

‘Excellent luck’: the private lives of two brothers, 1940-1950

By Richard and John Vaughan

Compiled, edited and annotated by Nancy Jennings, daughter of Richard Vaughan

November 28th 1945

Dear Richo

Letter and return pictures the

this day 136 Today is November 28th 1945. It was my last week-end at Lough Hill House. The Valiant was in Plymouth at that time.

and a good ship with a very fine skipper - an R.N.R. man called Dutton. I am a Gunner's Officer and Torpedo Officer. A hell of a job as my shocking predecessors have left the books etc in a hopeless state. Never-the-less I am very pleased with my appointment. I shall get leave fairly frequently for a good long time. I shall probably be in Cherbourg for eight or nine months anyway. Hope to be seeing you before long. Cheerio, and I may the very best of excellent luck ever to your footstaps! Yours ever John

although be a wash



Richard, 1950s



John, 1966

Synopsis

Hundreds of candid, witty and personal letters, supplemented with diary entries, images and documents, were pieced together to provide an insight into the lives of two brothers from 1940 – 1950 in a highly original snapshot of the era. They started to write to each other when John Vaughan, aged 13 in 1940, joined the Royal Naval College at Dartmouth as a cadet and was separated from his brother Richard for the first time.

At first, they wrote mainly about birdwatching, war-time evacuation, school, sports, and how they could meet up, mostly in Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Devon. As John went to war as a midshipman and Richard was conscripted to the Army, and later when Richard went to Cambridge University, the letters became more philosophical and concerned life in general, the armed forces, love, and future plans. They met and wrote about many inspirational people and colourful characters, including their father J. H. Vaughan (Solicitor General of Tanganyika, Chief Justice of Fiji), naturalists W.B. Alexander and Mick Southern, and the young Christopher Booker (later author, journalist, and co-founder and first editor of *Private Eye* magazine), alongside various teachers, gardeners, Naval officers and family members.

The book provides an eyewitness account of a different time, during the war and in the post-war years; it documents changes in the English countryside and declines in bird populations; it tells a story, with plenty of humour, about growing up and finding one's own way in life; it gives a unique insight into the brothers' hearts and minds. Much has changed since the 1940s, but some important things have stayed the same, and this book also documents those things: the loyalty and respect that existed between the brothers, and, as expressed by Richard in a letter to John in 1949: "life is decidedly incomplete without you around and about", their enduring brotherly love.

Quotes from the letters

"I'm having the devil of a jolly good time here" JV, age 13, Feb. 1940, writing from Royal Naval College.

"...we have not had a single air-raid this term!" RV, age 13, Jan. 1941.

"This afternoon I went thoroughly over all Sandford Sewage farm with W.B. ALEXANDER!!!" [well-known ornithologist, Director of the Edward Grey Institute of Field Ornithology in Oxford, who became a close friend]. RV, age 14, Feb. 1942.

"I sincerely hope I don't get mumps between now and the end of term because if I did I would miss some of the leave." JV, age 17, Aug. 1943.

"...perhaps you have heard on the news about a little spot called Sabang in Sumatra! I can say I took part in the raid..." JV, Royal Navy Midshipman, age 17, Apr. 1944.

"I remember hot sunny days in Devon, with Buzzards circling far up in the blue sky above the brown of Bracken Hill. The fresh green on the larch trees, the old, gnarled, twisted oak with the Buzzard's nest in it." RV, age 18, Nov. 1945.

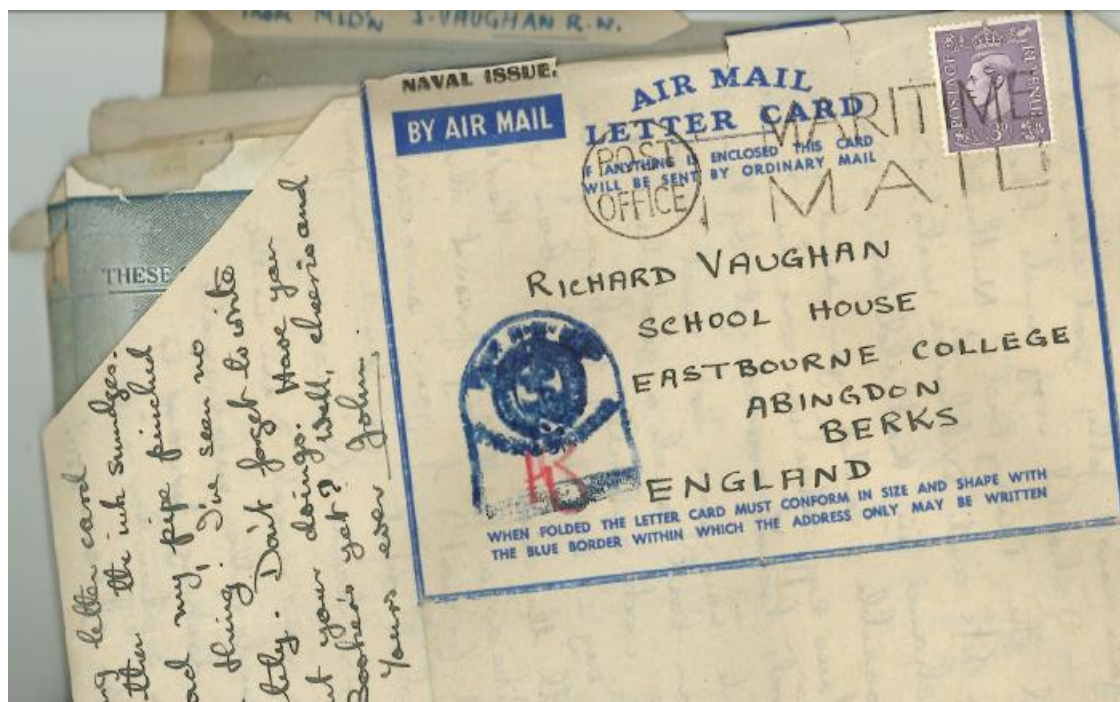
"[We] are being kept on as one of the very few peacetime minesweeping flotillas" JV, age 20, Aug. 1946.

"It is damned stupid having the entire ship's company aboard the ship in this dry dock where we have been for about a week and undock next Wednesday. The nearest lavatory is about half a mile away and life in general no more than a shadowy existence." JV, age 20, Mar. 1947

"I am working very hard – an average – I keep an exact record! – of 7½ hours work a day. This may seem paltry, but I can assure you it isn't – particularly as I am allowing none of the social amenities of the Varsity to slip by untasted!" RV, age 21, Oct. 1948, from Cambridge University.

"I was interested by dark hints in your letter about your willingness to leap stoutly into the marital bed – but who, my dear fellow? Which choice damsel is to share your embraces?!" RV, age 21, Feb. 1949.

"I do honestly think – that you take life a little too seriously. Probably my rather superficial and jocular way of life seems wholly inadequate to you, and maybe quite rightly so." RV, age 22, Feb. 1950.



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