

***A Personal Tribute to John Roake RIBA (1923 -2011)
Treasurer General and Past President of FBUA***

Given at a gathering of friends and family at The Reform Club



Good Evening Everybody

Bertha and Dinah have asked me to say a few words this evening about my memories of John, which I am very glad to do, both on my own behalf and that of his many friends in the Franco British Union of Architects, quite a number of whom I am pleased to see here tonight.

And it is through the FBUA that I came to know John. For those of you who don't know, I should perhaps explain that the FBUA is a professional body that promotes the exchange of professional ideas and information between the architects of France and Britain. But, as John frequently would remind us, it is above all a Societe d'Amitie, dedicated to encouraging personal and professional friendships between French and British architects.

As you have already heard, John was a partner in the practice W S Hattrell and Partner. He was instrumental in setting up an office for the firm in Paris, where at that time they were undertaking work on high profile projects for Marks and Spencer. So it was natural for John to participate in the activities of the FBUA.

He joined the Union in 1975, quickly becoming a member of the British Committee and taking on the role of Treasurer. Then in 1984, he became President and took on responsibility for our annual architectural conference, organising a memorable 3-day programme of talks and visits in Edinburgh.

As a momento, the Union published a Newsletter and I have with me two or three copies for anyone who would like to see it afterwards. It contains an

account of the events, the text of John's speech and a rather fine photo of him, with, I think, Bertha standing behind him. Rather symbolic perhaps.

He remained a member of our Committee for the rest of his life, working closely with Ronnie Biggins and others and helping to organise many of our subsequent annual conferences.

In 2000 he became Treasurer once again and was instrumental in establishing our charitable Bursary fund for young architects and students.

For myself, well I joined the Union in 1981, but I didn't really get involved much until I joined the Committee in 1987. And that is how I got to know John. And we steadily became very good friends.

We would meet 7 or 8 times per year, at the various committee meetings in London and Paris and at the Annual Congress. He hosted many of our committee meetings here in this Club, usually followed by Club Supper in the Dining Room and a retreat to the Library for coffee and brandy. I have an abiding memory of John on these occasions, discreetly ringing the bell for the Steward and ordering a Romeo and Juliette (cigar), ...or rather, two, for this was also a rare treat for me as well.

When I think of John, I immediately recall this tall slim man with his distinctive deep bass voice, a twinkle in his eye, always calm and collected, and full of good sense. I think of his quiet sense of humour and his love of the good things in life.

I think too of his meticulous attention to detail; particularly (but not only) anything to do with figures and computations. Jean Symons, who took over from John as Treasurer, talks of being astonished when she examined the comprehensive file of meticulously kept hand-written accounts that he passed over to her.

I have a story, one of several I could tell, which perhaps typifies how quietly effective he could be. It's about a conversation we had when I was having some difficulty persuading the National Trust to lay on a decent quality meal for around 80 of us at an FBUA visit I was planning to one of its properties, (I forget which). I suddenly remembered John had managed to get the Trust to lay on a magnificent 3-course lunch for us all at Stowe 2 years before. All I'd been able to get out of them was an offer of a £5 set meal of quiche with a bit of garnish.

How had he done it, I asked; the National Trust seemed not to understand anything other than bottom of the market coach-party catering.

“Well,” he said, “that’s what they offered me to start with. So I asked them what they could do for £7.50..... and they offered to throw in a pudding and coffee. Then I asked what they could do for £10 and their faces brightened a bit and they called in the Chef and he offered to add a starter. Then I enquired whether we could have a better main course if we paid £12and they started getting more enthusiastic, not many visitors ever wanted to pay that sort of price. And in the end we devised and agreed on a really good 4-course menu for £15. Which even included corkage, so we could supply our own wine and make sure they served something that was both French (it had to be French) and drinkable. QED. “

He had got them really excited at the possibilities, slowly tickling them up, till they were inspired to giving of their best. He was always good at doing that. As I tell this story to you, I can see the smile on John’s face as he was telling it to me.

I hope what I have said captures something of John Roake for all of you too. At this point I would like to ask French members of FBUA who are present to sing “les pompiers”

Thank you.

*Howard Nash
October 2011*