

## Michael Blakstad and East Meon



*Michael guiding Holly Class around Historic Buildings of East Meon*

Interviewer: Good morning, Michael. I am delighted you have agreed to do this interview, as you have been so much the inspiration behind the history group and started this oral history programme going.

Let's get to you, and let's start with when did you first come to East Meon? When did you buy a house in East Meon?

Michael Blakstad: Well, in 1980 the IBA, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, put up for tender the ITV stations, and I was part of a tender that was successful in winning TVS, or Southern Television as it then was. I was the director of programmes. So that was the reason for moving south.



I chose East Meon because I had heard a lot about the Meon Valley. And we found The Tudor House the first time we went looking.

We made an offer which was ridiculously low, and the lovely lady accepted it, much to the dismay of her estate agent. Mind you, she got her own back, because when she left the house she took electric light fittings, everything. It was such a low price. And she always said it was because she liked our family.

Interviewer: Oh, lovely, yes.

Michael Blakstad: We moved in in August 1981. No, in August 1980. And TVS started on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1981. I was incredibly busy for the next five years as director of programmes, but then I left TVS.

Interviewer: Where were you based?

Michael Blakstad: Everywhere. I was in Southampton. I was in Maidstone. I was in London. I spent 27 hours a week in the back of a car. I even had a television set attached to the front seat, so I could watch it from the back seat.

Interviewer: Obviously, this came after your BBC career.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. I was editor of Tomorrow's World at the end.

Interviewer: I have to ask you about your famous Wikipedia entry, which is to be the guy who sacked Raymond Baxter.

Michael Blakstad: Oh, dear. Is it? I never look at it. Yes, I will be famous as the man who sacked Raymond Baxter. You don't want that story.

Interviewer: Never mind. I had imagined that you had started as a weekend cottage sort of thing, but no, it was actually your home?

Michael Blakstad: Yes. In fact, it was a bit of each, because the kids were still at school in London, so Tricia stayed up in London during the week and she came down on a Friday night. And as she came down past Bereleigh, and as she heard the owls and the bells ringing, she felt, "This is it." (Laughter)

The children never really went for East Meon in a big way. They missed London. They went to Bedales and hated Bedales. No, they never really took to East Meon in a big way, but we have loved it.

Interviewer: And of course you have mentioned The Tudor House, which was an old history house, and we will get to the history stuff later on. But you then had to do a massive restoration.

Michael Blakstad: We didn't do it for a while. We added cladding and insulation, as Jonathan is now doing again to the eaves.

Interviewer: Jonathan Iremonger?

Michael Blakstad: Jonathan Iremonger.

But in the 1990s we decided that Tricia needed a studio. We got permission from the conservation people to raise the roof about six inches to give some air space, and we built a studio. It involved putting in-

Interviewer: Was that on the first floor?

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Above the kitchen and the back stairs. And it involved putting in the steel pillars, which aroused a certain amount of antipathy. We offered to paint them brown, but the conservation people said, very sensitively, "Well, there are a lot of different periods in this house. This is the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Paint them battleship grey." So we did. So that was the main thing we did.

We always knew that we hadn't bought a house. We had bought a project. There was an awful lot of conservation to be done.

The other thing we did was when Tricia's mother died and left us a small amount of money we had a Tudor garden put in.

Interviewer: That is the Knot garden?

Michael Blakstad: That is the Knot garden. And we got the son of a friend of ours, Stewart and Betty Bussell, who was a landscape designer and his wife, to design it. They did a lot of research as to what Tudor gardens were like, and it was lovely. And Tony Perkins dug it.

Interviewer: Oh, did he?

Michael Blakstad: It was like the Battle of the Somme. We got a digger in to level it. Then Tony Perkins, in November, dug it and planted it. And we haven't looked back.

Interviewer: So it is a mixed garden of both vegetables and flowers?

Michael Blakstad: No, it wasn't then. We were just flowers.

Interviewer: Oh, right.

Michael Blakstad: Our successors were Chris and Jane Cobley, and they knocked down the plaisance mound.

Interviewer: The what? Sorry.

Michael Blakstad: Tudors had a plaisance mound, which you sat on. So we put the spare soil at the end of the garden and called it a plaisance. But they saw through that, and they flattened it and made that a vegetable garden. No, we just had flowers.

Interviewer: Back to the house. I always seem to see things by Edward Roberts. How did you start working with him on The Tudor House?

Michael Blakstad: I can't remember how I met Edward. Oh, yes, I do. Edward is a very distinguished architectural historian,



He had written a book called Medieval Hall Houses, or he was about to write it and had done a lot of research, and he used to bring groups round. He asked if he could bring groups round to see it. So we were on his itinerary. I would sometimes be asleep in the garden, and I would hear this murmur. He taught us so much about the place.

