

## THE FIREDIVER

Sometimes memories come in totally uninvited but they are nonetheless welcome guests. Because it's my birthday today, I'm thinking of the Firediver of Southend. One of my birthday treats when I was a young boy was a day trip to the seaside with my Mum and Dad. In those days Southend was full of East End families just like us escaping London, desperate for a sniff of sea air, but mostly what they got was a strange potpourri of seaside smells. The sweet aroma of Candyfloss laid over the tangy pong of vinegar on fish and chips in newspaper. Car exhaust fumes mingled with cheap perfume gifted from the grabber machine. The tide seemed to be forever lurking miles away in the distance and when it returned, it came loaded with oil and mud from the refinery across the estuary, generously laying its miasma along the main drag.

It often rained on those days out, and that meant entertainment had to be found in the Kursaal or in one of the amusement arcades spread along the sea front. Occasionally we would take a walk along the pier, which, at that time, was the longest in the UK. These days it's a sad, burnt out shell. Have you ever seen a Firediver? It's not something you are likely to forget. I used to wonder if he was still alive. He'd probably be a hundred years old now. Was he married? Were his loved ones fearful of his daily dive of death? Did he do it for the money or the adrenaline rush? And now I have to tell you that old age mixes up my memories. As I write this down for you, I am also going through a biscuit tin full of old photos taken on my little box Brownie camera. And I have just found a black and white picture, presumably taken by Mum or Dad, of me aged about eight with the Firediver himself. On the back, written in pencil it says, Peter with the Firediver. August 1960. *Great Yarmouth Pier*.

Great Yarmouth. Yes, of course it was. Not Southend at all. Yarmouth was our yearly holiday destination. We stayed in a caravan park just along the coast and walked into the centre of town for fun and adventures every night. I remember seeing Lonnie Donegan in one of the theatres and The Shadows in another. I guess that's where my love of blues and guitar music comes from. I'm sure you are all too young to know anything about those artists but they were big names at the time. And there were always big TV stars doing shows on one of the two piers. Now, in the picture I am looking at, I'm dressed in shorts, white shirt and plastic sandals. The Firediver is standing with his muscular arms folded across his chest looking very proud. He has a very wide smile, and even in black and white you can tell he is very sun tanned. He's wearing some very old-fashioned swimming trunks.

Because I spend a lot of my time in the Nostalgia Café, I decided to put up a little blog about my holidays as a boy. I mentioned the Firediver in one of them and I added a scan of that little black and white picture. As a result I received an interesting reply. It came in the form of an email from The Firediver's daughter. I have her permission to reproduce it here.

"Hello Peter, my name is Pauline Digby. I was originally Pauline Boughton, daughter of Harry 'Hothead' Boughton, the Firediver you saw when you were a little boy. He dived off Yarmouth Pier. He did his show every weekend and did four dives on Saturday and three on Sunday. He did it mostly to help feed the family (there were six of us), but I think he enjoyed the excitement, too. He was nicknamed "Hothead" because apart from having red hair, he was a bomb disposal expert during the

war and once got all his hair burned off when he was demonstrating bomb disposal techniques for other soldiers and it went wrong. Because you have shown an interest in him I'd like to share something with you that I've never told anyone before. It feels like this might be the time to tell his strange story.

On July 8th 1962 Dad went out to do his "other job" as he called it (he was actually a postman). That day I went with him. I was 15 at the time and probably a bit bored at home. He did his first three dives OK. His last dive was always at five pm and the one that made the most money. I remember he was very pleased about the amount of cash he'd got in his cap from the crowd so far that day. If I was with him, he'd give me the money to look after and that made me feel very grown up and responsible. The act consisted of him doing two dives. The first was a normal dive off the pier and it was always the left side as you looked towards the shore because he said the water was very deep there. That first dive was a way of getting the crowd worked up for the next one. When he got out of the water he'd make a little joke about how he got his nickname. In those days anyone who fought in the war was regarded as a national hero and that meant more money in the cap. Then he would take a can of petrol and pour the contents onto the water below the small platform he dived from. No health and safety rules in those days. Then he would throw in a lighted stick that would set fire to the petrol and create a blanket of flame on the surface of the water below. Next, he would stand on the rail at the edge of the pier with his arms outstretched, ready to do the daring deed before he finally dived into the fire, staying under water as long as he could to create tension before appearing yards away from the flames to the applause of the crowd. I loved watching him dive. As he arced from the pier into the sea I often thought how his life had been as a young man and I was proud of being the daughter of the famous Firediver. Once he had surfaced he would come up the ladder and collect his money. Sometimes, if he could hold his breath long enough he would swim under the pier and come up on the ladder attached to the other side of the walkway. He'd sneak up behind one of the onlookers and tap them on the shoulder. It always got a big round of applause and more money.

