

Jack Storer

The Story of our Beach Hut – ‘Southwold Jack’ No 192

Then and Now

THEN.....

There have been beach huts in Southwold for as long as I can remember. I have been coming to Southwold since 1919, when I was a very small child, but my earliest memories date from 1923 or perhaps 1924. In those days my father was one of the lucky ones who had two weeks paid holiday each year, and we always went to the seaside and invariably to somewhere on the East Coast, like Gorleston-on-Sea, Walton on the Naze or Southwold.

When we came on holiday in 1919 we probably hired a beach hut although I do not remember it for, after all, I was only a year old, or maybe just a little older. Sea bathing was much more formal then than it has become, and there is a photograph in our family archive of my mother and me using a Bathing Machine. I remember from subsequent visits, that they were located south of the pier. Bathing Machines were drawn by a horse to the water's edge and were double ended so that you entered from the landward end, up steps, changed into swim wear inside the machine, then descended into the sea, as far as possible out of public gaze, at the seaward end. As the tide came in the horse would draw the machines up the beach. How very different it all is today!

For our holiday in 1923 or 1924 we came by ‘Belle’ paddle steamer from Tower Pier in London. I seem to remember hearing my parents say the fare was 6/8d return: that is 33p in today's money! The old pier was considerably longer than it is today, and I well remember clambering over one of the sponsons which housed the ship's paddle wheels, to disembark, and then, walking down the pier holding my father's hand very tightly, for I was convinced we might fall through, what seemed to me, the frighteningly wide gaps between the massive deck planks, into the sea below! One of the steamers was the ‘Clacton Belle’ and I think another was the ‘Southwold Belle’. Having stopped at Southend-on-Sea, Walton-on-the-Naze and Clacton-on-Sea, and then Southwold, it went on to Great Yarmouth where it tied up overnight and returned the next day. We walked up North Parade to Barley House, a boarding house on East Green: our luggage had been sent by rail by the ‘luggage in advance’ service and was waiting in our bedroom, having been delivered from Southwold Station by hand cart. My father had hired a beach hut just below East Green and opposite Barley House.

I well remember our holiday in 1929, when again we stayed in Barley House, on East Green, just opposite a flight of steps down the cliff to the Promenade – just as it is today. I was 11 years old and well aware of what was going on in the world. I never pass it today without a sense of ‘dejas vu’. We came by chauffeur-driven Daimler hire car, and I remember hearing my father discussing this with my mother: the cost from our home in Palmer's Green, North London, was £5 for he had

advertised in a local newspaper and found someone who wanted a car to take them back from holiday and who, presumably, paid for the return journey. Petrol came in 2 gallon cans and cost 2/- per can: 2 shillings or 10p for 2 gallons! How times have changed! On other occasions we travelled by train of which I have vague memories and part of the treat was to have lunch in the dining car, and we may well have travelled on the old Southwold Railway from Halesworth, but I cannot remember for certain. . I mention this for in 1929 the railway failed, and I remember going with my father to the station in Blyth Road, and seeing a locomotive standing lifeless in the station, and one or two carriages on the track. My father explained to me that the company had gone 'bust': this was probably my first lesson in finance and bankruptcy!

My father hired a beach hut on the promenade, just below East Green, and I can remember him complaining to my mother how expensive everything was becoming, for the rent for the hut for the fortnight had gone up to 13/4p from 10/- he had paid last time we came to Southwold. That is 66p in today's money, from a previous price of 50p! Of course it must be remembered that 1929 was the beginning of the Great Depression which lasted for four years.

I loved sketching in those days and I used to sit on the beach sketching Thames sailing barges; at times there were anything up to half a dozen in sight, and the occasional small sailing coastal vessel. Steam coasters were commonplace too. There was always a great deal of activity on the beach with many fishing boats sailing off the beach and many taking tourists out to the lightship! I remember going crabbing with my grandfather (born in 1850) in the harbour and being taken to see the lifeboat, the 'Mary Scott', Southwold's first motor lifeboat, but I cannot remember where it was based.