Then when we founded the history group he was our first proper speaker and has been our friend and mentor ever since. He lives in Cheriton. He is now retired and is getting, like me, a bit old.

Interviewer: Won't travel at night, I think you said,

Michael Blakstad: Sorry?

Interviewer: Won't travel at night, I think you said.

Michael Blakstad: No, he doesn't want to drive at night.

Interviewer: Obviously, once you came to East Meon you then got very much involved with the village, and you went on to the parish council and became chairman, yes?

Michael Blakstad: No, I didn't become chairman.

Interviewer: Oh, you weren't chairman?

Michael Blakstad: No, very much not.

Interviewer: Oh, right.

Michael Blakstad: Let me tell the story more slowly. In the 1990s, my company in Winchester... I set up my own company called Workhouse Limited.

Interviewer: Was this after TVS then?

Michael Blakstad: This was after TVS, 1986 onwards. I set it up. I bought out a little video company, which went bust and was in a lovely little converted evangelical church in Saint Peter Street, and got very involved very early on in the internet. We were absolute web pioneers. That is why we never made any money. We were far too early.

As a result of that, I was very keen that the village should have a website, so I built a website for the village back in the late 1990s.

Interviewer: When you say, "Built," how did you build it?

Michael Blakstad: Very badly.

Interviewer: Basic HTML?

Michael Blakstad: Basic HTML, no. I can't have done. I think I got somebody from the company to do the coding, because my company was still coding then, but I did the design.



**New on the site**

**SNOW IN EAST MEON** - All Saints Church (left)

**LIVING HISTORY** The Christmas family and the 'Mayor' of East Meon

**MOVIE!A** Glorious 39 (12A) (bottom) to be screened on Friday February 26th.

**Welcome to the website of this historic and active village.**

**Visitors** is designed to help people intending to visit East Meon. It offers a PDF guide to a walk around the village and links to the websites of our Shop, Pubs, B&Bs and a farm providing cream teas in the summer.

**News** has links to reports on recent and future events taking place in East Meon.

**History** - records of East Meon's fascinating past..

**Church** has the Sunday services at the village's magnificent Norman church, and more information about All Saints, past and present.

Then I asked the parish council in to see it, and they came into The Tudor House. They didn't know what to make of it, of course, but they couldn't stop it. So it was never an official website. I always wanted it to be part of the parish council and Meon Matters and to have one single website. I never achieved that.

Interviewer: East Meon now has – I am going to say this – a stupidly large number of different websites. Even the village hall has its own website, which is farcical.

Michael Blakstad: It is, and they don't relate to each other. Anyhow, and Meon Matters goes on.

Interviewer: Then there's the Gardening Club website and the History Group has two websites.

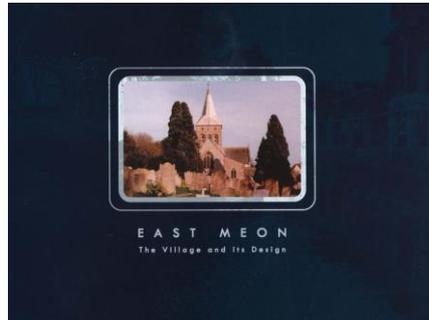
Michael Blakstad: I would say that the history group came out of that, because I had a page devoted to history, and I got so many enquiries.-

Interviewer: It was just on the website?

Michael Blakstad: On the website.

Interviewer: Well, obviously we will talk about that later on.

Michael Blakstad: I then agreed to stand for the parish council, and my first job there



... I had done a thing called a Village Design Statement as a non-councillor, which was still regarded as the seminal influence on the design of the village.

Interviewer: In those days parish councils did a parish plan and a village design statement, as pair of documents.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, that is right. I did both together. That led them to want me to go on the parish council, so I did, slightly reluctantly, where I did the next stage, which is the parish plan, which I did in the early 2000s. And of course I developed the website and was still banging on about it.

The then chairman, Michael Atkinson, was absolutely hostile to anything to do with the internet. In fact, he wrote me the most acid letter, a really ghastly letter, accusing me of wanting to take over the parish council and turn it digital and all the rest of it.

I was really hurt, and I showed it to Alan and I showed it to Philippa. They both agreed, and they had words with Mike, who I think regrets writing it, but that was the end of my time on the parish council.

But I did do the parish plan, which was the next stage, and then came the recent neighbourhood plan. And Alan is kind

enough to say that the design statement and the parish plan are exactly what the neighbourhood plan has evolved from.

Interviewer: When did the development of The Green take place in all that? Was that in the parish plan originally?

