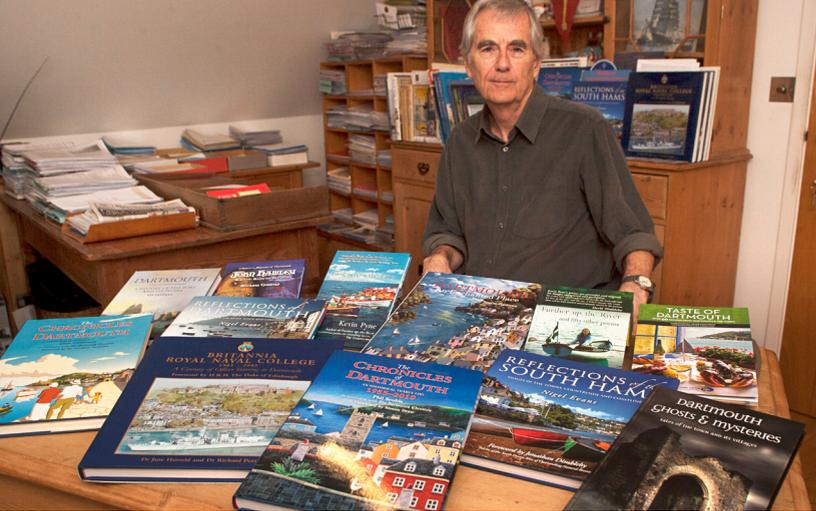


By the Dart INTERVIEW

RICHARD WEBB

RETIRING AFTER A LONG CAREER
IN BOOK PUBLISHING

Interview by Phil Scoble



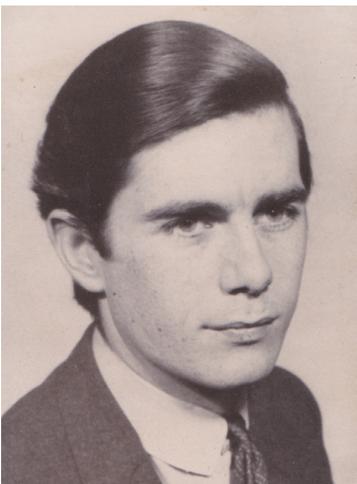
Richard Webb sits in the top-floor study of his newly built home overlooking Warfleet Creek – it's the view he grew up with as it is on the site of his parents' old house.

It illustrates his continued emotional connection to Dartmouth despite a life in the highest levels of the publishing world.

Richard was born on 26th July 1943. The same day a certain Mick Jagger was born. He can claim a mixed bunch of ancestors including Edward Whymper, the first man to climb the Matterhorn, William Addis the inventor of the toothbrush and the famous Fiennes clan of actors, writers and explorers who are all third cousins.

Richard's first glimpse of Dartmouth must have been when he was taken as an infant to visit his grandparents in late 1943,

Richard in the Sixties.



shortly before the evacuation of the Slapton area, Exercise Tiger and the preparations for D-Day in 1944.

Richard, with his father Lt Colonel Richard Webb and his mother Iris, spent the years immediately following the war travelling around the world on military postings to Burma, Singapore and France.

"I had to check David Bailey's expenses and I even had to chaperone Twiggy!"

In late 1954 Richard's father finally retired to his wife's hometown of Dartmouth where Iris's parents had lived since the end of the First World War:

Richard was sent to Marlborough College to complete his secondary education where he discovered a passion for literature and won various literary prizes.

He had taken a Royal Naval Scholarship to BRNC, Dartmouth but Richard decided that he was better suited to a life working with the printed word so, after working briefly with Christopher Milne at the Harbour Bookshop, he left Dartmouth in September 1961, aged just 18, to begin his career in publishing.

"My father said he would not support me financially through University so I had to go and earn a living. I was plonked on the steam

train from Kingswear to Paddington with a week's rent for a bedsit in Earls' Court. It was a real step in the dark."

After a few roles in and around Fleet Street, Richard secured an exciting job with the publishers of Vogue and House & Garden magazines in 1966.

"I was rubbing shoulders with the top photographers and models," he said. "I had to check David Bailey's expenses and I even had to chaperone Twiggy! I was then put in charge of Condé Nast's book division and did a lot of exciting projects – the famous Vogue posters and fashion books, House & Garden interior décor books and even one of Mary Berry's first books: *The Brides Cookbook*."

We also published one of the decade's most iconic books: David Bailey's *Goodbye, Baby and Amen*, a photographic essay on the decade, era, epoch and happenings of the 'Swinging Sixties'.

Living in Chelsea and working at Vogue - Dartmouth seemed a very long way away."

