

## Robert Norton Ayton

### The Ladybird Years

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My name is Rupert Ayton and Robert was my uncle. There were four boys in my dad's family: Jack (1913-2006), Robert (1915-1985), Bert (1916-2005), and Bill (1922-1995). Bill was my father. Any Ladybird enthusiast from 1960 to 1980 likely read at least one book illustrated by my uncle. So I have provided answers to questions about what I know of Robert.



### *Growing up, did I spend a lot of time with Robert?*

Not like some children may have spent with aunts and uncles. It wasn't a close family and he and Joan did not have children. I was born in 1956, and our family immigrated to the US in 1960. So Robert was somewhat of an enigma until we returned to the UK in 1965. I did have

the Story of Flight, and he did send me old Eagles containing The Great Sailor while we were in the US.

On returning to England in 1965 and spending several weeks two summers at Brockley Elm Farm with him and Joan, I had a tremendous impression of him. But again we re-immigrated in 1969. I did receive cards, letters, and even tape recordings from him. I saw him once more on a trip to England in 1978.



*How do I know so much about Robert?*

I've been piecing together the puzzle of his life and career from lots of sources and vague recollections. There were three visits with Joan after Robert died. And my father told

the occasional Robert story, too. I have asked my mum about her recollections of Robert. And of course, my older sister Barbara had lived quite close to Robert and Joan for a few years in the 1970s, and she has shared her observations.

And I have been the keeper of Robert's artifacts, mainly his sketch books, which tell a lot about his approach to illustration. I also have the several letters that he wrote during the war. And I have the old family papers from the time of my grandfather's death.

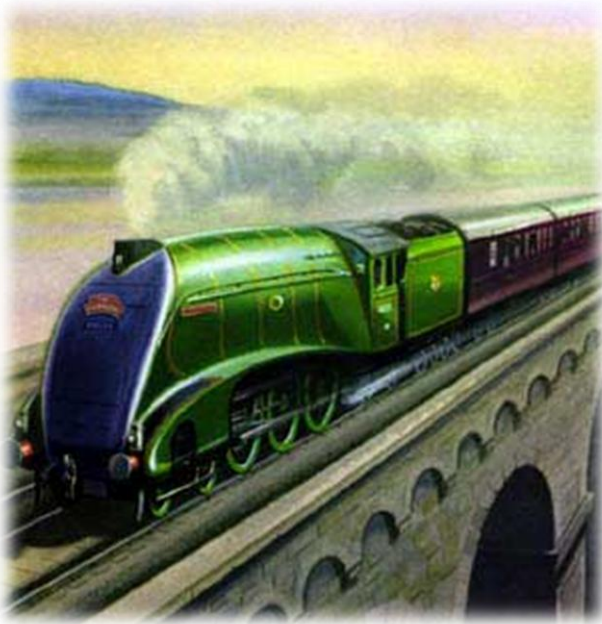
There is the Howard Corn piece for the Eagle Times in 1997, which was based on an interview with Joan, and is now updated on the Eagle blog. One has to remember that at the time of the original interview Joan had already suffered a stroke and her memory may not have been completely accurate. The update clarifies a few things.

During my research many people have been very helpful in providing snippets of information or directions. It is quite amazing how helpful the Internet has been and how generous complete strangers can be.

### *What was Robert like?*

Well, he was a Taurus, like me. And when I was younger, I certainly wanted to emulate him. He was a bon vivant. Full of large gestures. Very outgoing. Very charming. A little flirtatious. He was always very positive and gave everyone he met a boost. I think he probably stood many a round of drinks at the local pub.

He was a free spirit. I think he got this from his childhood. Robert's father died in 1928 and it was quite a reversal of fortune for the family. Compounding it, his mother was stone deaf and lacked coping mechanisms. The four boys ran wild, and one can guess that Robert was the wildest. The deep scar over his left eye was the result of a free-for-all among the boys over a fruit bowl. Evidently Rob had his face in it when it shattered under duress. He was also a very good school boy hurdler, which takes a certain devil-may-care attitude.



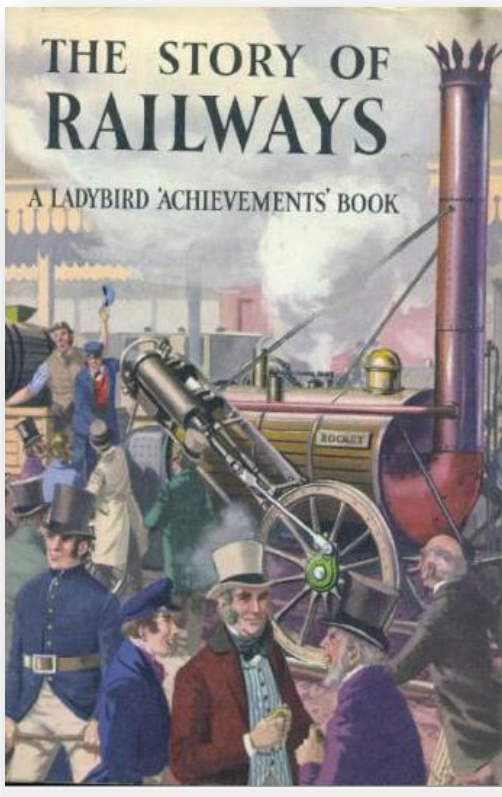
Knowing this you can understand that Joan's line in the Eagle Times article on why the couple never had children was an allusion to Robert being the delinquent child. For example, Robert kept an antique fox hunting horn (which I now have) and Joan said he used to run through the house blowing it with glee anytime there was good news.

