

A TRIBUTE TO JOHN ANTHONY WILSON

John was born in 1949 in Huddersfield as the youngest of four children and brought up in a mainly Quaker family (that is, the Religious Society of Friends, and mother and sister were Quakers), attending a Quaker boarding school, then qualifying as a nurse in Huddersfield and doing psychiatric training at the Quaker Retreat in York. The family did a lot of sailing, on reservoirs in a dinghy, with holidays on the Norfolk Broads, the south coast, and the Llangollen canal in North Wales. His mother did a lot of work for charity, and first visited India in 1966 as a member of the Executive of Oxfam, and again in 1971/2, inspecting and helping charities and also doing Inter-Faith work. According to her autobiography when back in Huddersfield a friend who had second sight forecast authoritatively that John would go to help a Hindu doctor in the Nilgiri Hills in Southern India. Sometime later John did so, working for Dr. Narasihman as a Quaker volunteer for two years. The doctor had been given some poor land at Kayunni with a tiny building to set up a clinic for the Paniya tribal people, who were still hunter-gatherers, and it was a hard life to start with. After the two years John did a one year course in intensive care, but he could not be replaced in India and went back for another two years. He used to go deep into the forest villages to provide medical care, as did Dr. Narasihman, when no other Indian doctors would – and they were too expensive anyway.

It was possible to be given poor land to help tribal people and at the end of his second period of voluntary service John did so with the support of Quaker Peace and Service, after considerable difficulty with some officials. The 17 acres of land was at Ambalamoola (where wandering animals such as elephants were another problem) and the Nilgiris Wynaad Tribal Welfare Society (NWTWS) was set up in 1978, and a bungalow built on the hill. John studied agriculture and set up a plantation growing coffee, ginger, cloves and pepper to finance the medical care he provided. When back in England for a visit he would do a lecture tour to support his project. Things gradually developed and improved, with a separate dispensary and a well being dug in 1981. However standing up for the tribal people and helping with developing their agriculture and teaching, apart from the medical work, did not always win him friends. He had to deal with diseases such as tuberculosis and leprosy. Languages were a problem of course, and he became so fluent in Malayalam that (with his beard) he could sometimes pass as a native. His Tamil was also good and he could speak Paniya and understand three other tribal languages. After he bought the boat he became fluent in French as well. Quite impressive for an Englishman! As things developed and the plantation provided funds a separate area of land was bought, and later the Government gave some more.

In 1983 after his father died and he went home for a visit the Indian Government was introducing additional restrictions, and unfortunately he could not get his residence permit renewed and had to use difficult to obtain tourist visas, visiting each year and trying to solve problems, but being told to leave by an official in 1989. In spite of UK government help his attempt to obtain Indian citizenship had got lost in the official swamp. He was very upset, naturally. At one stage he also did voluntary work in Sri Lanka, helping the Tamil people.

As a child he had been attracted to the waterways, his favourite place to play being by the local canal, and the attraction seemed to surface again when, unable to continue his work in India fulltime, he bought the Dutch barge Johanna in 1991; - it was built in 1923 and in trade until 1990. It was taken to France to be fitted out for self catering passengers but the gearbox was damaged on the way and it had to be towed, at first by manpower, then up the Seine through Paris to a boatyard run by an Englishman on the Yonne. There the open hold was decked over and other repairs done, then John fitted out the passenger accommodation himself, with a little family help. At first there were ten berths, and typical of his generosity, he pitched his charter prices at a fraction of other

charter barges and this enabled people to try out living on a barge before deciding their own vessel. However bookings were poor in the early years, and later the layout was changed to three pairs of single bunks which could be moved to make doubles. His winters were normally spent in India.

Although there were difficulties the NWTWS continues to grow, and John's initiative has now developed into a much larger organisation with hospital beds and a school and receives some government help. He was not himself a Quaker, and in India he was often accused of being a Christian come to convert tribal people. This was quite untrue, he hated any sort of religious conversion because it destroys tribal culture and custom – a thing very dear to John's heart. Helping to develop their agriculture was a different thing. Wherever John went in a wide radius he would recognise and greet Tribal people by name. In turn he would be recognised by the Tribal people who held him in great respect. Even in latter days he could often guess who the next generation of younger people were because they looked like their parents. In fact many he had delivered as babies. John had a deep understanding of the tribal psyche and had an extraordinary and remarkable relationship with them.

With the life of service he led John achieved a great deal, particularly in India, his life amply demonstrating the modern spiritual light of active benevolence.