John Upton: A 'Happening'[1]

By Melissa Seims

'Artists to my mind are the real architects of change, and not the political legislators who implement change after the fact.' **William Burroughs**

In this article we are going to look at the mischievous Brighton counterculture anarchist and artist, John Upton. He was also a High Priest of the Wica having known and worked with Doreen Valiente and later, Charles Clark. Hailed by some as the UK's first Street Artist[2], we are going to dig into John's life, his work and the seemingly magically-fated part he played in the story of modern Witchcraft.

John Upton left this plane to go on his next adventure nearly twenty years ago. He was one of the most personally-influential people I've ever met – though in the blinkeredness of youth, it was only later I fully realised this.

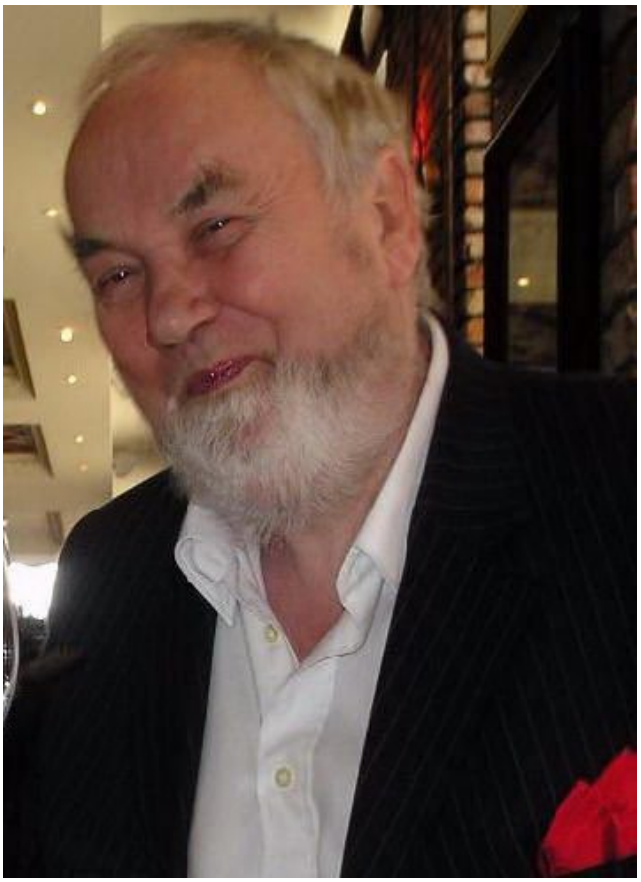


Figure 1: What is going on with those eyebrows!

[1] 'Happenings' were the forerunners of performance art and emerged from the theatrical elements of dada and surrealism. They included an element of spectator participation. (Tate website)

[2] https://www.sussexexpress.co.uk/news/recreating-bookshop-mural-for-psychedelic-tour-of-brighton-1129716

Crafting the Canvas

Born a Piscean on the 28th of February, 1933, in Hastings, Sussex, John rarely spoke of his parents. His mum, Mavis Upton (nee Eldridge) was around but emotionally distant. I'm not sure what happened to John's father, he never mentioned him. I think he was possibly killed in the Second World War as John's mother remarried in 1956, to become Mavis Carpenter.

As a child, John, like many others, played in the rubble of bombed houses. I suspect at that time, things were rather 'normal' for him, though he was to become anything but.

John was never very good academically and in fact didn't learn to read and write until he was a teenager when a girlfriend taught him. However, one thing he was good at, was boxing. He took the fighting name 'Puck Upton' after Shakespeare's mischievous character. At 17, after a string of wins he got the opportunity to train with his hero, the British and Commonwealth lightweight champion Billy Thompson. Joining Billy in the ring, in the first round John found: *'he [Billy] didn't seem to be doing much, and in the second he did even less.'* John thought Billy was coasting so went up to Thompson's manager and said, *'He don't have to do that you know, I'm better than that.'* Angered by the insinuation, John and his manager were thrown out. John, upon asking his own manager what had happened, was told the problem was that he was a better boxer than Thompson. With his illusions shattered, John was deeply upset by this; Thompson had been his hero, his 'God', and with a sad realisation, John gave up boxing for good.[3]

Some years later, John was asked to take part in a medical investigation looking at people's brains and was told there was something unusual about his. John attributed it to being punched in the head during his boxing career. I guess we shall never know if this was the cause of the flamboyant and unusual artist he subsequently became.

