



# **The Sailor's Tale**

**A short biography of**

**Roy Basil Dawkins**

**By Keith Morris**

# Prelude

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

Oak Tree Cottage, in Linersh Wood, Bramley, which he shared with wife Freida, 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**

**2018 (updated in May 2024)**

## 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 was 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 or sister Pat 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.

“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 Purchase 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 gentlemen: “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 and rolling down the bracken on 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.

Another time Roy remembers being in the street when a flying “buzz bomb” flew overhead and then went silent – a sure sign it was about to land. Roy froze before it then restarted and landed two streets away. He ran to the scene, which was horrific, and soon his mother turned up in an ambulance and told him to go straight home.

“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 CEGB, 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.

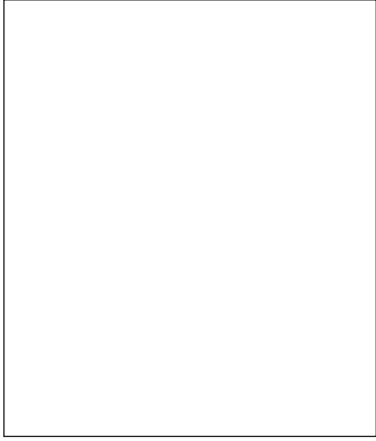
“After 18 months, she asked me to marry her,” said Roy.

“She was a very strong character and she beguiled me. Mary had a strong family, which I never had, and that family have been the same source of strength ever since.

“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 and married in St Mary’s Parish church in Diss in 1959.











**Roy with Freida, his daughters Nicky & Pip, their partners Keith & Simon and children, Hannah, Tom, Gabs and Ben.**

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 on 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 late 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, Mary and the young 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 at 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.













