

'The Man in the White Suit' by Diana Brahams

Martin Bell, OBE – Former BBC correspondent, Independent MP, historian, writer and poet and Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF.

Martin Bell moved into the Suburb with his young family 40 years ago in December 1974 and still considers it "the best place to live; it is friendly, quiet and tranquil." A huge contrast to the vicious and deadly Balkan and middle east wars he has witnessed. The Lullaby of Sarajevo was the sound of bombs and gunfire and sirens and smashed glass and bricks during the time he was reporting there for the BBC so that when he returned for spells of respite the total quiet kept him awake. Bell was working abroad for seventeen years and let the house out during this time – but now he is glad to be home and relishes the calm of the Suburb with its woods and green spaces and the local shops. It is the complete antithesis to a violent noisy war zone. He took great pride in showing me the great oak tree in his garden that is possibly the oldest and largest in the Suburb. As a member of the Suburb Residents Association, he enjoys many local events and activities.

Born in Redisham Suffolk on 31 August 1938, Martin was one of the last batch of young men to do National Service; perhaps it was his time in the army during the fading years of the British Empire and time spent fighting Archbishop Makarios and the EOKA movement in Cyprus that sparked his life interest in war zones. He was refused a

commission because he failed the army intelligence test but ended his term as a corporal. After the army he went to Cambridge where he gained a First Class Honours degree in English and joined the BBC in 1962. Two years later he moved to north London to be near Alexandra Palace which was the BBC's broadcasting centre until 1970. In 1974 his doctor, who lived in Southway, told him of a friend's house that was for sale and he and his family moved in in December.

In 1991 when he was 'embedded' with the British army (a new concept for journalists then) he wore army combat kit and was given the serial number 001, but a few months later, in June 1991, when the civil wars in Bosnia were in full force he was wearing a white suit (it's actually a dusky cream colour) and avoided a lot of bullets. He then felt he should continue to dress this way and, back in Britain, it became his trade mark and he was known as The Man in the White Suit. (He only wears a dark suit to funerals.) Having finally retired from the BBC and expressing disgust at the sleaze in Parliament, 24 days before the general election of 1997 he was persuaded to stand against Neil Hamilton, the conservative MP for Tatton, who was embroiled in the questions for cash scandal. When both Labour and Lib Dems withdrew their candidates he found himself elected with a majority of 11,077 votes, a seat he held for four years. Though he spoke rarely in the House of Commons, he took his duties as a

constituency MP very seriously. He did not seek re-election in Tatton in 2001 when the new conservative candidate, George Osborne, was selected and later won but he did stand as an Independent against Eric Pickles. Pickles won but Bell gained 32% of the votes cast – an impressive performance on his part. At this point, Bell retired from active politics and concentrated on writing and lecturing with a brief return to TV in 2003 during the invasion of Iraq. He became a goodwill ambassador to UNICEF in 2001 and received an OBE for services to journalism in 1993.

Martin Bell is the author of several books that reflect his experience in the dangerous war zones of the world. The first, published in 1995 is 'In Harm's Way'. This was followed by 'An Accidental MP' in 2000 and 'Through Gates of Fire: a journey into World Disorder' in 2003, 'The Truth that Sticks: New Labour's Breach of Trust' and 'A Very British Revolution: the Expenses Scandal and How to Save Our Democracy' in 2009. In 2011 he published a volume of light and dark verses entitled 'For Whom the Bell Tolls'.

Interestingly, his latest work which is due to be published next year by Pen and Sword is called 'End of Empire: a soldier's story' and deals with his time as a conscript National Service Soldier. This, he says, was prompted by the recent release of classified documents and the discovery of a hundred letters that he wrote to his parents that were stored in the attic. I am looking forward to reading it.



ICON BOOKS PUBLICITY

The Great Wall - Conservation and Repair

The Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust is organising conservation and repair of parts of the Great Wall on behalf of the property owners and assisted by the City of London Corporation.

This Grade II Listed structure was designed as a divide between the rural Heath and the built-up Suburb.

In recent years the wall has become overwhelmed by the vigorous growth of ivy and other vegetation. This is invasive into the brickwork and its weight is a significant strain on the structural stability of the wall.

The work will be to remove ivy, repair the wall and re-establish controlled vegetation. It is a similar scheme

to that which the Trust successfully carried out at Sunshine Corner.

Once the work has been completed the re-growth of vegetation in front of the wall will be allowed, but maintenance will prevent it from becoming too vigorous and therefore posing a future threat to the wall.



An early photograph of The Great Wall



Invasive ivy and other vegetation



Trust staff surveying the Wall



Repair and conservation work in progress

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