

In Conversation With John Pilkington: Hampshire's Own Explorer and Travel Writer

Intro: Welcome to Hampshire HistBites. Join us as we delve into the past and go on a journey to discover some of the county's best and occasionally unknown history. We'll be speaking to experts and enthusiasts, asking them to reveal some of our hidden heritage, as well as share with you a few fascinating untold stories.

Emily: Welcome back. Once again, we have spoken to Hampshire explorer, John Pilkington, about his travel experiences. As you may have found out last week, John travels the world bringing back wonderful stories from his adventures, but did you know he's also written books and has worked for BBC Radio 4, making documentaries and appearing on radio programmes?

If you live in Hampshire, you may have even been to one of his lively and illustrated talks he gives at Winchester Discovery Centre and elsewhere. He's spoken to over a thousand audiences in six countries, and impressively holds the Royal Geographical Society's Ness Award for popularising geography and the understanding of the world around us.

Hello John, have you got any interesting tidbits of trivia about yourself? Any strange achievements?

John: I've got one or two tales from my travels. Like when I got stranded in Antarctica. Now, not many people can say they've been stranded in Antarctica. I was at the southern end of Chile, in the city of Punta Arenas. And I was offered a lift in an American Airforce Hercules aircraft to the Chilean base of King George Island, just off the Antarctic Peninsula. - It was a day trip, believe it or not, because they were just going to deliver supplies for the approaching winter. And I sort of chatted up the pilot and eventually got on board with a lot of other people and masses of cargo, off we went and landed on the sort of rough airstrip on King George Island.

And he said, "Right, we're going to load and unload. You amuse yourself for a bit and take off is at 3:00 PM." So I went off and looked at the penguins and about 2, 2:15, or so I was going back to the runway and I heard this noise: engines revving up. And I knew there was only one plane there.

And then the plane took off over my head. I never got to the bottom of that. I think they just completed the operation rather more quickly than they expected and either the pilot forgot about me, which is entirely possible, or they just thought, 'Oh, we'll give him an adventure!' And I was stuck there for two whole weeks.

Although it was still technically summertime, didn't even have my toothbrush! But the Chileans on base there looked after me magnificently and I did a bit of work for them, bringing stuff up from the shore where other supplies were being landed by ship.

And they fed me and lent me a sort of thick down jacket. - saved my life! Eventually a plane came of the Chilean Air Force, a similar plane, Hercules aircraft, and I paid, I think it was \$500 for them to bring me back. And it was the best \$500 I've ever spent, effectively paying

for the two weeks in Antarctica. The people on the base didn't ask for any payment at all, and I think I'm the luckiest person in the world because people on cruise ships, for instance, can pay tens of thousands of pounds to spend, you know, five minutes in Antarctica. And there I was for two weeks.

More importantly, an insight into the ecology, the wildlife, and the weather, the climate of Antarctica, although it was technically summer, it was, you know, jolly cold and there was snow on the ground and there were penguins and elephant seals, all sorts of wildlife, which you'd never get to see normally, because, as a lone individual, I was able to walk wherever I wanted, just being careful not to step on the highly fragile mosses that grow on the island. I mean, because I wasn't in a group or crowd of people the animals just ignored me really.

Emily: Is that the first time you've ever seen sort of things like that up close, almost?

John: Oh yeah. First and last. I suppose in my childhood, I saw them in a zoo, but it's a bit different, isn't it?

Emily: Seeing them in the natural habitat.

John: Yeah, that's right. So that was just one unexpected experience. People ask me: what is your favourite place on earth? And that's always a difficult one because I've got so many favourite places.

Usually, the last place I visited is my favourite. I think a couple stand out. One is Tibet because of its incredible culture and the wide-open skies of the Tibetan plateau. And the other is Patagonia, which of course is the Southern tip of South America. It's not a country, it's a sort of region, divided between Chile and Argentina. And, of course, that was what brought me to Punta Arenas and the trip to Antarctica in the first place. I first went there in 1979 and fell in love with the people, the lifestyle, the wide-open spaces and decided that one day I would go back again. And 10 years later I did, and I wrote a book about it, and that was my excuse for spending three seasons in Patagonia, spring, summer, and autumn.

Emily: Fantastic. It must be so hard to be able to pick favourites.

John: Well, not so hard actually, because often they get handed to me on a plate. In 1991, the Soviet Union broke up, and so I decided straight away to learn some Russian. In 1992, I went off to spend the summer in one or two of the former Soviet republics, which were by then independent countries. These were the newest countries in the world. In fact, one, now called Kyrgyzstan, didn't even have an official name when I arrived. It was fascinating to see countries and people at the very beginning of their journey to independence.

