

Older people's experiences of food - Leicestershire

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# Walt & Anne

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# Walt & Anne



have lived in  
their home for  
3 years



favourite food:  
Chao Fan rice  
(Anne)



love:  
?



look forward to:  
Walt's health  
improving

Walt and Anne Cooper moved to Loughborough from Sussex 3 years ago to be closer to their daughter. Walt is a military man, and the army has shaped his life, taking him around the four corners of the globe, his wife and family accompanying him. After retiring from the military, Walt became overweight, developed a number of health conditions and has spent the last few years in and out of hospital. He receives a great deal of support from his wife and daughter and is also involved in a membership organisation that offers a strong sense of community.



*"The military is my life"*

Walt spent 22 years in the military, travelling the world, accompanied by his family, and living in a number of places including Libya, Germany, Hong Kong and Cyprus. Walt describes how the military shaped not only his life but his outlook on life: "I was only a young man when I went in... I was forty when I came out".

# Family



Living abroad meant the family had to settle into new homes every few years. The homes they moved into were all kitted out when they arrived, so they didn't bring much with them when they moved, 'just a few ornaments'. Each time they moved to a different base, most of the other military families would also move which meant that the children and wives maintained a sense of community and continuity; 'moving around like that is just something you get used to'.

They were always able to buy imported British food and living abroad also brought with it opportunities to learn new recipes, some of which Anne continues to use, her favourite being Chao Fan rice.

*"That's the difference between us and civilians. Although I guess I'm a civilian now."*

When Walt came out of the army in '78, he had a difficult time adjusting 'I moved from the South to the North back to the South - I couldn't settle down. They [my family] suffered because they had to follow me around.'

Part of the reason he found it so hard was the different attitudes people had, and the fact that people couldn't understand him or his experiences in the army. 'We look at life different. We see people lose their lives... But civilians don't.'

Another adjustment was to losing a sense of community and a structured way of living- 'it's not just about what you're doing in the army, it's about the community you are living in. You are used to a regimented community.'

As his first civilian job, Walt worked as a long distance lorry driver. With his new lifestyle and lack of strict routine, Walt started becoming unhealthy. As drivers 'we'd get to a greasy spoon at 10 and order a massive breakfast... I was always fit in the army. I never saw a doctor. I was never ill until I came out of the army. It was the different change of life. You stop doing the exercise... When you start sitting down and driving a lorry or a bus all day, you put all this on.'

One day when he was carrying heavy double glazing panes, he had a heart attack. So as not risk his health any further, Walt retrained as a locksmith.



# Life today

## Health

Walt currently suffers a number of health conditions and has had a number of extended hospital stays over the past few years.

His conditions include:

- Sleep apnoea - every night, Walt wears a mask when he sleeps to keep him breathing.
- Heart problems - he has had a valve replacement and a pacemaker put in since his heart attack. A machine by his bed sends automated reports to hospital with readings from his heart.
- Diabetes - Walt can't feel his feet due to the diabetes. He has to give himself an insulin injection before meals and regularly monitors his blood sugar levels.
- Unidentified lung condition - **'it's lucky if he can get round the block'** a lot of the trouble is he can't exercise, just gets out of breath. They think it's his lungs.'

Walt and Anne keep careful records of all of this: **'I've got a green folder, it's full of all my complaints. That way if the ambulance comes they know exactly what to do.'**

He has a positive and practical attitude about living with so many conditions; **'you just live with it don't you'**. He has a great deal of respect for people with disabilities who are able to live remarkable lives with disabilities such as paralympians: **'it just shows you don't have to sit around all day like me.'**

During his illness, Walt had a number of operations and stays in hospital of up to a month for a new valve, defibrillator, diabetes and for kidney problems. His strongest memory of hospital was the food - **'it's all pre-packed they're just heated up and put on a tray.'** He used to order the Halal meals as they were prepared outside of the hospital.

Coming home was always a relief as Anne was able to look after him and he also had a number of health professionals coming to the house to support him.

