Friend Sonia was doing some research for a genealogy course when she made the discovery.

“Our first contact was on the phone,” recalls Roy. “We met a few months later. Peter is much taller than me, but apparently I am the spitting image of my father. We keep in touch by phone and email and it's been good to make contact and to be able to fill in some of the gaps in my childhood, we welcome him to the family and I look forward to getting to know him better.”

Ninety years young

As he celebrates his 90th birthday in April 2018, Roy is still a regular at his gym and a keen rower at the Dittons Skiff and Punting Club.

When he turned 80, Roy claimed to be the world record holder on the Ergo rowing machine, so at 90 he will undoubtedly now be looking for a second world title.