They had experienced 75 years under the Soviet flag, which for some was a time of oppression and invasion, yearning to be free. Then, in 1991, their dreams came true... or did they? And that's the question that I set out to answer because, as we know, not everything has gone smoothly in the years since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Some have done better than others, but many people in those countries look back nostalgically to the old Soviet days when, well, they didn't have great wealth, but they had certainty and a pension, of course.

Emily: So, what is it that encourages you to visit these particular places at certain points?

John: Some are handed to me on a plate, like my trip to Bolivia to explore the dinosaur footprints that are to be found in some very remote parts of Bolivia, not widely known outside

the country, but I happen to have a good friend who was the author of the Lonely Planet guide to Bolivia. Now that's a good friend to have because she was able to tell me things - she'd written the guide, but it hadn't yet been published, and so I got a first look-in at places which I suppose now are tourist attractions, but I got an advanced ticket to that. And at the same time, because I'd always been a fan of the old Western movies, like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid. So I decided to try and find the place where they met their untimely deaths.

Having robbed several banks in Argentina and Chile, they turned their attention to the payroll deliveries of the Aramayo Franke company in Bolivia. Now, a tin miner's wage isn't great, but there were awful lot of them, and they were all paid weekly in cash. So, you can imagine the amounts of money that were being taken on horseback across the Andes and Butch and Sundance got wind of one and relieved the unfortunate men of their cargoes, but it was not good news for Butch and Sundance. They zig-zagged across the Altiplano being pursued by posses of police, soldiers, and local people who were outraged.

Eventually they were cornered in a tiny village called San Vicente. San Vicente is probably the coldest place I've ever been, including Antarctica. It's the highest village in Bolivia, which makes it probably the highest inhabited place in the whole continent.

And when I was there, the temperature never went above minus seven degrees Celsius. It's a miserable place and that's where they were cornered. And as anyone who's seen the movie will know that it seemed as if the entire Bolivian Army surrounded them, which wasn't true. It was three soldiers and a policeman. The policeman ran away.

Not such a dramatic thing, but the end of their careers as highwaymen,

I've always found people in authority have been very kind to me. I was once arrested in China for being somewhere I wasn't supposed to be and I thought, 'Oh dear, this is serious,' 'cause, you know, back in the 1980s, this was in the Xinjiang Province, which of course is now notorious for the repression of the Uighur people. It was pretty much closed to foreigners in the 1980s, but I was following the route of Marco Polo, so I thought, well, I'll just try it and see.

They kept me in overnight and then I thought, 'well, what's going to become of me? Am I going to just disappear?' But no, I had to do a traditional Chinese form of punishment, which was to write a self-criticism. They allowed me to do it in English, luckily, and gave me a pen and paper, and I just threw myself into it. I thought, well, might as well make the most of this. And I said how, oh, you know, I'd done something wrong, and I knew it was wrong, and even though I disagreed with the idea of not being allowed to go where I wanted to go, I now see the error of my ways and I wrote all this, on and on and on. And eventually the policeman who was supervising me said, "Right, that's enough."

They let me free, but not to carry on my journey. I had to go back the way I came, which was, well, fair enough when you think about it.

Emily: It seems like quite a bizarre punishment, really.

John: It makes you think, doesn't it? It makes you dwell on what you've done, and I think it could be used for, sort of, smaller misdemeanours in Western countries as well, because I think many people commit offences just out of thoughtlessness, really. They think: 'Oh, well, you know, it doesn't really matter'; 'It's a victimless crime'; 'What does it matter if I go here

when I shouldn't go here?'. And same with, sort of, offences like parking in this country. We all think, 'oh, it doesn't matter; nobody really minds.' And I think it's good to be forced to think about these things, occasionally.

Emily: It gives you an understanding of the error.

John: Yeah, it gave me an understanding of the error, and the Chinese police, of course! And the Chinese way of thinking, which I don't think is widely understood, sufficiently understood, in the West. For instance, in China, ever since the days of Mao Zedong and the Cultural Revolution, the good of the people, the good of society has always overridden individual interests and well-being. When I was there in the 1980s, they were opening up the West of the country, Western Xinjiang, which had many important minerals, including oil, and they were shipping large numbers of Han Chinese people out West to exploit these resources.

And now we hear outrage because they are shipping a large number of Uighur people back East. And nobody mentions that this has been going on for decades and it's not just the minority people who suffer, although they do suffer more than the Han Chinese and always have done going back hundreds of years. The Chinese have always had a pretty brutal approach to the minority people in what the Chinese regard as China, which of course includes Xinjiang and Tibet.