Outbreak of War in 1939

War was declared on 3rd September 1939. In 1940, after the evacuation from Dunkirk, most of the Southwold beach huts were removed and placed on the Common, and linked by heavy cables. The purpose was to prevent landings by enemy aircraft and gliders. All potential landing sites were similarly obstructed. We were so short of weapons that guns were withdrawn from museums, refurbished and brought back into commission. RA Coast Defence Regiments were deployed around the coast and 2 x 6" Vickers naval guns of 438 Battery, 547 Coast Regiment RA were installed in an emplacement at the foot of the cliff below White Lodge, on Gun Hill, close to our present hut. Those guns were never fired in anger. Nos 28 and 30, South Green became an Observation Post and Battery office, and 'Windy Peak', the present home of Sir Richard and Lady Elizabeth Dales was the Officers Mess. After the evacuation from Dunkirk in May 1940 the old pier had a gap blown in it by the army to deny its use to the enemy in the event of invasion. Similarly, the old chain ferry was withdrawn from Walberswick.

In 1942, 1943 and 1944, I was serving as a military Intelligence Officer at various HQs in East Anglia, latterly on the Staff of HQ East Anglia District at Felsted School, near Braintree, Essex. The school, like all other similar properties in

East Anglia, including St Felix School, had been requisitioned by the army and the pupils evacuated to the West Country. Our HQ covered Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, and among other duties I was responsible for the integrity and security of the beach and cliff minefields which ringed the coast, and the multitude of anti-invasion obstacles that were erected on the beaches and potential landing sites. From May 1940 onwards the threat of German invasion was very real. We know now that Hitler cancelled Operation Sea Lion (the code name for the invasion of Great Britain) following the Battle of Britain in 1940, but he omitted to tell us! We could not lower our guard for, as the threat of invasion receded, so the likelihood of commando type raids against selected targets grew. The book and film 'The Eagle has Landed' is postulated on such a possibility, namely the assassination, or capture and abduction, of Winston Churchill from Holkham Hall. The authorities took no steps to deny rumours that Churchill used to retire at weekends to Holkham Hall, on the north Norfolk coast: indeed, I believe they actively encouraged the rumour! The full story is told in the book 'When the Moon was High': Churchill never stayed at Holkham Hall; he and the Foreign Secretary, Sir Anthony Eden, used to stay at Ditchley Park, near Chipping Norton in Oxfordshire. It is a close neighbour to Heythrop Park, which became NatWest Bank Staff College, where I was Principal from 1973 to 1977. The biggest security worry was when the King and Queen stayed at Sandringham which is very close to the coast and close to Holkam Hall. That part of my life is recounted in full in my autobiography 'My Life' which I wrote for the benefit of our family and a few friends and distributed to them in 2011.

As part of my duties I regularly visited St Felix School, which by then had become a RN HQ, involved in the planning of Operation Neptune, the naval element of Operation Overlord, the invasion of Europe, which took place on 6th June 1944. Whenever I came to Southwold I visited Newsoms's Bakery on South Green, now Ginger's House, owned by Mr and Mrs Hugh Fuller, to buy jam tarts off the ration to take back to our Officers' Mess, and jolly good they were too! By 1944 East Anglia was seething with military activity and on D Day, 6th June 1944, I was manning the Ops Room in Felsted School and I counted 92 operational RAF and USAAF airfields/landing strips/satellite airfields on the 'ops' map. Non essential civilians were banned from a five to ten mile wide strip right round the coast, and there was no petrol for private motoring, other than a small ration for essential users eg doctors, veterinary surgeons, clergymen, undertakers and suchlike. Virtually the only vehicles seen were military vehicles.

.....and **NOW**.

In 1976 we bought The Middle House in anticipation of our retirement the following year, with the intention of spending the rest of our lives here: we moved in, in June 1977. Little did I know then, but I was to develop a second career as an international financial training consultant which was to take me to 24 different countries, and in 1984 we were living in Sharjah in The United Arab Emirates. Our son Charles telephoned to say a beach hut called 'Many Waters' was on the market, and I told him that if he could see the water's edge from the doorway (our grandchildren were toddlers then!) to buy it. He did, for £2,000 with furniture and fittings. An annual rent of £30 was charged but neither Rates nor VAT were payable.