On the day I'm thinking of, he did his usual routine. Basic dive first and Firediver second. But this time it was different. He went through the flames just like normal but he seemed to be leaving it a really long time before he surfaced. I started to get a bit frightened but thought it was part of the show, so I went to the other side and looked for his red hair in the darkness below. Unfortunately, Dad didn't come up from under the water that day. As you can imagine I was screaming and everything. Two men jumped in and swam around and dived under but he wasn't there. I think I passed out. When I came round there were police and an ambulance on the pier and the area was cordoned off. There was a police diver in the water looking for Dad. Mum eventually came and took me home. Obviously we were all in shock and crying and everything. I'm crying as I write this because that memory is so strong. We had to go to the police station to give details about what had happened. We decided to walk home and got to our house about 9.15pm. When we walked into our living room, Dad was sitting in his favourite armchair staring straight ahead. His red hair had turned completely white. He wasn't wearing a shirt and there were what looked like scratch marks all over his chest and back. He was gripping some kind of necklace thing made out of small seashells. Of course we were all over him, crying and everything. Giving him and each other big hugs. But he just kept staring ahead a saying "She wouldn't let me go. She's a beauty, that's for sure. Red hair just like mine. But I couldn't stay. Not with the family and all. Red hair. She's a beauty. She took my wedding ring." Then we saw that the ring was gone. He just kept saying the same thing over and over, even when the police turned up. When they went Mum tried to get some answers but he was in a kind of trance and

eventually he just fell asleep in the arm chair in the living room. So we covered him up and all went to bed except Mum who stayed with him all night. While he was asleep she tried to take the necklace thing but even though he was asleep he just wouldn't let go of it. So she settled down for the night and eventually drifted off.

The next morning when he woke up he couldn't understand why he was in the living room and Mum was sleeping next to him. When she started to ask him what had happened it was clear he couldn't remember anything after diving into the water. He was as amazed and confused as we were by the whole story. And then Mum saw that the necklace had gone and the wedding ring was back on his finger. The carpet around the armchair was soaking wet, too. He never ever remembered what had happened to him that day and later he started to get angry if we tried to talk about it, but he carried on with the shows for a couple of years until he just lost interest. So for a long time now I've put it out of my mind. But now you know and I'm glad I've told someone who might understand. You can share this story if you'd like to. My Dad was a lovely, family man and he wasn't mad. I just think something very strange happened to him that we will never understand.

Yours, Pauline Digby."

We went back to Yarmouth often while I was still a kid. But the Firediver wasn't to be seen. Maybe the health and safety people finally shut him down. Instead, on the same part of the pier, an escape artist entertained the crowd by releasing himself from locks and chains put on him by members of the public. He said he was the man who banged the gong at the start of all of those old fashioned Rank Movies that were made in the UK. He bent iron bars with his hands and banged nails into wood with his bare fists. I went back to Great Yarmouth again last month. I was doing some research on British folk customs up along the coast. I walked to the sea front from my little B&B by the racecourse. It's changed quite a lot since I was a boy. There were so many people speaking languages I didn't understand and I felt like the world I'd been brought up in had disappeared. Maybe it's the same for all generations. And now the sea front is full of people painted silver pretending to be standing in mid air. Rather dull compared to the show 'Hothead' put on. I mean just standing there doesn't require much courage, does it? I think I'm going to get my son to do a good scan from the picture of the Firediver and make a big print to frame. And then I'll have a lovely story for his kids. Who knows, I might even take them to Yarmouth for their holidays. Or even a day trip to Southend.

John Ellis is a UK based musician and songwriter, He is best known for his work with Peter Gabriel, The Stranglers, The Vibrators, Peter Hammill and many more. His infamous 'Jimi Hendrix plays the Welsh national anthem' hoax was featured on UK television and in print around the world. He has released 7 albums of instrumental music and has just completed a full-length novel. John Ellis also runs a not-for-profit organization called [The Luma Group](#), creating bespoke arts workshops for a variety of clients. To find out more, please visit:

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