*"All our support is each other"*

Walt and Anne have been married for 56 years and they form a strong team. She usually does the cooking in the house and he helps out with the garden and odd jobs like moving the fridge and shelves around. Since Walt became ill, a lot of their energy has been put into getting him better, and both Anne and their daughter have been trying hard to help Walt get into a more healthy and active routine.

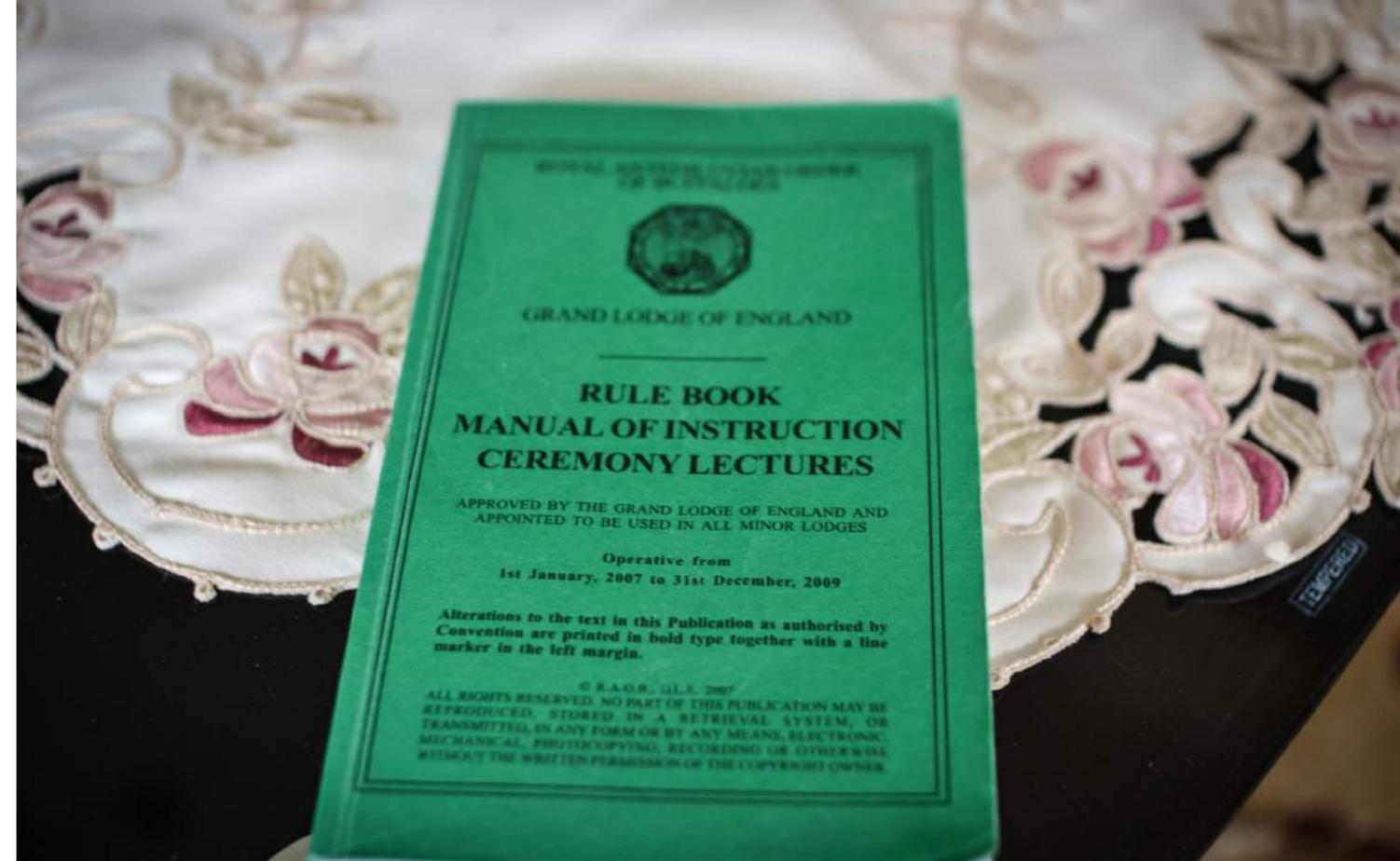
*"I enjoy being in the garden but I can't do a lot of things these days - do a bit sit down, do a bit sit down, do a bit..."*