Rent was adjusted annually in line with inflation, and by 1991 had reached £80 per annum. That year Rates were charged for the first time at £23.69 and backdated to 1990 charged at £18.55. At that time the hut was insured within our house insurance for an additional premium of £5. Thus total direct outgoings for 1991 were £127.24 plus, of course, maintenance costs.

In 1992 VAT on the Rent was introduced, and by 1995 outgoings were: Rent £118.32 VAT £20.71 and Rates £32.80 Total £171.83 plus, of course annual maintenance. The upward spiral had well and truly started.

At that time rumours and press reports began to appear stating that the price of a beach hut had reached the astronomical figure of £8,000. The press and WDC both overlooked the fact that property prices generally had also risen greatly! A very 'left wing' WDC stated that they would introduce measures to control ownership: new owners would have to be approved by WDC and existing owners would not be allowed to sell their huts on the open market, neither would they be allowed to pass them on to their children. Thus WDC would effectively control ownership through a register of applicants. There was concern that ownership of huts was passing from local people to wealthy outsiders, but the effect of the proposals would have been to give WDC the right to say who could own a hut!

I have always had a rooted objection to unnecessary interference in private life, so mindful of Lord Acton's famous dictum 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power to corrupt absolutely' I wrote to various owners and suggested we form a Beach Hut Owners Association to fight these outrageous proposals. At the same time Mrs Jessica Jeans, another local resident and owner, took similar action, so we joined forces. On 20th January 1992 we wrote to as many owners as we could trace, inviting them to a meeting in St Edmund's Church Hall on 30th January 1992 to consider forming an Association to fight these outrageous proposals. The hall was packed to capacity; the late Mr George Bumstead, a well known local resident, businessman and hut owner, kindly took the chair, and our proposals received overwhelming support. **Thus was born the Southwold Beach Hut Owners Association with Mr Bumstead voted as first Chairman, and a committee was elected.**

To the surprise of WDC we sought Counsel's opinion, and were advised that their actions were 'ultra vires'. To cut a long story short, a reasonable agreement eventually emerged with rent linked to the annual rate of inflation. Some other reasonable terms were agreed; that every hut should have a fire extinguisher, be kept in good repair and decorative order, and owners denied access in the month of January to enable maintenance work to be carried out, and to protect the legal position regarding right of access. That requirement has now been removed. Relations between WDC and the Association (SBHOA) were cordial, and WDC asked that the Association remain in existence as a 'channel of communication'.

I must record that WDC referred to these huts as 'Beach chalets'. I detest pretentiousness, especially as I suspected that a more genteel 'chalet' might attract a

higher rental than a mere 'hut'! My views prevailed and they remain.....'beach huts', as they have always been known in Southwold.

In the late 90s I was elected Chairman and during my term of office we had a severe storm when nearly all the huts north of the pier, and many south of the pier, were badly damaged. Mr Malcolm Berridge, then Chief Executive Officer of WDC came to Southwold to see the damage for himself and met with a sub committee of SBHOA. He took a close interest and agreed to recommend to the Council certain changes regarding dates when huts north and south of the pier were removed to the Pier car park for winter storage, and then replaced in the spring, and also agreed free parking for those owners on the day they were removing contents of their huts for winter storage, and replacing them in the spring. I wonder if owners still enjoy those concessions? At this meeting I gave a personal undertaking as Chairman that SBHOA would encourage owners to let their huts when not required for their own and family use, so that as many visitors as possible could enjoy their use: an undertaking that was confirmed at a subsequent AGM.

On 19th January 2000 we received notice out of the blue from the Head of Tourism and Leisure Services, that Waveney District Council required more 'flexibility' in setting the fee' and we were given three months notice of determination of our licenses, failing which 'you will be required to remove the hut by 30 April, 2000'. So much for gentlemen's agreements! This was a sign of things to come. But nothing happened.

On 19th December 2003 we received another official notification that our licenses would be terminated on 31st March 2004. Furthermore they were thinking of replacing them with 30 year leases and introducing a system of banding, depending on location, similar to Council Tax. Reports continued to appear in the press about the exorbitant prices huts were fetching and WDC actually built two huts, Nos 195A and 195B and offered them for sale by 'informal tender' to test the market. They quoted rents of '£450 pa to March 2005, £875 to 31 March 2006 and £1,300 to 31 March 2007. It was obvious that the era of a hut as a family amenity was fast coming to an end and we were moving into the age of rich men's 'must have' playthings. We learned that an annual rental of £1,500 for huts in bands B and D (including No 192) was proposed which, with VAT, Rates and Insurance, would have meant an outgoing in excess of £2,000 pa. Not a bad increase from the £30 per annum total outgoings in 1984! In the famous words of Del Boy in the sitcom 'Only Fools and Horses' – 'a nice little earner' for WDC!