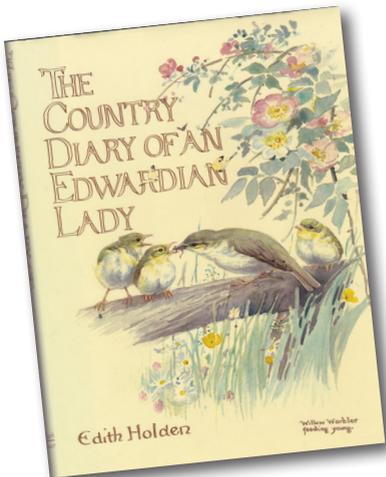
Then in 1970, aged only 27, Richard became Publicity Director of the leading London book publishers Michael Joseph. He worked with many famous authors including James Baldwin, HE Bates, Dick Francis, James Herriot, John Masters, Spike Milligan, Derek Tangye, Leslie Thomas and the former Prime Minister Harold Wilson amongst many others.

"It was an extraordinary time.

I would arrange for, and accompany, these famous authors to TV interviews, and got to meet David Frost, Michael Parkinson, Joan Bakewell and even Michael Caine. Our book launches were star-studded affairs and it was just an amazing experience."

In 1974 Richard returned to Devon and co-founded, with Delian Bower, their own publishing company in Exeter in 1975. It was naturally named Webb & Bower.

The fledgling company received a manuscript entitled 'Nature Notes 1906'. Richard renamed it 'The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady' and, when published in 1977, it instantly became a publishing and merchandising phenomenon.



"Country Diary' chimed with the times exactly – it was rural nostalgia with a safe, beautiful look people wanted after the Seventies recession. It sold a massive amount – over three million copies - and we made the

Top 10 of the past 40 years

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1) <i>A Brief History of Time</i>
Stephen Hawking | 6) <i>Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus</i>
John Gray |
| 2) <i>A Year in Provence</i>
Peter Mayle | 7) <i>Notes from a Small Island</i>
Bill Bryson |
| 3) <i>Wild Swans</i>
Jung Chang | 8) <i>The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, aged 13¾</i>
Sue Townsend |
| 4) <i>The Country Diary of an Edwardian Lady</i>
Edith Holden | 9) <i>= A Child Called 'It'</i>
David Pelzer |
| 5) <i>Angela's Ashes</i>
Frank McCourt | 9) <i>= The Da Vinci Code</i>
Dan Brown |



Richard with wife Gilly on their wedding day in 1992

Guinness Book of Records for the longest running UK No. 1 Bestseller. Our lives were changed overnight."

"I felt, as so many new people arrived in Dartmouth knowing only about its beauty, I wanted to open their eyes to the extraordinary history and the people who have lived here before,"

It has just been announced that *Country Diary* is the 4th largest-selling book of the past 40 years!

Between 1976 and 1992, Webb & Bower published over 350 titles including 24 national bestsellers and one international bestseller. They received 14 national awards for design, typography and production and sold over 10 million copies of their books.

Richard first met Gilly Blane White, co-owner of the Good Food Guide restaurant Billy Budd's Bistro of Dartmouth, in 1988, became engaged at Christmas 1990 and they got married in Gibraltar in 1992.

In 1994 Richard returned to Dartmouth to live – he planned to have a happy semi-retirement as a literary agent.

Then in 1999, Kingswear Historian Don Collinson brought Richard a manuscript based on 15 years of research into the Dartmouth Chronicle.

"My first thought was: this is unique

and I must publish it," he said. "I had missed the experience of taking a book from manuscript to final publication and I was delighted to be back in that role." *The Chronicles of Dartmouth 1854-1954* was a huge success, winning the 'Devon Book of the Year Award' in 2000.

It was the start of a new, second career for Richard. In the next 13 years, he published

a dozen books about the town, its Naval College, its people, food and history, as well as poetry by Kevin Pyne and the second volume of *Chronicles (1955 – 2010)* by Phil Scoble.

His swan-song book on his retirement, aged 70, last year was the lavishly illustrated and highly acclaimed *Dartmouth – An Enchanted Place* by Joslin Fiennes which he published in association with ACC. This completed a 52 year career with over 365 books published. One for every day of the year!

Why did he latterly put so much into his local Dartmouth publishing?

"I felt that as so many new people arrived in Dartmouth knowing only about its beauty, I should open their eyes to the extraordinary history and the people who have lived here before," he said. "I hoped that the books would help them realise that they were involved with a very special place.

"As a teenager I couldn't wait to get out – but now I think that Dartmouth is amazing. The Flavel, the Music Festival, the Food Festival, the Regatta and all the restaurants make the town a wonderfully interesting and vibrant place to live. It's a good place to be – and I'm very proud of the books that I have created about my home town."

"I also care passionately about its environment and was very pleased to have instigated the registration of Sugary Green, above Sugary Cove, as an official Village Green so safeguarding it for future generations." •