

John Sadler, Hexham Courant, Friday 6 June 2008

AN EVENING in the company of John Sadler is fascinating.

His knowledge of history is scarily vast, and he explains it with such passion it comes alive.

Those bits of history you wish you'd been taught at school are revealed in all their gory and salacious glory.

John (55) is an author currently working on his 20th book on history. He is an acknowledged expert on Border history and Anglo-Scottish relations, with a particular emphasis on the military.

This expertise has led to television work, as a consultant and as a presenter, on BBC Scotland's Richard III and Channel 4's Buildings That Shaped England among others.

Although much in demand as a writer, John works, too, as heritage project development officer for Durham County Council, which dovetails perfectly with his love for and knowledge of the past.

It is plain to see he takes his job immensely seriously, but he admits it's the historical element that drives him on.

Born and brought up on Tyneside, John's family was the Sadler Brothers building firm. His great-great-great grandfather was a keelman on the Tyne.

John attended George Stephenson Grammar School, going on to study law at Northumbria University.

"I don't know why I took law," he mused. "I thought it would be useful for the family business, but it wasn't interesting."

He worked for Sadler Brothers as a secretary for eight years, and spent 20 years slogging away in legal jobs, even until quite recently, but his distaste for the work shines through.

Having published his first book, *Battle for Northumbria*, in 1988, John felt even more strongly that he wanted to make a career out of his passion, but was realistic enough about the difficulties involved.

"Writing was unlikely to make me a living on its own," he said.

"But I got the chance, in 2004, to be curator of Bellingham Heritage Centre, at a time when I was receiving a number of commissions for books."

Breaking the shackles of an unhappy marriage to legal affairs, the union between heritage and writing proved to be a much closer fit.

Offers to lecture and to lead tours of battlefields here and abroad followed shortly afterwards.

What shines through John is his remarkable energy and his infectious love for his subject.

A discussion on any topic can lead into an anecdote or historical tale. Far from being wearing, the meanders enliven proceedings, informing and illustrating the conversation.

Like it or not, you will end up learning.

For instance, you probably thought Hadrian's Wall was a defence, built to keep the marauding Picts out of England.

In fact, it was an engine of war, built so the Roman garrisons could march out, flanked by cavalry, surround the enemy and push them back against the Wall. Trapped in these killing fields, they would be slaughtered.

Another fascinating tale is that of Riccarton, which used to be a thriving station town to the extent it could support two brothels.

"The Scottish police, coming over all Presbyterian, rode into town to shut these houses of ill-repute down," John explained.

"The promise of favours, which they accepted with alacrity, persuaded them not to make arrests.

"Apparently, some of them had to be helped to their vehicles the next day, they were so knackered," John laughed delightedly.

His pleasure at the scurrilous side of history fits well with his confessed non-conformism.

"It runs in the family," he explained. "My grandfather and father were both conscientious objectors, and my great-uncle co-founded the Independent Labour Party."

Indeed, John's grandfather suffered greatly for his convictions, being imprisoned during the First World War.

Before the war he was a fervent churchgoer until hearing a preacher telling young men it was their duty to sign up and fight. He vowed never again to go to church, and he stuck to it for his whole life.

During his incarceration he was force-fed when on hunger strike, damaging his long-term health.

On another occasion he was tied to a stake blindfolded, listening to the cocking of bolt-action rifles. Despite being told he would be shot if he would not recant, he called their bluff.

Even though he comes from a family of pacifists, John grew up with his obsession for military history. He supposes it comes from a childhood immersed in archaeology.

"My father was a keen archaeologist and amateur historian, and as a boy I was involved with Professor G. A. Jobey, a Military Cross winner and archaeologist, and the obsession endured," he said.

Being from the North-East, he has a strong affiliation with the area, holding the landscape and people in high affection.

He moved from Tyneside to Belsay in 1976 with wife Ruth, a homeopath, and it's here they brought up their two daughters, Rebecca (21) and Emma (18).

"Fortunately for me, the area I love has such a rich vein of history running through it," John enthused.

"The Borders were the site for the longest and most vicious war in history, the 300 Years War.

“In the 16th century, when the South had Shakespeare and beautiful architecture, the North was filled with castles, bastles and battles. That’s why it’s so sparsely populated.”

Apparently, during the reign of feckless King Edward II, the Scots under Robert the Bruce had steadily retaken control, ravaging the Borders.

Edward III set about repopulating the land with the toughest Englishmen he could find, often not the most savoury or law-abiding types.

He gave them land in Tynedale, and let them get on with countering the Celts. This is where the Charltons, Robsons, Milburns, Dodds, Halls and Reeds come from.

John is heavily involved in re-enactments of battles and interpretation of history.

He studies swordplay, and played a large part in the popular Storywalks programme at Housesteads on the Wall, and some Roman murder mystery days.

Tyne Bandits, a group dedicated to historic swordplay and interpretation, meets every week in Hexham.

“We’re looking for new recruits at the moment,” John said.

“What I like about battle re-enactments and sword fighting is that it brings history alive.

“You can actually see it, and it gives an idea, even if it’s only a slight one, of what things were like.”

Talking with John, it becomes difficult to understand why we’re not all interested in history, particularly in this region.

“The hills and valleys of Tynedale are stuffed with artefacts and remains from the Bronze Age until today,” he enthused.

“During the Second World War a Halifax or Lancaster bomber crashed up here somewhere.

“Apparently, because the crew spoke with Yorkshire accents, the local Home Guard were all for shooting them as German spies.”

If all teachers were as passionate as John, we’d be a nation of historians.

It seems natural that someone this knowledgeable and entertaining should branch out, and he’s planning to write a series of historical novels. They will be Cornwell-esque, based on characters in World War One.

If he can imbue them with a fraction of the quality of his conversation, they will be best-sellers.