Like Queen Victoria, the owners were not amused! The SBHOA went into action and at successive AGMs we were assured that leases had almost been agreed. The Association issued a Newsletter periodically, reporting progress (or lack of it!), but in all this time owners did not receive a single communication from WDC – our Landlords. Dr Slim Dinsdale was Chairman when this blew up and kindly indicated that he would remain as Chairman to see it to a conclusion. Under his Chairmanship the Association did wonderful work and we, the owners, are indebted to him and the Committee, who have given freely of their time and expertise to fighting this battle on our behalf, and very time consuming it has been. We have taken legal advice and

to enable this work to continue the owners made subvention payments from time to time. Then, in about 2005 or 2006, there were several staff changes in WDC with new legal staff appearing. The new blood refused to accept much of what had already been agreed and, like all new brooms, insisted on starting again.

There was a sudden flurry of activity in 2007 when someone woke up to the fact that Rates had not been collected for several years. I received a demand for arrears of Rates in the sum of £544.84 with the threat of legal proceedings if not paid within 30 days. On the 4th January 2008 I received advice that the Valuation Officer had reduced the rateable value for beach huts back dated to 2005, and a few days later I received a refund of £200.20 and, later on, a further refund of £47.53 in respect of the period when we had no access to our huts during major work on the sea defences.

In February 2008 District Councillor Simon Tobin, himself at one time a beach hut owner, and one of our local representatives on WDC, took a close interest in the matter, and, at his request, I wrote a Report that effectively was a shortened version of this Story. He placed it before Mr Simon Baker the newly appointed part time Chief Executive Officer, the third since the battle had started, who telephoned me at home one afternoon in late July to say that he had only just become aware of the situation from reading my report, and I quote his actual words 'I am ashamed that this has dragged on for so long. I do not know what to say'. Councillor Tobin maintained his interest, matters improved, and we began to make progress. Eventually, in February 2010 I received the counterpart lease for our hut.

I refer to this saga, with tongue in cheek, as The Second Battle of Sole Bay. From December 2003, when we received notification of the termination of our Licenses, until February 2010, when I received my counterpart lease, is a period of 6 years and 3 months. By way of comparison WW2 was declared on 3rd September 1939 and ended on 15th August 1945, when Japan surrendered, a period of 5 years 11 months! Any businessman who conducted his affairs in such a manner would soon be out of business.

For more years than I am aware we owned our huts subject to a license that required 3 pages of A4. Twice I received a draft lease by e-mail requiring 47 sheets of A4. The final counterpart lease is at least printed on both sides but still required 24 pages. There has been correspondence in abundance. There are 255 huts so that an absolute minimum of 30,000 sheets of paper have been used. Then think of the time, effort, travelling costs, telephone calls, postage and e-mails that have been incurred, plus the legal expenses SBHOA has incurred. Some will remember WW2 when we were exhorted with posters "Is your journey really necessary?" Was this exercise really necessary? It would be interesting to know exactly what the REAL cost of this saga has been?

Throughout my career I NEVER came across a case handled with such ineptitude and inefficiency, compounded by the absence of a draft lease to replace the cancelled license. As the former Principal of a Management College, I have to admit that, at this point, words fail me!

A comparative table covering the year 1984 to date.