I recall Robert saying that some art school students told him they wished their parents could be more like him. His response was that the comparison was unfair on the parents as Rob was not a parent. The implication being Rob's previously referred to lack of responsibility.

## *Do I know anything of Robert's artistic ability?*

I did get to watch him work a little in his studio. His darkroom was a lot of fun. And he did set me out with a canvas and oils one day and give me some tips. But what I surmise about Robert's ability and approach comes from what I knew of my dad's approach, and Robert's sketch books.

Robert mentored my dad, and my dad followed him to the Harrow Art School and later into advertising. Dad was very precise and organized, and it was likely something they shared. I think Robert used model kits or props to help him with historical items. And he did visit museums and locations. The camera was a key tool for him.



Looking at one of Robert's sketches, I can see that he could capture everyday life with a few strokes of his pen. I think animals gave him trouble, as I see in his sketch book how many times he redrew an animal until he felt it was right. And he kept detailed notes on his sketches. Also, I can also see how Robert would first capture the movement or the pose, or the expression of a person, and then refine it.

I think deadlines were a problem for Robert as they were for my dad. Creating on demand is tough. It's a feeling I had staying with him. Rob had the inevitable tension headaches that come with that. In later photos you see pictures of him with very thick glasses, so I suppose his eyes bothering him contributed to the strain. And he did indulge his vices such as tobacco and the grape, which didn't help his health.

*Robert is well known for his Eagle strips in the 1950s. What other work did Robert produce during his career?*

I think his pre- and post-War body of advertising work was significant but very hard to pin down. His major account was likely Castrol and he created superb illustrations of cars, boats, and planes all moving gracefully at high speed. I think he may have worked for Dorland's initially and perhaps directly for Castrol later on. Wakefield, who owned Castrol, seemed very magnanimous and I could see him contracting with Robert directly.

In the early 1980s Robert illustrated at least three children's books for Oxford University Press. Viking Press used his illustration of a woodpecker opening a milk bottle, but I don't know the actual publication. BBC used his illustrations for The Animal Game, The Countryman, and Ramshackle Road. There may have been others as I have not fully accounted for his sketch book as yet.

Robert also taught art classes at West of England College of Art, where he is still fondly remembered.

### *What about Joan?*

She was his rock. He called her “Joan-chick.”



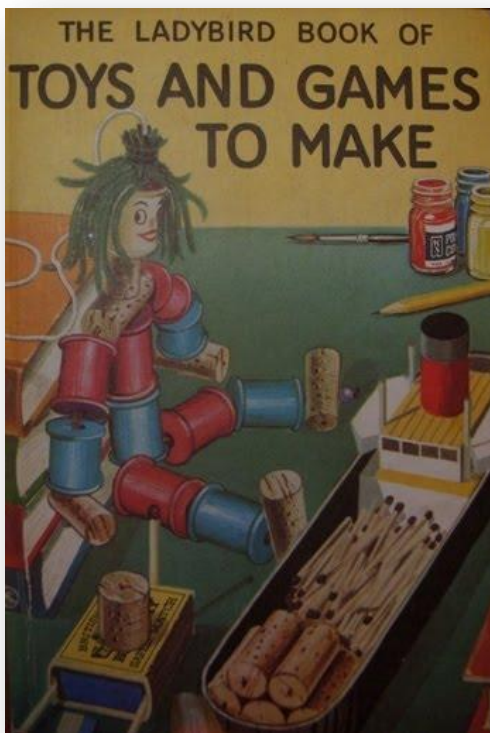
The story goes that when the teenage Joan Elmes saw him out of her bedroom window before the war and was smitten. They married in 1942. I think he was her life. And she really made him what he was. Joan gave him that boost in confidence that was behind his personality. And Robert being a free spirit, she kept the house together. They never had any money and I think

the bailiff was no stranger to them. But that is part of what made Robert who he was.

Joan had two very great friends, Mo and Betty. They were her support system and I am indebted to them for passing along some of Robert's remaining items after Joan died in 1998.

*Is Brockley Elm Farm where Robert created most of his Ladybird art?*

Yes. That and Montacute. Robert lived at home on Dagmar Avenue in Wembley from the age of four until the War. I have the vaguest of recollections of that home from a visit in 1959 or 1960. After the war, he and Joan settled for a time in Earl's Court. Later they owned a house in Barnes. About the time when I was born they rented a house in Montacute, which is where at least Flight was illustrated. That house is another of my vague recollections and I actually rediscovered it during a trip in the late 1980s. It was right on the square by the cross.



Sometime in the early 1960s they rented Brockley Elm Farm near Backwell, which is not far from Montacute. It was a rambling place where Robert had a studio and darkroom. When I saw it again in 1978 it was very run down and was probably too much to maintain. He and Joan moved to a very small glassworker's row house in Nailsea in 1983 where I think he illustrated

his Oxford University Press work. Robert must have tossed all of his papers and items out during the move as there was nothing really of him in the house when I visited Joan there.



*The War interrupted Robert's career. What did he do?*

He was in the army in France and Germany. Rob was a motorcycle dispatch rider and later part of the military police processing prisoners of war in Germany. I recall a couple of German officer daggers that he said he'd acquired in trade for a Lugar. Earlier he'd come under fire and had a few amusing anecdotes to tell. I have a superb sketch of one anecdote, and Robert wrote some very poignant letters. It seems that his access to a camera and lack of access to pencils and papers helped him refine the photographic and darkroom skills that served him well during his later career.

*Do I have a final thought on Robert's life?*

In retrospect, if you compared his life to his brothers' you'd have to say he burnt more brightly but more quickly. And fittingly, his ashes were spread over a rose bed next to a park bench with a fabulous view.

