

# Harbour

# LIFE

John White has lived and worked at the tiny hamlet of Felixstowe Ferry for almost all of his 79 years

WORDS & PHOTOS: Mike Trippitt

**A**t his shed door – a very old shed door – John White, Felixstowe Ferry's veteran harbour master, looks through the boatyard and out onto the River Deben. The waters that ebb and flow here, and the tiny fishing hamlet, are his life. He says: "People say to me, 'Have you lived at the Ferry all your life?', and I say, 'Well no, not yet.'" Typical dry, Suffolk wit. In fact, John did live for a brief period of his early life all of three miles up the road.

"When my father went into the Merchant Navy during the war my mother moved to Felixstowe. I was born just before the war, so my first memories are actually of living in Felixstowe. We moved back to the Ferry as soon as my father came out of the service." John's father acquired a boat and began fishing for a living. He built the shed from which the harbour master, who will be 80 next year, still works.

"I remember him building it," says John. "It was secondhand when he bought it from one of the aerodromes. So, this shed has been here since 1945. And is still here . . . just." John has been harbour master for 20 years. The job started in the 1950s, when the Felixstowe Ferry Fairway Committee was set up to regulate boat moorings on the Deben.

"Before that, anybody could come down here and dump a sinker and chain," says John. There was a good deal of confusion, he says, and problems when vessels dragged their moorings, so some locals formed a fairway committee and obtained

a lease of the riverbed from the Crown.

"After that happened, all moorings started to be regulated. My father-in-law, Charlie Brinkley, was elected harbour master. I was his assistant for a few years and when he retired they appointed me."

John's introduction to the river at the Ferry was much earlier, however. "My dad would bring me down on the crossbar of his bike when they were building the shed. I used to mess around in his little pram dinghy on the end of a rope. I would have been six years old."

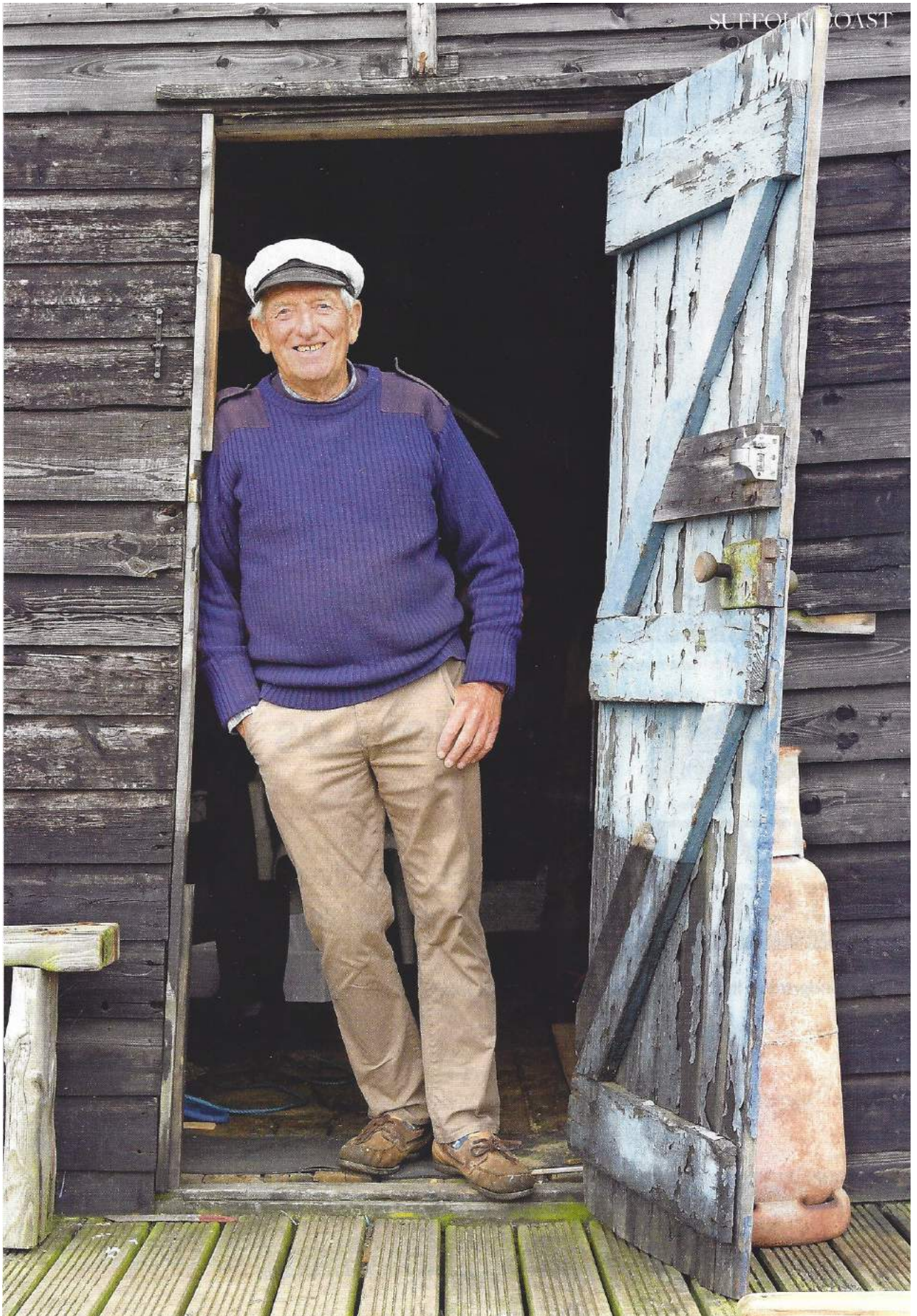
He went on to sail dinghies with his brother, David, before committing to a working life in and around Felixstowe Ferry boatyard, starting with as an apprentice shipwright in 1956 with C H Fox and Sons. John recalls that first year well, including his weekly wage of two pounds, 18 shillings and sixpence.