In order to look after Walt, Anne has stopped her regular swimming - something she used to do three times a week - and thinks this is why she has also put on quite a bit of weight. She has had to change her diet too, to accommodate for Walt's diabetes, but is happy about this because it keeps her on track.

One of Walt and Anne's daughters lives close by and works at a local sheltered housing block, Summerville. She is a big support for Walt and, alongside Anne, is trying to get Walt on a healthier track. They also have a lot of family outside the area, both in Sussex and near Middlesbrough including 7 grandchildren and their brothers and sisters.

## Community

After returning from the army, Walt was invited to join the Royal Antediluvian Order of Buffaloes; a men's members group 'similar to the masons' that provides a sense of community and camaraderie within a defined structure. The group holds weekly meetings and monthly charity raffles (to which the wives are invited). Anne enjoys making cakes for these events and also hosts 'the Buffs' at her home. Last year, all the Buffaloes and their wives went on holiday together. After Walt returned from hospital to recover from his heart operation, the Buffaloes helped him to finance an electric buggy for getting around.



*"We always say we are a charity for ourselves and we also help other outside charities... We support orphaned Buffalo children, help sick Buffaloes and have convalescent homes in places like Cornwall."*

Whilst Walt has always been part of a strong community; of soldiers, lorry drivers, Buffaloes, Anne has been less involved in women's groups (such as the Wives Club and Women's Institute), preferring instead the company of a few close friends with whom she enjoyed sewing and baking. Nowadays, her main involvement is in baking for the Buffs and supporting her daughter at Summerville - again baking or simply chatting with residents. Walt also helps out at Summerville and enjoys taking one resident, Charlie, out with him for a drive once a week.



## Relationship to food

### Cooking

Anne is the cook of the house and actually used to work as a cook at a number of organisations including care homes and golf clubs. She really enjoys watching cookery programmes for tips and new recipes. One of her favourite things to do is to bake. She enjoys the creative side of it, and has done courses in flower making for cakes. Anne often makes cakes for other people, particularly for special occasions like her daughter's wedding or friends' birthdays (and whenever her son in law is coming round as he is a big fan). Nowadays she doesn't want to eat the cakes herself but loves to keep making them all the same.

If Anne doesn't want to cook, Walt will step in. He learnt to cook in the army and can make most things; stew, roast, mince, potatoes...

*"Recently I made some cheese straws... I ate them all and I got told off!!"*

### Diet

Walt is a big meat eater and doesn't like vegetables. At dinner time his plate looks different to everyone else's despite Anne and their daughter doing their best to encourage him to eat better. There is always a lot of meat and not many vegetables. Walt also prefers simple food and told a story of his son in law cooking with red wine 'and all kinds of rubbish' that took 6 hours to prepare. Out of all the places they lived, he preferred Germany because of its 'good common food. Nothing fancy.'

Various medical professionals have given Walt instructions about what he should and shouldn't eat. 'The nurse told him he has to cut down on fat in meat... Someone else has said, maybe the heart nurse, said he should not have too many fluids'. He describes how both his daughter and Anne keep track of these instructions and 'give him his orders' about what to eat.

Over time, and due to Walt's conditions, they have tried to make meals smaller, but Anne feels at a loss. 'We've tried everything we can - we don't eat a lot nowadays.' The challenge is that it sometimes feels like an uphill battle and he doesn't seem to be losing any weight. 'It's very easy for people to say you need to do this or to do that. They don't realise the effort it takes.' Walt describes how this is in part because of the insulin he is taking 'they call it fat insulin, you can't lose weight with it. But it's not an excuse. I shouldn't be making excuses.'