Year	Rental	VAT	Rates	Insurance	Total
1984	30.00	----	----	5.00	£35.00
1991	80.00	----	23.69	5.00	£108.69
1995	118.32	20.71	32.80	5.00	£176.83
2000	152.98	26.77	50.27	5.00	£235.02
2003	160.72	28.13	85.30	222.61	£496.76
2010	509.30	89.30	132.27*	261.62	£992.49*
2011	536.53	107.31	138.44*	295.44	£939.28*
2012	555.70	111.14	292.50*	295.49	£962.33*
2013	573.93	114.79	300.32*	275.49	£964.21*
2014	587.99	117.60	306.15*	273.80	£979.39*
2015	593.31	118.66	312.00*	296.50	£1,008.47*
2016	593.97	118.66	314.64*	306.29	£1,018.92*
2017	593.31	118.66	314.64*	307.69	£1,019.66*
2018	593.31	118.66	314.64*	297.79	£1,009.76*
2019	716.14**	143.23**	314.64*	282.90	£1,142.27*

*** The figures for Rent are after a 5% discount for membership of SBHOA and a further 5% discount for residents within Waveney District.**

In December 2016 Waveney DC wrote to owners, without any prior discussion with SBHOA, and stated that in line with the quinquennial revaluation, it was raising the ground rent for ‘Southwold Jack’ in 2017 to £771.67 plus VAT £154.33 = £926: an increase of 30%! In addition the rent would continue to be increased annually in line with inflation. The increase was contested by the Beach Hut Owners Association.

**** Rent and VAT include ‘Back Rent for 2017/18 of £99.69 plus VAT £19.94 arising from the quinquennial revaluation.**

When we bought the hut in 1984 the rent was £30 and there was no VAT. I am aware that all departments of WDC have been instructed to ‘make money’ and, as I have observed elsewhere, it is clear that beach huts are regarded as ‘nice little earners’!

* In 2010 50% of Rates were refunded under the Government’s Small Business Rates relief scheme introduced that year. In 2011, and subsequent years, the refund was 100% so the amount paid was nil but, of course, that concession can be withdrawn at a moment’s notice - especially in a period of austerity!

The years 2004 to 2009.

During those 6 years not one penny in Rent or ‘on account’ was collected by WDC. Then, in January 2010, I received a bill for £2,636.08 for arrears of rent and a demand to sign a Promissory Note. In all that time insurance and other costs continued and were paid. A Promissory Note is a negotiable instrument and in all my life I have never signed a Promissory Note, so I refused to sign such a piece of paper, especially as it was for a debt that I had NOT incurred, and was wholly due to the ineptitude of WDC, and I never did. Throughout my business life my word was my bond, and it will remain so.

There is one other item of expenditure that must be mentioned – annual maintenance. By their very nature wooden huts close to the sea are subject to rough treatment from the elements, especially salt laden winds, and the sea itself. We all know of huts that have been swept away or severely damaged by storm, there have been cases of destruction by fire, some by arsonists – fortunately very rare – but it is the constant buffeting by salt laden winds, especially in the winter months, that is the constant enemy, and the main cause of the on-going battle against wood rot.

The new leases require huts to be repainted every three years. Mine was painted in 2012 at a cost of £680 and in 2014 I had a lot of rotten timber replaced and repainted to a total of £2,115. A few years ago I had to have the asbestos tiled roof replaced at a cost of over £2000, and because of the constant battle against rot individual planks have to be renewed every time the hut is painted. In May 2017 it was repaired and repainted with much of the timber having to be replaced, at a total cost of £1,055. In May 2019 I have just had some cladding renewed, because of rot, at a cost of £490: it has yet to be painted. Then, of course, gas bottles have to be replaced regularly, and cookers, furnishings and beach furniture are not indestructible.

In 2011 VAT was increased to 20%. In 2019 the fixed expenses will be approximately £1,300, and the annual maintenance costs average about £500, which means an annual outlay of £2,000 or more, or say £40 a week. And that is before we have opened the door of the hut! The season lasts from May until September and huts are rarely used between October and April – even then, only by the really hardy..... and English Channel swimmers in training, who are even hardier!

Realistically, therefore, one should set aside a sum of about £2,000 per annum to ensure the hut is kept in tip top order.

We rename our hut.

Previous owners had named the hut ‘Many Waters’ which had no significance for us so the name fell into disuse. But nearly all the huts have a name so in 2014 I invited our family to suggest a suitable name bearing in mind that Margaret and I are past our ‘sell by’ dates. Several fun names were suggested but Adam came up with ‘Southwold Jack’, which met with instant family approval. I am sure he was inspired by THE Southwold Jack, the two thirds life size medieval figure, which hangs at the back of St Edmund’s Church and sounds a clapper to

signify the beginning of services. It is very much the symbol of Southwold. Or did he perhaps have other thoughts? Anyway, Southwold Jack it is.

