



The power of Baker's descriptions of the natural world were recognised when he published his first book, *The Peregrine*

On the trail of the

NATURE AUTHOR: Enigmatic figure who wrote an

TO the untrained eye, JA Baker might have seemed like an unremarkable individual. He lived all his life in Chelmsford and spent most of his working life in his home town too. He didn't stray beyond the boundaries of Essex too often and never went abroad.

A former pupil of King Edward VI Grammar School, he led a quiet suburban life with his wife Doreen in their homes in the Old Moulsham area of Chelmsford.

He may have seemed like an ordinary Chelmsfordian but there was another side to Baker. He was obsessed with the landscape and wildlife around Chelmsford, particularly east of the (then) market town, along the course of the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation to the estuary at Maldon and beyond onto the bleak but beautiful saltmarshes and mudflats of the Dengie Peninsula. It was here where he really came alive.

Whenever he could, after work and at weekends, he would get on his bike (he didn't drive despite working for the Automobile Association in New London Road) and head east to see what he could find. And not just to observe it, but to write about it in his unique, rapturous style. Writing was Baker's other obsession. He was inspired by literature as a school child and

JA Baker, born and bred in Chelmsford, is recognised as one of our greatest writers on the natural world but he's remained an enigmatic and largely unknown figure until now. On the 50th anniversary of the publication of his acclaimed book, *The Peregrine*, and with a new biography about him just released, **Darryl Webber** discovered more about him



Biographer Hetty Saunders

aspired to be a great writer himself. After 10 years of observations in the wild, he successfully married his two obsessions.

The power of Baker's descriptions of the natural world he encountered were recognised when he published his first book in 1967, *The Peregrine*, an account of his hunt for birds of prey in Essex which was distilled from the diaries, records and journals he kept of his wild adventures over a decade.

It was published to critical acclaim for its vivid, unsentimental and almost hallucinatory evocations of the Essex landscape and its wildlife. One reviewer, Kenneth Allsop, wrote: "It is a masterpiece and instantly takes its place amongst the great triumphal affirmations of man's search for his lost place in the universe." It was recognised as a landmark in natural history writing and awarded the prestigious Duff Cooper Prize for non-fiction writing in 1968, though the judges made clear the award was under the category for 'poetry' rather than 'natural history'. That's what set it apart from other wildlife tomes. It was alive with striking images and brilliant, inventive prose.

But despite the acclaim and attention, Baker himself remained as elusive and enigmatic as the falcons he tracked down. The Times offered up the only snippet of biographical information on Baker after the release of *The Peregrine*:

"John Baker is 40 and lives in a council flat in Essex. He doesn't want it known which town. He doesn't want his neighbours to know what he does. He hasn't got a phone or a TV. He never goes anywhere

socially and the last time he went out to be entertained was 12 years ago when he went to the pictures to see Shane..."

The mystery of JA Baker, the birdman of Essex, has started to unravel now, 50 years after the publication of his seminal work. Thanks to the release of documents, maps and notebooks after the death of his wife Doreen in 2006, and with the help of her brother Bernard Coe, an archive has been assembled at the Albert Sloman Library at the University of Essex.

Cambridge post-graduate student Hetty Saunders became taken with Baker's writing after studying it for her MPhil in English Literature and visited the archive at the University of Essex. When the course finished, she was still interested in JA Baker. She offered to catalogue the archive and when doing so realised much of Baker's life, methods and habits were revealed there. A biography of Baker seemed the next natural step and with the encouragement of her supervisor, Robert Macfarlane, the acclaimed writer on landscape and nature, she set about putting together a book about him.

"There was just so much of it and the more I found the more and more interesting it was," she said. "He had seemed so mysterious before but this opened up his world. There hadn't been a lot written about him beforehand because there wasn't a lot of information.

"I think he wasn't exactly shy, but was very private. He wanted to be a great writer but he didn't want to be a celebrity. He was on TV and radio [when *The Peregrine* came out], so he did put himself out there.

"Everyone seems to think he was a strange hermit but he wasn't really. He was wary though [of criticism]. He was very strong in his convictions that all he'd written in *The Peregrine* was true and that all he had done was embellish what he'd seen a bit. But when it came out there had been some snobbery and some naysaying about his observations. He was only considered very mysterious because no one had any personal information about him."

John Alec Baker was born in Chelmsford in 1926, the only child of Wilfred and Pansy Baker who had married the year before. Wilfred, who worked as a



draughtsman at local manufacturer Crompton Parkinson, was a town councillor for many years and served as Chelmsford mayor in 1964.

Baker went to Trinity Road Primary School then attended King Edward VI Grammar (KEGS). He was a bright child but got bored easily and was prone to day-dreaming. He struggled in subjects that didn't interest him leading some teachers to think he was lazy but what he really wanted was to break free of the confines and routines of school life.

Already a sensitive child, he became increasingly introverted as an adolescent and craved the freedom that nature represented for him.

This yearning for the outdoors, allied with his talent for writing, would come to fruition in *The Peregrine* but only after many years of frustration and disappointment. After school, he went through various jobs but found it difficult to settle and often rubbed up against his fellow workers. Even his wife Doreen had to admit he was a bit of a loner.

"He wasn't hateful about people but he wasn't at his happiest around them," said Hetty. "His escape from everyday

mysterious birdman of Essex

acclaimed book about the wilderness just miles from his home in Chelmsford



JA Baker. "His escape from everyday life was through hunting perigrines"



Baker's stomping ground. Paper Mill Lock, above, and the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation



Ulting Church. The main area for Baker's peregrine sightings was between Little Baddow and Ulting

'There should be a blue plaque for Baker'

MARK Hanson has been a fan of JA Baker for years and believes that the writer should be more widely known and acknowledged in his home town.

Mark 61, who lives in Boreham, has his own archive of Baker books, documents and clippings as well as an enduring interest in wildlife and the Essex countryside.

He owns various editions of *The Peregrine* and regularly traces Baker's favourite haunts along the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation, looking out for bird life himself.

"It became an obsession for him," said Mr Hanson. "And this was his local stomping ground. Like the birds he was tracking, he used the Chelmer and Blackwater Navigation as a conduit for visiting Danbury, Little Baddow, Ulting and Heybridge. It was his fly-way, his channel for getting him to the places he wanted to go."

Mark, a biologist by training and former president of the Essex Field Club, wrote a piece on JA Baker for the Chelmer Canal Trust's newsletter in July 2010 in which he revealed biographical details about him as well looking at sites along the canal which Baker regularly visited.

Worthy

Mark said the main section for the peregrine observations was the Chelmer Valley between Chelmsford and Maldon, "in particular the middle section between Little Baddow and Ulting."

On the 50th anniversary of the publication of *The Peregrine* and with Baker now being recognised as an important literary figure, Mark thinks it's time to let locals know more about him.

"I think what he did is worthy of commemorating. He was a natural wordsmith and channelled it through his love of nature and birds. He made us look differently at the world around us."

Mark believes there should be a blue plaque somewhere in Chelmsford, at one of the properties Baker lived at, or along the navigation to mark the writer's achievements and influence.

He also thinks there should be an exhibition dedicated to Baker too, ideally at Chelmsford Museum which is just around the corner from the writer's childhood home in Finchley Avenue.

"He made a great contribution to nature writing and the county, and that should be acknowledged."

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