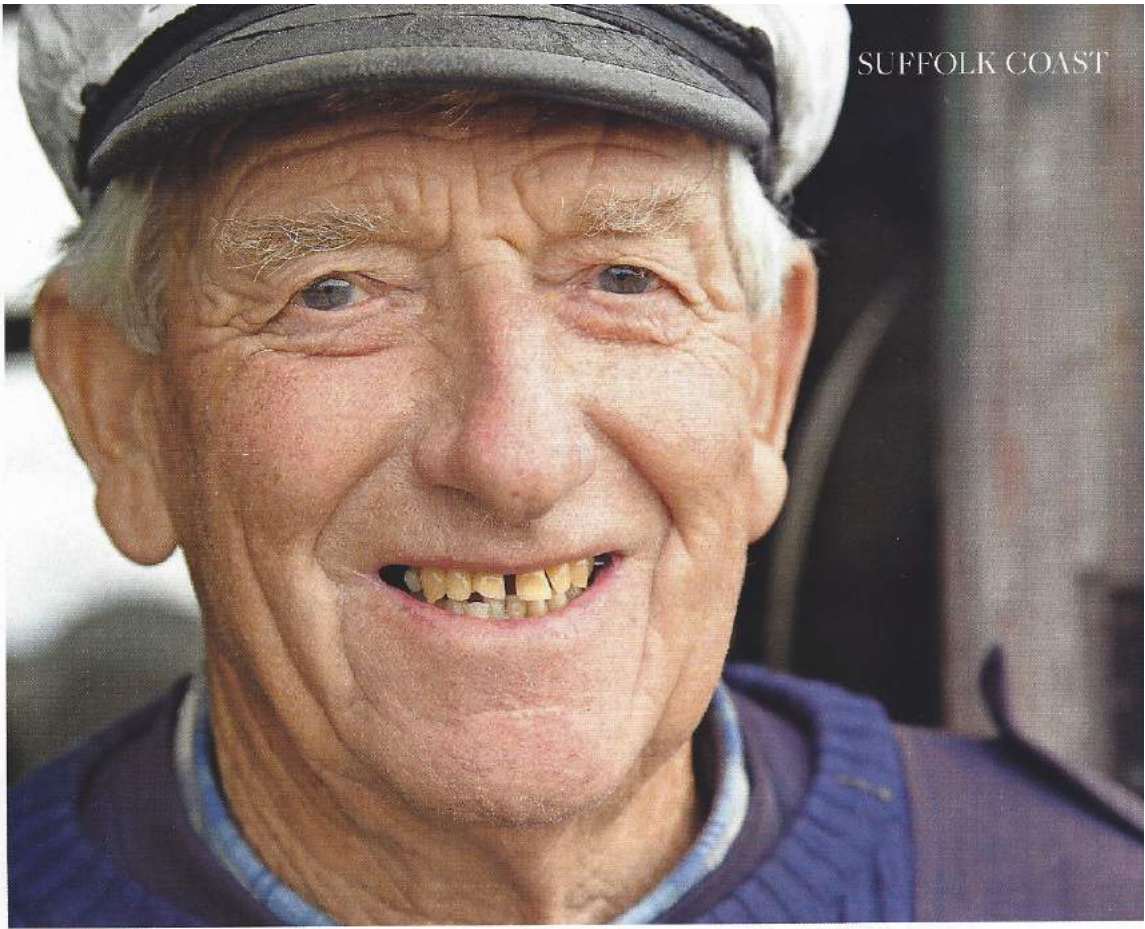
The four men who worked at the yard carried out any work to do with boats, including building three foot-ferries – Late Times, Our Times and Odd Times, for Charlie Brinkley's service across the river to Bawdsey.

