

FEATURE

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Originals

Michael Boon has been involved in many local organisations - and this wealth of experience, especially as instigator of the Great Yarmouth outer harbour, has given him remarkable insight, and, as **GERALDINE SCOTT** found out, a unique position as an observer of the town.

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Sitting in Mr Boon's dining room in his Gorleston home, it's easy to tell he is a man of varied interests. The walls are lined floor-to-ceiling with books ranging from local history – two of which Mr Boon penned himself – to the world of theatre, interspersed with photos of his younger years.

"It's the only room in the house we can use," joked his wife, Pamela, to whom he has been married for 42 years.

Mr Boon spent his childhood living with his family on Burgh Road, although he was born at the army base in Shrivenham during the war.

"We came back after the war and the house was completely safe, except the door had been blown in from a bomb landing in the back garden," he said.

From 1953 to 1959, he was educated at the old Great Yarmouth Grammar School, originally founded in 1551. The grammar school had moved to Salisbury Road in 1910 and became the comprehensive Great Yarmouth High School in 1981, and Mr Boon has continued to be involved.

He helps to run the annual meet-up of ex-pupils but also published his book, Great Yarmouth's School, in 2010 as a chronicle covering the last century of the institution.

On leaving school he qualified as a chartered accountant, working with Lovewell Blake. But after 10 years with the firm he upped sticks to study English and law at Nottingham University.

"I wanted to go when I was 18," Mr Boon explained. "But my father had wanted me to become an accountant, and I did when I qualified in 1969 so this was next."

But not even academia could keep Mr Boon away from his home town, as once his studies were finished – for then, at least – he returned to Gorleston to become group management accountant at the Caister Group, a major holiday and



■ Michael Boon, from Gorleston.
Picture: JAMES BASS

A lifelong love of local history and the theatre

leisure provider who were eventually bought out by Ladbrookes.

It was Mr Boon's next career change for which he is most known, when on a whim he applied to a secretarial position at the Great Yarmouth Port and Haven Commissioners. Little did he know that he would be chief executive officer within two years and become a driving force behind Great Yarmouth's outer harbour.

"It was an interesting start," he said. "I became the first CEO in 1977, and the government told me I had to reform the authority.

"It was clear that the port was too small and it was a situation where we needed to either expand, or die."

“I’ve had my time, now other people must do it. I’m now just an interested observer.

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Mr Boon looked to Europe and felt that the only way to expand would be outwards, and in 1981 he persuaded the board to agree to the idea of constructing an outer harbour. Although contested in both houses of parliament, the construction of the outer harbour

was permitted under powers granted by the Great Yarmouth Outer Harbour Act 1986, and Mr Boon and his team did all the preliminary work they could to get the scheme off the ground.

"It could have been built in the 80s, it was ready to go," Mr Boon said. But long-term investment was needed, and he stepped down in 1999.

"I took it as far as I could," he added, and the outer harbour was eventually constructed in 2007.

Throughout his time at the port, Mr Boon kept an interest in local history and theatre, and returned to an academic career studying at Cambridge and London universities.

Factfile

Age: 72

Family: Wife Pamela and daughter Melody.

Address: Addison Road, Gorleston

At Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, in 2005 he gained a masters in local history, with a focus on the role of the gentry in Great Yarmouth from 1450 – 1509. Now, he is working towards a PhD on the port and town of Yarmouth in the 15th century at Royal Holloway, London. But throughout this study, he has always been based at his Gorleston home.

"This is my town," he said. "I enjoy being a part of this town."

Although Mr Boon has walked many paths, one over-arching theme has always been his love of theatre; he has been a member, actor and active director of The Masquers since 1963, directing more than 20 Shakespeare plays to date.

It was through the group that Mr Boon met his wife. "She used to get all the big roles," he said. "She was a very good leading actress."

They knew each other for 10 years before they married, and they have one daughter, Melody.

Now, Mr Boon is picking up his PhD after a four-year break to fight bowel cancer. "It slowed me down," he said.

However, always the optimist, Mr Boon has continued his research and writing – even once editing a book from his hospital bed.

"I've seen a lot of changes in this town, and it's almost gone full circle; now we have to do what our forebears did in the 15th century and secure its future.

"But I've put into a lot of organisations in Great Yarmouth over the years, I've had my time, now other people must do it. I'm now just an interested observer."