Michael Blakstad: That was before I joined the parish council. No, it must have been after. It was in 2001, 2002. I wasn't anything to do with it. Or if I did I slept through it. (Laughter)

What did come out of it was the Moviola. Because parish councillors used to get a bundle of papers, which they leafed through, and I happened to spot a note from somebody called Phillip Walkley, who was offering parish councils the opportunity to bring a cinema to their village.

And I had already said to the village hall, "You need a cinema," and they had agreed, but they didn't know how to do it. So I got Phillip Walkley round.

Interviewer: Hmm. One of my questions was going to be Moviola.

Michael Blakstad: Moviola is the most extraordinary outfit. I was later chairman of Moviola. My meetings would begin: I would call for expressions of interest, and it would go as follows: "I am married to him, but he is living with him." Because Phillip and Christina were the founders. Phillip then went gay and went off to Spain.

But he was an extraordinary man. He always wanted to do a bus that would go round the village as well, like they did in Scotland, a cinema bus.

Interviewer: Oh, right. I have seen that in the Highlands.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, that is right. The Tilda Swinton thing. But that wouldn't work financially.



Moviola, 2008



Moviola, 2018

So instead of that he personally went and sourced the films. He would go to all the film festivals. He would draw up an agenda or a menu of about 30 movies which we would watch the trailers. He would do notes. And each village would have a committee and choose its films. Moviola would send out a camera kit and a screen and audio, and the village hall would set itself up.

In 2008 he came to East Meon. And the first time we did it he insisted on putting the audience on the stage and below and the screen at the end. We had *The Constant Gardener* as our first film. It was a great success, but that didn't work. We turned it round. And it has been a huge success.

About eight years later I applied to The British Film Council for a grant to get our own equipment, so now we just hire the movies. Moviola still does the sourcing. I don't know what they are doing at the moment in lockdown.

Interviewer: Nothing. They are currently in full suspension until the New Year.

Michael Blakstad: The point about Moviola is it is a great social event. People who couldn't get to the cinema – or wouldn't, too much trouble – wander down. Once a month they meet up. I think *The Sunday Times* described it as a monthly movie with wine.

Interviewer: Yes. A glass of wine beforehand definitely helps. (Laughter)

Michael Blakstad: And during. (Laughter) And the ice cream. So it has been great. I have enjoyed that very much. So that came out of the parish council. But then I left the parish council and went my own sweet way.

Interviewer: The other thing that I was immediately told when I came into this area, about 13/14 years ago, was that you were the broadband guy.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. Well, this arose because my company, Blackrod, became Workhouse. Blackrod was Michael Rodd and Michael Blakstad. Then it became Workhouse. And we had evolved into new media in a big way. We were absolute pioneers of the internet, along with another company called Victoria Real.

When I left Workhouse I was appointed by the government to advise in two sectors, the travel and hospitality business and the aerospace industry, that broadband was on its way and they should want it. I was called a broadband ambassador. They didn't want to know. It is crazy. This was 2001/2002.

I also sat on a government parliamentary steering group which looked into the local loop unbundling of BT.

Interviewer: I remember it well.

Michael Blakstad: Well, I formed the impression that BT was going to dig in, so in about 2001/2002 I discovered an agent, a little company on the Isle of Wight, run by a man called Chris Verrinder, who had set up a satellite to a radio network.

He came, and he climbed all over the village, and we established a link to the Aramiska satellite to a barn at Garston, which is up above the village, and in line of sight to a number of houses. Only those in line of sight could get it. Bereleigh, for instance, wanted it but couldn't.



Erecting the aerial at  
Ye Olde George

and at Garston Barn

We stuck in two routers, one in the barn and one on the roof of the George. And every time there was a storm the routers would go, so we would have to go and reset it, banging our heads on the beams etc.

Interviewer: What sort of speed did you get then?

Michael Blakstad: We got more than BT did when it arrived. I think we got about 15 megabits per second.

Interviewer: Oh, that is good.

Michael Blakstad: Maybe I am exaggerating.

Interviewer: Well, if it was that it was very good.

Michael Blakstad: It can't have been. Yes, it was certainly better than dial-up. We charged £13 a month. It made a little bit of money, but it was a hell of a lot of work.

Now the first meeting we had to see who was interested was at the George and a chap called Robert Mocatta turned up. I had never heard of Robert, never seen him before.

Interviewer: A useful contact.

Michael Blakstad: Well, he was and he wasn't. He was, actually. He was, at the time, a telecoms analyst I think.

Interviewer: Yes, he was.

