



The Clive Browns, Di Jones and Sue Smiths of this world have one advantage over Johnny Osmaston, they can clearly state their surnames and not have them helpfully corrected into “*Ormiston*”. It’s a strange surname, burdening only a few worldwide, all descendants of a bloke who started out life as John Wright, son of a successful industrialist and major philanthropist in Derbyshire, in the north of England around the beginning of the 19th century. Francis was a busy fellow and God-fearing one would imagine, as he endowed and built 27 churches around England during his lifetime, one in the small village of Osmaston.

Despite Francis’s huge engineering works (which constructed bridges, railway stations - think London’s St Pancras, host to the

Eurostar) and all those churches, he did not have a title. When he married the beautiful Selina Fitzherbert of Tissington Hall, whose proud papa was a Baronet, he outdid his father-in-law by building a manor on his 11,000 acres at Osmaston, which was roughly eight times the size of Tissington, complete with three lakes, a 300-foot basement railway distributing coal to heat rooms — and also the brick walls of the orchard, as one does.

So when Francis Wright died, he left the manor to eldest son John, with a vast annual sum to keep himself and it. The other sons inherited his Butterley Company engineering works. Three lakes and all that sort of thing turned John’s head a bit, to the degree that he changed his surname to *Osmaston*.



Convinced he was an astute investor, he began buying coal mines, from prospectuses shown to him by enterprising salesmen. When his wife Florence suggested that possibly, just possibly these salesmen were slightly dodgy, John told her not to be a silly woman and to return to her needlework.

Thus great-grandpapa lost the lot, managed to sell the manor and retreated (with his **fifteen** children) to lick his wounds at his hunting lodge in Sussex, while his Butterley Company brothers kept on engineering and prospering.



Our Johnny Osmaston was a post-War surprise in Sussex, the youngest of his three sisters being 12 years his senior. As the family farm had hosted Canadian troops during the War, the sisters window-gazing fascinated as they washed at the garden well, two decamped promptly to Canada, the other stayed around for a little longer (you can't decamp all that easily at the age of 12).

And in keeping with propriety, at seven years John was sent to boarding school. The first was just ten miles away. One day he noticed the heads of his father and youngest sister passing the classroom window. Later he was called to the headmaster : "John, your mother has died, you may have the afternoon off on your bed".

His father became frail as a result, and the pair ended up moving in with John's Aunt Myrtle in the neighbouring village of Fittleworth. She was an indomitable lady, unable to cook (accustomed to servants in India), a trainer of dogs and horses, and a figure of absolute terror to the local villagers — and initially to John as well. She introduced him to a life-long love of golf and also to contract bridge. Inevitably they became great mates and shared many a gin and tonic together.

At the second school, the initiation ceremony was to stand on a dormitory cupboard in your pyjamas and sing. Voice about to break, all dear Johnny could think of was "*Hang down your head Tom Dooley*". He ended up loving it all. As the School Prefect of Chapel, he read the Sunday lesson (Harold Macmillan was a frequent congregant) and won all sorts of Athletics prizes.



The teenager with his father

His housemaster was just as significant a figure in his upbringing as his father, even acting as guide to classical Greece for 17-year-old John and a fellow student during one school holiday, where novice driver Johnny was propped up on many cushions to steer the aging Austin across Europe.

Fast forwarding, after matriculation, although offered a place at St Andrews, John was somewhat sick of academia, entered the wine trade and eventually started dating an Australian girl, Fiona.

They toasted each other rather regularly at one Fulham Road establishment, leading the Irish publican to suggest that they should get married. After several wines this seemed a great idea and they did.

To the newlyweds, visiting Australia seemed a good idea, though the summer heat was an awful shock, as was living in Melbourne with his in-laws. Together with another couple they hatched a plan to drive to South Africa. There must have been some wine involved as they ended up heading north, picking grapes at Stanthorpe and finding Airlie Beach. There they stayed for a few years, starting the Whitsunday Travel Centre, loving the islands and gaining their first daughter Kate.

Back in England his father was ill and in care and Aunt Myrtle had died leaving him her house, so they sold the business and took baby Kate to Sussex. John landed a dream job with Dun & Bradstreet as European Sales Manager for its Moody's Investment Service. He would often leave home (Vanessa and David now added to the family) on a Sunday afternoon, take the hovercraft to Europe and drive around all week, wining and dining clients in Frankfurt, Paris, Brussels, Zurich, Geneva, Amsterdam, etc., and return to the family on Friday evening.

Young mothers of tiny children sometimes go bonkers with all the demands put upon them.

John's redoubtable mother-in-law Verona Butler (herself a name

on our Club Presidential Board) rang him to say Fiona was at the end of her tether, and he should bring her home to Australia.



Fiona insisted that they first visit Covent Garden. After new dress, hairdo (Fiona, not Johnny), babysitter, etc., etc. they both fell asleep during *Samson and Delilah*, surrounding patrons asking them to leave because they were snoring. They flew to Australia, where John was to enter the world of real estate, joining his parents-in-law's agency at Mt Eliza.

It was not a very successful alliance, so they finally drove north, wondering where the grass would be greenest. Eventually they ended up in Noosa, running mega-popular Noosa Sound restaurant Going Pasta. They settled in Pomona in the beautiful Old Nunnery, complete with its very own ghost (two witnesses). Having a restaurant sounds great fun, but is actually a dreadful 24/7 grind. The pressures were too many and Fiona decided the grass may be even greener with one of their acquaintances. She also decided it would be easier if John moved out, so she kindly packed him a suitcase of clothes.

Our ever heroic Johnny took it all on the chin, stiff upper lip, re-entered real estate and about twelve months later as he faced the prospect of his worst Christmas ever, at a party he bumped into Susie Prenzler, who was facing a similar scenario.

That was early December; a week later he had moved in with her at Sunshine Beach, and they were married as soon as the divorces came through.



Meanwhile one of his former chefs had started Pasta Pronto at Noosa Junction. John joined in, making beautiful fresh pasta, and stayed until retirement beckoned.

Visiting England, they tracked down John's former housemaster and the fellow student with whom he had travelled to Greece. After a very happy long lunch the 92-year-old housemaster had to dash back home to join some buddies at Bridge.

Inevitably once back in Noosa John joined our Bridge Club, enticing Susie along a couple of years later by agreeing to another trip to the U.K.

With retirement they moved to the melaleuca haven formerly called the Weyba estate. John is on some of the honour boards at the Noosa Golf Club and along with the legendary Graham Hugh, does a lot of the dealing machine work behind the scenes at the Club. Louise Ryan has joined the team as well, and Clive Brown is now starting to learn the somewhat daunting ropes.



As his Wednesday Bridge partner it's difficult to contain my enthusiasm for this particular interviewee. Suffice to say, thank heaven for dear Johnny.

by Susie Osmaston