Going myself to places because it's all about rethinking your ideas, isn't it? Rethinking your ideas about China and about faraway places in general because we all - we're all romantic about faraway places, but when you get there, then Hampshire becomes romantic because the tables are turned. And when you're in Xinjiang, for instance, Hampshire is far away, and I become very nostalgic about home when I'm away. I love home. I love travelling because it opens my eyes, allows me to rethink everything, really, but I always regard Hampshire as my base, and I will always come back here. I'm not a wanderer like a butterfly going from one place to the next. I go out, I do a trip, I plan it as well as I can, although there are always unexpected things, which are often the best part of the trips, and then I know that eventually I'll come home

Emily: 'Cause you've travelled to so many places, have you made, sort of, any interesting comparisons to Hampshire, any, sort of, strange or interesting connections that you've made between these faraway places and your home base of Hampshire?

John: There are always the rivers, of course. I'm a great fan of rivers and I'm lucky enough to live close to the Itchen, one of Hampshire's main rivers, along with the Test, and world famous for its trout fishing. But if you think of the more famous rivers in the world, there's lots to be learnt by going, for instance, up the Mekong, as I did in 2003. And the Mekong is one of those rivers that encompasses everything. It starts up on the North of the Tibetan plateau, and then it flows down through the gorges, the famous three gorges of Yangtze, Mekong, Salween, and then down through the countries of Southeast Asia to the South China Sea and 30 million people rely on the Mekong for their living, their fish.

It's not just sport fishing for trout. It is the giant Mekong catfish, the other great fishes of this massive artery, that provide the sustenance for the people who live along its banks. So, rivers as a lifeline, rivers as a line of communication. The Itchen, of course, was used for centuries to transport wool from mid Hampshire down to Southampton and then abroad.

And the Mekong has been used for centuries for carrying Chinese exports downriver and carrying things upriver that the Chinese need. I took a trip on one of those river boats and discovered it was packed to the gunwales¹ with packets of instant noodles. So, like coals to Newcastle, they were carrying instant noodles to China.

Emily: It's almost as though it's the hub of life.

John: Water is the most important thing. And where do you get water? In the rivers, and lakes, but it's rivers that appeal to me and I love trying to find the source of rivers. My Mekong trip was all about going to the source of the Mekong, where no European had been before. Although a Frenchman claimed to have found the source of the Mekong, a man called Michel Peissel, in 1994. But it turned out he'd found the wrong source because the source of a major river - you can imagine, rivers have lots of tributaries, especially up in the headwaters - and geographers define that the source of a river as the source of the longest tributary. And, unfortunately for Peissel, he was about 68 miles out. So I went, looking. I had two companions: a Chinese and a Tibetan. The Tibetan in particular knew the area like the back of his hand, and he guided me to... well, we did have a little argument at the top about whether we should go this way or that way. And I think he took me to the wrong source, but the correct one was only about three miles away and so I insisted we go there as well. That turned out to be, actually, the source later identified by the Chinese Academy of Sciences as the snout of a glacier on the north face of a mountain called Guozongmucha.

So I was the first European to arrive at the actual source, not the first European to explore the headwaters. But if the Chinese Academy of Sciences is correct, then Guozongmucha is the source and I think that's now acknowledged by many other people who've been there.

Emily: That's quite an achievement. It's a good thing that you did decide to go there. Otherwise, you could have missed out! So, what originally inspired you to start exploring? What was your original point of, 'I want to do that'?

John: Well, as a child, I loved maps and when I was at school, I was always sort of the one with the world atlas in the library, looking at places and thinking, 'Ooh, that sounds romantic'.

You know, places like the Hindu Kush and the Mountains of the Moon and daydreaming about one day going there. So that's what interested me first. Then at university, I did geography, which is sort of a continuation of that. And, incidentally, that's how I eventually got into town planning, which of course is related to human geography very, very much so, but it was maps and daydreaming, really, that made me want to explore the world. And eventually I discovered I could. I could go to these places that sounded so romantic on paper. I had pictures of them in my head and, talking of rethinking our ideas, when I got to these places, they were usually not in the slightest like I imagined them. So, rethinking my ideas about faraway places and the romance because... for the people who live there, they're not really romantic at all. I love mountains, but the people who live, for instance, in the Himalayas regard the mountains as just a nuisance: they get in the way, they have to be climbed, and you can't cultivate the land because it's all sort of steep mountainsides. So, when somebody like me comes along and starts saying, 'wow, this is great'... They're obstacles to be overcome, not things to give a source of pleasure.