John spent 42 years at Felixstowe Ferry boatyard, by which time he had become a director of Felixstowe Ferry Boatyard Ltd, the company set up to run the yard when C H Fox and Sons pulled out in the mid-sixties.

"When I was 60 I wanted to retire from the boatyard and run the ferry," he says. A foot ferry across the river between Felixstowe Ferry and Bawdsey







has operated since 1932, after vehicular chain ferries became uneconomic. Several ferryman plied the ferry trade over the decades, but for many years the boatyard held the right to operate it. At his request, John's fellow directors granted him a ferry licence for five years. "I was self-employed for the first time in my life, and ran the ferry until I was 65 in 2004."

Most days, John can be seen in his harbour master's cap, walking the shores of the river, pootling about the harbour, or taking visitors on 25-minute trips in his boat. "The one thing about semi-retirement is that you don't have to rush about anymore," he says. But to visiting and local sailors alike, John is best known for his knowledge of the river, his

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ABOVE:  
Felixstowe Ferry  
harbour master  
John White

willingness to share it and his help in keeping them safe.

To the unwary, the shifting banks and bar at the mouth of the river can be treacherous. The way these changes occur, how the banks and channels are formed and how the bar moves every year has been almost a lifelong study for John. Shingle from the beaches north of the River Deben moves south along the coast due to the action of the tides. It's called Longshore Drift. When it gets to the river entrance, the tide rushing out and in every day moves the shingle off and forms the banks. "Over the years the channel into the river moves south until the shingle bar over-extends itself and a new channel is formed among the banks, and the cycle starts again."

Carrying out an annual springtime survey of the banks and estuary is not part of John's official duties, but for 25 years he has done one, producing a chart to assist boat owners navigating in and out of the river. "I used to produce a sketched chart and send it out to local sailing clubs

and yachtsmen. I still go out and do my own survey and sketch a chart, but my son converts that to go on my website."

At the harbour, where he has spent almost every day for six decades, talking to people, running them about, and passing on his knowledge, John White thrives. "My perfect day is when the sun is shining, with not too much easterly wind. I'll come down, and if there's visitors on the visitors' moorings I'll collect the fee. I'll get my motorboat out and just hang around to see if anyone wants a trip. I'll mess around here all day – it's just nice chatting to people. It's beautiful here and I appreciate it. I wake up every morning and think, "Thank God I live where I do."

As for the harbour master's retirement? "Everybody's got to pack up in the end," he says, smiling. "I'm 79 now, but I think I can go on for a few more years yet. But you never know, do you? You never know what's round the corner." ♦

John White is at [debenestuary.pilot.co.uk](http://debenestuary.pilot.co.uk)