Michael Blakstad: He said, "You don't need to because BT will come." We were both right. BT did come about two years later. But in the meantime a lot of East Meon people were very happy, especially those who had businesses or wanted-

Interviewer: Well, I can now complete the story for East Meon for you on broadband. Rob is currently trying to sort out how to use the latest round of local and government finance to connect the distant parts of East Meon. I have been involved with him doing Langrish and Ramsdean, and we are circulating a list of all the places that don't have it, where the lines might go for fibre, who might pay. This is the final stage.

The question I have got to ask you, since you were involved in the early days of broadband, why the hell didn't it become a national infrastructure project that the government funded?

Michael Blakstad: I have no idea. Our job was to do a paper that MPs would understand. And I was very proud of it actually. I was just a small business in Winchester, and the other people there were BT, BBC, Sky, all the big boys, and British Gas. No, British Gas weren't on it. That is right. British Gas was a client of ours.

Michael Blakstad: Yes. And there were ministries.

Interviewer: What about the canals people?

Michael Blakstad: No, they weren't there.

Interviewer: I thought they were going to run pipes up the canals as well.

Michael Blakstad: They weren't on the grid.

But British Gas was very keen to get involved, so I used them as my resource. The BT guy would give 16 reasons why not. At the next meeting I would give 16 reasons why, because British Gas fed me with the data. So it was great fun.

And a very good chairman, a Sheffield MP called Richard Allan. He was an engineer. I don't know what happened to him. But it was very well chaired. George Younger in Andover was the Tory hotshot. And Douglas Alexander was the Labour guy.

So they had some good people on it, and in fact they did succeed, or the paper did succeed, in forcing BT to do it a bit quicker than they might have done.

Interviewer: But, sadly, the papers are just out and we have dropped another seven places in the European broadband table.

Michael Blakstad: I know. It is ridiculous.

Interviewer: We are rubbish.

Michael Blakstad: Yes.

Interviewer: Let's get back to East Meon. I was going to finish this segment off by saying what are the biggest changes you have seen in East Meon? But another thing you told me about was that there was a Catholic chapel in Temple Lane.

Michael Blakstad: Yes, there was.

Interviewer: Really?

Michael Blakstad: Yes.

Interviewer: Until when?



Michael Blakstad: Until about 15 years ago. It was the old Zoar chapel and then a Baptist chapel. Then it became Catholic just after the war. And it was run by a succession of visiting priests. One was a rather dashing army chaplain from the US Navy, who was attached to HMS Dryad.

Bill Darcy, who was a great hit with the ladies, wrote a book which featured East Meon, and our Catholic parish priest in Petersfield was very upset by this book because it had far too much sex and violence.

Then he was succeeded by a very elderly Irish priest called Canon Devine, who was in [Bordon]. He was in his 90s, and he would conduct the service sitting down.

No, it was great. It also had some of the prettiest wives in the village, whose husbands happened not to be Catholic.

Interviewer: Let's go back. You were in The Tudor House for how many years?

Michael Blakstad: Thirty-nine.

Interviewer: Then you sold it.

Michael Blakstad: No, sorry. I wasn't. I was there for thirty-two years. Then we sold it because it was getting too much.

Interviewer: You then moved into a new property in The Green?

Michael Blakstad: In The Green, yes. I was very pleased with The Green. In the sense that when I went to see it, when they were building it, they had my Village Design Statement on the table, and they had observed every one of the recommendations that we made. And I think it is less ugly than most modern developments because of that.

It also works extremely well as a community. So we loved it there. Tricia missed it very much when we moved, and I did too. But then I got Parkinson's and Tricia got dementia, and we couldn't cope there, so here we are.

Interviewer: So here you are Bishopstoke. It is just so sad there was nothing closer to the village to go to.

Michael Blakstad: I know. I fought a battle to try and get permission to develop in Petersfield at a site on Frenchmans Road.

Interviewer: Oh, God. Yes, I know the one.

Michael Blakstad: But it wouldn't have been the right place for us because it is... What are they called? I can't remember the name. Anyhow, it would just have been flats with a restaurant, no care facilities.

Interviewer: Sheltered accommodation?

Michael Blakstad: Yes, sheltered accommodation.

Interviewer: So how do you look back on your time in East Meon?

Michael Blakstad: Oh, with great regret at having left it, with great love and affection. Quite exciting.

There were some other little things I did. There was a woman in the village called Molly Dicker, who was a very fine artist. She had done a picture of the church. When I was on the parish council I had said,



“You need a logo,” and so I persuaded Molly that we could use her logo, and I got Paul Martin Design to adapt it.

So the parish logo is something to do with me as well.

Interviewer: Oh, good. I didn't know that.

Michael Blakstad: So I left a small mark on the village.

Interviewer: You left a large mark. You are sadly missed in the village, obviously, to this day.

Thank you very much for that, Michael. All the best in Bishopstoke.

Michael Blakstad: Thank you.

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