Walt also recognises that rules can be broken, particularly on Fridays when he takes Charlie out from Summerville.

## Routine

Anne and Walt have three meals a day; waking up at 8 for breakfast often followed by some shopping in town, then a light lunch (perhaps cheese and crackers) and then a main meal in the evening and a snack before bed.

*"In the evening we have a biscuit. Wait no. What do we have now? A rice cake... If you'd have tried to get me to eat a rice cake a few years ago!"*

As well as the content and time of the meal, for Walt and Anne it is very important to eat around the table. They can't understand how these days people see it as normal to eat in front of the television; 'you [should] eat your meal together and you [should] finish your meal together'. It's also important that the food is presented nicely on a plate; 'you can't just throw it on a plate. If food is cooked good enough to eat it's good enough to present properly.'

To manage his diabetes, Walt has had to make a lot of changes to his day to day habits. He has to check his blood sugar levels four times a day and give himself injections before eating. He also has to take a lot of tablets. If he does any exercise his blood sugar levels will quickly drop and he will start to get dizzy so he carries emergency glucose supplies with him in case this happens. This new routine gets in the way of his regular life; 'if I go out I have to take my insulin with me because I have to have an injection before I eat. I order a meal, then I disappear off to the gents to do my injection. I don't like it. It's awkward. You stand in the toilet, put your stuff on top of the toilet. Not everywhere has disabled toilet.'



## Shopping

Anne will write the shopping list and decide what to buy and Walt comes along to the shops to keep her company. They will often go down to Loughborough to go shopping. They will buy fruit and vegetables, bread and meat from independent shops like they have since they were young. 'We don't always buy everything in the same shop - it's what we prefer. We go to the veg shop for the fruit and veg, to the butcher for our meat, to the baker for bread and then the milkman comes to deliver milk - we put in a bit of extra time and a bit of extra money too (we know that). It gets us out and it's nice to support the local traders.'

The rest they will buy from Aldi. Aldi has been a big hit because of its low cost, saving them £25 a week 'the same cereal that's 79p in Aldi costs £2 in Tesco and they haven't got as much sugar.' 'Well that's what he says,' says Anne.

Food is not just something that Walt and Anne see as important in their day to day lives. They are concerned that others are able to both afford and equipped to prepare healthy meals. They would like to see supermarkets doing more to bring down the prices of fruits and vegetables so that young families aren't forced into unhealthy habits. They also regret that in the modern day, it's much harder to learn to cook as it's not something that's taught in schools and mothers are usually at work.

## Thinking about the future

Looking to the future, the most important things for Walt are 'my health, getting fitter and for my family to get well and stay well'. If anything happened to Anne, Walt would become a Chelsea Pensioner; returning to the military community that defined so much of his life. He can't see himself growing old anywhere else, particularly not in any kind of retirement facility.



Anne describes how whilst some things in her life have become more difficult with age, she is still happy and able to cook and bake for friends and family 'although I suppose later on I might not want to'. She feels apprehensive about the thought of depending on schemes like Meals on Wheels to get by because 'you've been eating your own [food] all your life and you've suddenly got to eat something that's put in this dish in front of you'. She plans to stay in her home as long as she can manage, even if something happens to Walt, however, she would be happy to move to somewhere like Summerville if it came to it.

*"What you really need is companionship. That's the most important thing. On both sides our neighbours are ladies on their own. They must spend so much time on their own. You do need companionship..."*



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# Walt & Anne

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**Food for Life Better Care works with care settings, hospitals and in the community to tackle malnutrition and loneliness among older people.** Good food and enjoyable mealtimes can dramatically improve health and wellbeing, and aid recovery from illness or surgery. However, supporting older people to eat a nutritious diet, and to drink enough fluids, whether they reside at home or in care, can sometimes be a challenge.

In July and August 2016, we conducted research with older people in Leicestershire to understand their day-to-day experiences of food. This story was kindly shared by Walt & Anne.\*

\*Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.