When I asked John how he realised he was an artist, he said that after seeing some paintings he thought looked like they were made by children, he understood that he too could be a creative. 'For Walls With Tongues', an online project that documents Britain's mural painters from 1966 to 1985, gives further details: Apparently, John was sitting in a prison cell after having left the army and declared himself a 'conscientious objector'. Whilst there, he came across a book of D. H. Lawrence poems.[4] When John reached the part about flowers he was shaken by the beauty and power in the illustrations and realised there was something magical about art. He thought: *'there really is something here'* and just like that, decided to become an artist though he *'didn't know anything about art and had never drawn anything.'*[5]

John subsequently travelled to Holland and worked as an assistant to a man who painted portraits of dogs. The wife of whom, taught John about Marxism which greatly appealed to John's core nature. Returning to London, John was pavement drawing outside the National Gallery when he decided to venture in. It was there he discovered Rembrandt whose work

[3] https://www.forwallswithtongues.org.uk/artists/john-upton/
[4] I suspect it was *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* first published in 1923.
[5] https://www.forwallswithtongues.org.uk/artists/john-upton/

immediately spoke to him. Of Rembrandt's 'Jewish Bride', John said it *'kept me awake at night, worrying how good it was.'*

Figure 2: Rembrandt's 'Jewish Bride'

John was also a great admirer of Dadaism. An early 20th century European art movement with a funky name. It consisted of artists who rejected the logic and aestheticism of modern capitalist society; choosing instead, to express nonsense, irrationality, and anti-bourgeois protest through their work; this included, visual, literary, and aural art. Most maintained political affiliation with left and far left-wing politics. He was also inspired by the artists Wiliam Blake, Wiliam Turner and the social activist, textile designer and author William Morris. John loved Morris's idealistic socialist fiction book, *News from Nowhere* and found it: *'utopian, something we should aim for, something really good.'*[6]

John's personal flavour of socialism was a blend of Kropotkin and Marx philosophies, and he was an anarcho-syndicalist. This movement, based on a pure form of Marxism and Anarchism, had core principles of solidarity amongst workers, and direct action to attain a goal, rather than looking to politicians and representatives.

In the 1950s, John studied at Camberwell School of Art, but his unique background and journey into art, left him largely unsullied by the artistic fashions of both academia and the contemporary art crowd, making him a true 'outsider artist'.[7] In describing himself as an artist, John said:

'I paint in a similar way to Picasso, though of course, he only does coloured drawings really.' [8]

[6] https://www.forwallswithtongues.org.uk/artists/john-upton/

[7] Outsider art is art made by self-taught or supposedly naïve artists with typically little or no contact with the conventions of the art worlds. In many cases, their work is discovered only after their deaths. Often, outsider art illustrates extreme mental states, unconventional ideas, or elaborate fantasy worlds. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Outsider_art

[8] 'Artist with an urge to 'paint big', *Croydon Advertiser and East Surrey Reporter*, 15th May, 1959.

Describing how he manifested his art he said:

'It is the particular set of social ideas which determines the nature of the painting. What the artist does is pick up the vibrations in society and reflects them in his work.'[9]

For a few years in the 1950s, he exhibited at the annual 'Open Air Exhibition of Paintings' in the Victoria embankment gardens.[10] Organised by the then, London County Council, its intention was to allow students and amateur painters to exhibit and sell their work. It was free and open to all; with the council even providing screens to which artwork could be attached.

In the late 1950s and still in his twenties, John held an exhibition at the Bridge Café in South Norwood. In a news clipping about the Café exhibition, he expressed his desire to paint a 300 square foot painting. His later, 1960s wall murals, were to see him fulfil this ambition and he became known for doing things BIG, screamingly bold, and completely in-your-face. In the same article, John comments on how he was thrilled to have once been compared to the Mexican artist, Diego Rivera, who was known for helping establish the mural and fresco movement both in Mexico and internationally.[11]

