

Robert Malster (1932-2023)

A long serving volunteer of both the Suffolk Records Society and the Suffolk Archives, Robert (Bob) Malster, died on 16th April in Ipswich Hospital, just four days after his ninety-first birthday. He was voted in as a member of council for the Suffolk Records Society in 1999 when John Blatchly was chairman. Shortly afterwards he started volunteering at the Suffolk Record Office with a group of others from the Suffolk Local History Council in about 2000, and they worked as a team tackling larger cataloguing projects for about twenty years up until Gatacre Road closed in early 2020. I first met Bob when I started volunteering in 2009, and although I knew of him as a local history writer, I was struck by his strong Norwich, not Norfolk, accent. He was born in Norwich Cathedral Close in 1932 and remembered well experiencing the bombing of Norwich in the Second World War. He was also a hereditary 'Freeman' of the City, but was disappointed that he had never been able to trace the Malster ancestor who had first received the honour. He was however delighted that some years after his son Paul had sadly died of leukaemia at the age of twenty-one, his daughter Andrea successfully challenged the Norwich City Council rules that Freeman status could only be handed down through the male line.

Bob's career was in journalism which moved him to the land of the South Folk working on the Lowestoft Journal, and ending up at the East Anglian Daily Times in Ipswich, where he made his home. He lectured on local history for the Workers Education Association and later he became editor at the publisher Terence Dalton - The Lavenham Press. His biggest impact however was always as an author. His first book - Wreck and Rescue on the Essex Coast was published in 1968, and it was the first of an incredible thirty-seven books he authored, or co-authored, that I have been able to trace - there were probably more. His speciality was maritime history and with his wicked sense of humour he was once delighted to tell me that in a review of one of his four books on Norfolk and Suffolk maritime history, published between 2012 and 2017, the reviewer described him as 'probably one of the best writers on East Anglian maritime history today'.

Apart from volunteering at Suffolk Archives he also volunteered at the Ipswich Transport Museum, and was a member of, amongst others, the Ipswich Maritime Trust, the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History, the Suffolk Local History Council, and the Suffolk Records Society. For the Society he edited and introduced the 2013 volume The Minute Books of the Suffolk Humane Society, 1806-1892, on one of his favourite subjects - lifeboats. Of course, as far as his fellow volunteers were concerned he was Mr Reliable, the font of knowledge we all relied on to solve our problems. Bob emailed me in March and said he had just completed the text of his latest book on the history of industry in East Anglia, but was having trouble with the illustrations - "I can't just jump in the car and nip up to Leiston or Norwich to take that picture that I forgot to take years ago when I had the chance. There's a lesson there somewhere, but it's too late to learn. Do it now!"

His remarkable character will be sadly missed by me and all who were lucky enough to have known him, and I do hope his last book will be published, although he has already left an enormous literary contribution to the history of East Anglia - an incredible achievement!

Paul Botwright (May 2023)