

Interview by David Eastaugh with Borin Van Loon on the Future Radio (107.8 FM) arts and culture show 'Platform', broadcast 10 November, 2012.

The Waveney Clarion...

BVL: ...ran monthly from February 1973 right the way through until July 1984. So as an alternative community publication, part of the radical press of that era, it was remarkably successful and long-lived – a lot longer than most. It grew out of the first Barsham Faire, which older listeners might remember. Barsham Faires were organised around that time and they led in turn to the East Anglian Arts Trust, which was built to maintain contacts [made] at the first Barsham Faire. You could reasonably say that a lot of people left London and other cities seeking out new ways of living in East Anglia particularly. A lot of energy came in that way, locals joined in and Barsham Faire was an attempt to establish a medieval type of fair/gathering; very anti-commercial, really: a time for people to get together to eat and drink and celebrate and so on.

Some of the money was used to start the *Waveney Clarion* which seemed a logical step to start to document all the things which were going on and to exchange information. It covered the Waveney valley which obviously runs between the two counties and went as far as Ipswich in the south of Suffolk and as far north as Norwich and beyond. It got a pretty good circulation, very much on a shoestring and due to voluntary work – a lot of work – by some very dedicated people.

DE: The first Barsham Faire was in 1972, wasn't it?

BVL: That would be right, so you can see the timescale.

DE: It's quite interesting because you had Woodstock which was obviously in '69 and then quite quickly that kind of culture which had also happened in London in '67 came over. So there was a lot that went on in East Anglia in the early seventies. Getting a fair together is one thing. But getting a publication together, this is obviously pre-computers, it does seem absolutely amazing the amount of focus and energy and also talent, really.

BVL: Yes, well, I can pin that down. I've just built the *Waveney Clarion* website and it involved me in going back and re-familiarising myself (or even for the first time, familiarising myself) with a lot of the detail and the people involved. There were two key players: Sandra Bell and Andy Bell were in there and Mick Sparksman, who happened to be my tutor at art college – he did the design and illustrations; Don Mathew came on board and is still an old friend of mine and we've been working on this website together and he edited the *Clarion* for many years. So, you had this kind of thrust of energy. I think Sandra had a background in journalism and she brought to the table quite a strong professionalism really, as well as that kind of, slightly laid-back 'manyana' type of thing. There was an energy as well as a kind of rural relaxation and it the combination of the two seemed to come across in the *Waveney Clarion*.

DE: Yeah, because Sandra put together the book *Build another Barsham* –

BVL: You're absolutely right,

DE: Again, I'm still amazed at how much got done without computers, the internet and desktop publishing. That really came over looking at what I've researched in the last few decades of that period. Then coming across the website, I didn't realise how long the *Waveney Clarion* lasted. I always thought that it was a seventies thing; I didn't realise that it went into the eighties.

BVL: Yeah. I got involved in around 1976, I suppose, so I was a little late to it, but I only moved to East Anglia from London in 1975. I started as an illustrator and doing cartoons and that sort of thing and then I started to write for it and I got quite close to quite a few of the people. And in those days – you put your finger on it – you relied on a printer and we had a friendly printer in Beccles. Everything was typed out and done by paste-up: Cow Gum, bits of paper, grids and long hours into the night hacking it together.

DE: I was quite amazed that it was monthly, because I thought that it might have been quarterly. To bring out a publication, to get the content and to get enough people together there must have been a lot of very key people, as you mention. Also, fantastically, you had Mick Sparksman who was the man who created Coypu.

BVL: Yes, he [Coypu] became this iconic rural guerilla. At the time coypus were still roaming the marshes and being killed off by Coypu Control. So it was ideal timing for Mick to create this strange, off-the-wall character who, I think uniquely, appeared in every strip, in every issue.

DE: It was a big ideological movement during that time –

BVL: I think it was. We can't ignore a political backdrop to this, going right back to something that's still troubling. You know, there were bombs going off in London, you had the Rent Act. There were quite a few things which were giving people a prod to say: "Maybe time to move". That certainly influenced myself and my wife to move out. And when [you look at] the issues around at the time... They do say: "The past is another country" and when you go back... blimey, all that was happening: cruise missiles, Greenham, Friends of the Earth were very big, Greenpeace. All these things were really bubbling and becoming things which people needed to address. Nearby, Sizewell power station and nuclear power, how we're going to grow food the best way, borderline science, the future of rural communities... and actually, a lot of that stuff is still very topical.

DE: A lot of those created the seeds for things... during that time, it was very much a niche market and it was mostly, I suppose, what people would refer to as freaks and hippies. But those things have emerged into the mainstream, so a lot of those ideas from that seventies period, the Barsham and the early *Clarion*, even though, at the time it was probably, at the time, a bit of an 'us and them', now have become part of the mainstream. It just goes to show how things do alter with life.

BVL: Absolutely. I think that the interesting thing was the integration. You know, I wasn't party to the early meetings about the *Clarion* and about the fairs, and so on. But I didn't get the impression: "Oh, these outsiders coming in and putting something

on which the locals could come along to". I got the impression that there was an integration into people's lives and other people came forward from the local communities. In fact, they turned up in their tens of thousands to go to the events and then became involved in organising the next one.

DE: So, coming to the end of the *Clarion*, which was '84, what sort of things contributed to it slowly folding?

BVL: Well I think everything has its time and everything has its lifespan. It's quite interesting to look at some of the documents I've put on the website. Particularly the final letter, the final issue: there was always the door left open to say "we'll be coming back, but this is the last one for a bit". Obviously, that was the last shout. As always with this sort of publication it's to do with getting advertising, selling enough copies and getting people to keep the energy level up to do the distribution and the selling and all of that stuff.

DE: What's interesting is that with the fairs, I got the impression that they began as quite magical events which changed people's lives and then they tailed off to become not so magical. The last few fairs in the eighties were just three day events with nothing that exciting, just a lot of bands.

BVL: You're absolutely right. I think the *Clarion* came to an end around the same time that the fairs came to an end. In a way, because they'd always walked hand-in-hand, that was kind of the end of that era. So be it.

DE: Talking to people like Richard Barnes about why the fairs stopped, I thought they'd say it was the police, but actually the police were great; it was the travelling community that really put the nails in the coffin, because noone could do deal with that. You know, the convoy who normally made a bit of a mess, didn't pay to get in, then hang about for months afterwards and then steal lots of stuff, then leave a mess. So a lot of the organisers of those fairs thought: "Actually, we're not going to do this".

BVL: Well, it's very difficult, you know, when you've got all the hassles and you think: "Aren't we supposed to be having a good time?" You can understand that.

DE: And looking after each other, when you've got a group who just take and aren't actually contributing. It's a hard thing then for people who were giving. I can imagine, as I said earlier, things start with people coming in with quite a strong vision and ideology and then sometimes when they move and there isn't other people coming in with some vision, then it's really hard because suddenly there's a void. And, you know, there's the convoy who didn't really have much more than to get drunk, really.

BVL: Well, I don't have the experience of having the responsibility of organising an event like that. The nearest I got was running one stall at The Last Barsham Faire. It was an extraordinary thing to be part of, to be in the middle of. Despite the fact that it rained a lot towards the end and it had its ups and downs. But, at the time, you thought: "Yeah, this is something very special". I don't know how they did it.