Other activities.

A strange thing happened in the autumn of 2013. I received a letter from Clarissa Bruce enquiring if she could hire our hut for the winter. I wondered why on earth anyone would want to hire a beach hut for the winter months? Some illicit purpose perhaps: even a little smuggling? We invited her to call and discovered that she was a long distance swimmer with the ambition of swimming the English Channel. Her idea of a swim was to disappear for a long time towing a bright red 'float' so that she could be easily identified if in trouble. Of course we readily agreed and Southwold Jack took on another role and became a training base: she has been using it ever since and is known to all who use the hut. So we bask in the reflected glory and a plaque in the hut records that 'Clarissa Bruce, long distance Channel swimmer, trained here'. Her husband Richard accompanies her sometimes in a kayak which they store at the end of our garden.

Everybody who has hired the hut has readily agreed that she can continue to use the hut in which to change and store her clothes for safety and some delightful friendships have been established. In July 2015 she led a Channel relay swim under the banner 'Southwold Jacks'; the team consisted of 5 swimmers and they completed the swim in 13 hrs 53 minutes. In 2015 Clarissa kindly sought sponsorship for the swim on behalf of our family charity Hope and Aid Direct (founded and still led by our son Charles which takes a convoy of humanitarian aid twice a year to Kosovo or wherever else it is needed) and Ovacome (which offers support to sufferers from ovarian cancer). They raised the magnificent sum of £4,500 divided equally between the two charities.

One other thing I should mention: we lend them our hut for a Hogmanay party on New Year's evening, and Clarissa, a descendent of Robert the Bruce, is a piper of some merit so, if you hear the skirl of the pipes coming from the beach, fear not: it will not herald an invasion by the Scottish Nationalists, it will just be Clarissa and Richard entertaining their friends to a Hogmanay party!

In 2017 Clarissa undertook a solo swim of the English Channel but was unsuccessful and had to give up after being in the water for about 11 hours, due to strong adverse currents and deteriorating weather conditions: she was about half way across the Channel. However, the good news is that on 22.07.2018 she and Ms Edie Hu, a Chinese American lady who lives in Hong Kong, a close friend and swimming companion completed a duo-relay, taking it in turns to swim for 1 hour, in the magnificent time of 14 hours and 59 minutes. Edie Hu was the last swimmer and on landing in France had to go up the beach, above high water mark, pick up a stone and wave to the accompanying crew, and then promptly return to the boat; but not before receiving the congratulations of friendly locals! Otherwise she would have been treated as an illegal immigrant!

But that is not all: in November 2019 she is planning to swim the Sea of Galilee (Lake Tiberius), which is fresh water; she is planning and has booked a slot to attempt another solo swim of the English Channel in July 2020. We wish her well. We have been astonished at the organisation that goes into all this: each swim is planned and conducted like a military operation and is very highly regulated. Please watch this space

The cost of beach huts

As this story tells beach huts have soared in price and now are banded. Needless to say Southwold Jack is in the most expensive band and huts in the vicinity of Southwold Jack are regularly changing hands at prices in excess of £150,000. But property in general has also risen in price, especially in Southwold. It is a cause of great concern to those of us who have children, grandchildren and great grandchildren. When I studied Economics nearly over 80 years ago, I learned that the price of an article was what it would fetch! In other words, what someone would pay for it! And so we have to live in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be. But at least we try and ensure that as many people as possible can share 'Southwold Jack'.

.....and so, on a happier note,

When you enter the hut you enter another world, and worries fade into the background. You will never forget an early morning in the hut, when the sun floods in, for it faces due east: that is something you will never forget. All the worry and hassle, the shams and deceits of daily life, fade away. Our grand children are now grown ups and have their own families, and we are seeing them following in their parents' footsteps. As age creeps (gallops?) on, we still enjoy the hut as much as possible, and countless generations did before us. After all, we are only recycled teen-agers! May it continue for a while yet? In'sh'allah!

Margaret and Jack Storer
Revised – May 2019



THE STORY OF OUR BEACH HUT

‘SOUTHWOLD JACK’

No. 192

By

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