1 Pronounced **guh**·nuhlz

Emily: So different from how when you visit, it must be amazing to be able to see these sites. Has your inspiration for exploring changed? Has that, sort of, changed from when you first were inspired by maps?

John: I think it has developed rather than changed. I was a geographer, but in fact, many of my trips have been historical rather than geographical. Well, they're both really but when I followed Marco Polo's route across Asia, that was very much recognizing his outstanding contribution to the European knowledge of the Far East.

And more recently I spent some time in Eritrea and Ethiopia, following the route taken by a little-known British military expedition. 150 years ago, when a local chieftain, horror of horrors, had taken prisoner the honorary British consul, and then several other Europeans as well. And after four years of fruitless negotiations, Queen Victoria's government decided to send a rescue mission and 26,000 commissioned soldiers, 40,000 pack animals, including camels and elephants. And after a four-month campaign, riding and pulling their heavy guns across the mountains of Ethiopia, they arrived at the mountain stronghold, where he was holding his captives.

He'd got about more than 50 of them by then, not just Europeans. The mighty British Army set up their positions and opened fire on Easter Monday of 1868. Of course, they obliterated the army that was waiting for them. The captives, all 50 or 60 of them, were rescued. Many of them were pretty cross about it because they weren't, sort of, captives in the sense of prisoners, they were more employees of the chieftain and they immediately lost their jobs.

The British consul was brought back home. Sadly, he only survived another two years; the experience was too traumatic for him. But this is an almost unknown piece of British history and our interest in Ethiopia was only temporary. As soon as we got the captives back, we retreated, we marched back to the coast, pulled up all the infrastructure we'd laid down and went home.

I mean, this was the height of British imperialism. And yet on this occasion, we didn't use the incident to occupy, to colonise Ethiopia, when we could have done. So, it reveals that we were not always as jingoistic as we're portrayed in that era.

Emily: It sounds like your travels are very much rooted within that sense of historical discovery. And it sounds like this is sort of the perfect opportunity, not just to bring other cultures to light and to discuss them more widely with the public audience, also to bring forward these historical stories as well. And actually, the opportunity to talk about these things that we don't so often hear about.

John: That's always driven me. I've always, sort of, enjoyed rooting out little known stories, like the one about Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and the Ethiopia one as well. So, it's about bringing back stories. It's about sharing stories either in writing or on radio.

It's about making people think, 'wow, I never knew that' opening people's eyes as my eyes have been opened to places that aren't at all as you might expect, because I've spent quite a lot of time in the Middle East in countries like Syria, Iran, and Iraq: countries which are always in the news for all the wrong reasons. And when you go, you realize that people there are just the same as us. They want to make a living, a decent living, if possible. They've suffered enormously through wars and violence and some still are. It was the same when I was in Afghanistan. Another country, you know, people sort of think, 'My goodness, you went to

Afghanistan!' But the part I went to was perfectly safe at the time I was there and the people, once again, were so kind. I think people all over the world are always curious, curious about me, but at the same time, welcoming and keen to be of help. All... People are always willing to help a stranger.

And, of course, I'm always a stranger in their countries. And often in need of help whether it's directions or food or water, you always need something on your travels and people are always keen to provide it if they can.

Emily: I think that's a really lovely thought because I think it's one of those things that you do see on the news.

John: That's right. It's the same with Russia. I mean, Russia has a terrible reputation in the West, doesn't it? And Mr Putin doesn't help that much, but when you go to Russia, the Russian people are so warm and have a wicked sense of humour. A sense of humour, which comes from their 75 years under the Soviet rule, under the iron fist of Stalin. And they laugh about these things. I'm not sure I could laugh about such things, but they somehow manage to survive, you know, stoically, they soldier on and make the best of whatever they've got.

And this is a characteristic that I think we all need, especially in times of pandemic when so many of us are suffering so much. We can learn from people like the Russians and others in Eastern Europe. And we can learn, if we want to, from the Chinese as well. I certainly learnt a lot in my travels in Africa and South America, and each continent is so totally different that you never, ever stop learning. That's the best bit.

Emily: Thank you for listening to today's episode. If you're interested in finding out more about John and his adventures, do check out his website at pilk.net where you can also find his books about his travels and even purchase signed copies.

You can find these details and a link to his website in the show notes on the Hampshire HistBites website. Thank you for listening and do tune in again next week

Outro: We hope you enjoyed listening to today's episode. If you would like to find out a little bit more about what we've been talking about, then please visit the website, www.winchesterheritageopendays.org, click on Hampshire HistBites, and there you'll find today's show notes as well as some links to more information.

Thank you.