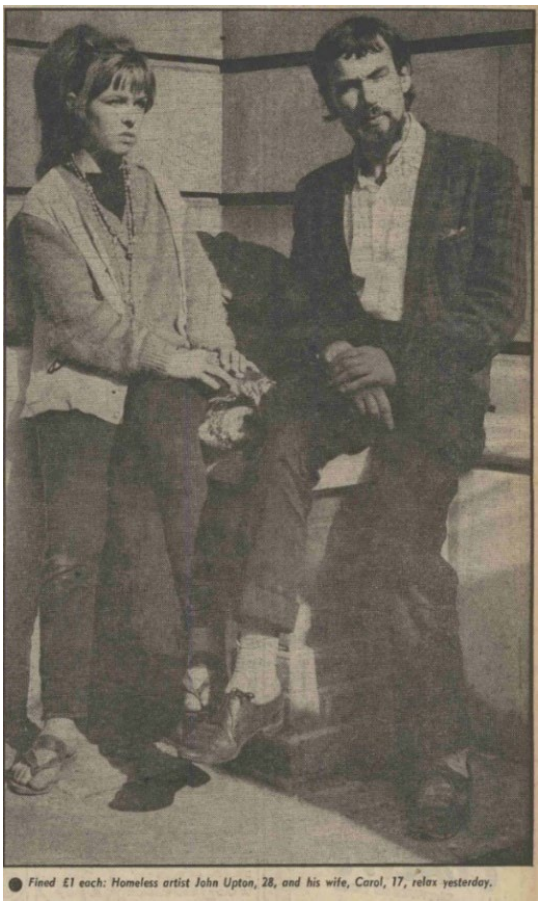

Fined £1 each: Homeless artist John Upton, 28, and his wife, Carol, 17, relax yesterday.

Figure 3: John Upton in 1961 aged 28

In 1961 a photograph of John made it into the *Daily Mirror* following a mass sit-down by 'Ban-the-Bomb' demonstrators organised by the anti-nuclear 'Committee of 100': A British anti-war group that had been established the previous year by the mathematician, philosopher, intellectual and then CND (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament) president Bertrand Russell, along with a few others. Its supporters used mass nonviolent resistance and civil disobedience to achieve their aims. Other notable people involved were the playwright John Osborne and actress Vanessa Redgrave. Following the sit-down, many people were fined, and some went to jail.[12] John, then 28, is described as a homeless artist, I think he was actually squatting at that time.

With a personality equally as colourful and varied as his work, his art was featured in many exhibitions both here and abroad. He created over 50 large-scale murals all over the UK in places such as Brighton, Irvine, Leicester, Dudley and Glasgow and some of his work is held at the Victoria and

[9] https://www.forwallswithtongues.org.uk/artists/john-upton/
[10] 'Left Bank' artists are near neighbours, *Norwood News*, 8th May 1959
[11] 'Artist with an urge to 'paint big', *Croydon Advertiser and East Surrey Reporter*, 15th May, 1959.
[12] 'After Great Sit-down the Big Pay-Out , *Daily Mirror*, 19th September, 1961.

Albert Museum in London.[13] In the late 60's he worked with *The Beatles* original company 'Apple' doing some stage design for them.

Figure 4: Brighton Playground 1976.

Today, in some quarters, John is hailed as 'The UK's First Street Artist' and a few years ago this modern mural (Figure 5) was painted and names him as such.

Figure 5: John Upton – 'The UK's First Street Artist' – modern reimagining by Kriya Arts of Upton's original mural from the 1960s.

[13] https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O553819/drawing/

After spending a few years around London, John was to flamboyantly burst onto the Brighton scene in the mid-60s when he started painting psychedelically coloured wall murals. He became an artist-in-residence for Sussex University, in Brighton, and created a large mural to adorn a university wall. Entitled 'Christ's Entry into Brighton', it was a spin on the cover of The Beatles *Sgt. Pepper* album and depicted the central 'Christ-like' figure as Aleister Crowley. He is surrounded by colourful figures of that time such as Chrstine Keeler, Harold Macmillan, and Jimmy Hendrix, mixed in with Sussex University staff and students. I believe the university still have it on display.

Figure 6: Christ's Entry Into Brighton by John Upton

In the second half of the 1960s, dropping LSD on a Friday night became something 'Uppy', as John was often called, and other budding revolutionaries indulged in. The anarchist author, Nick Heath, was amongst these progressive psychonauts and remembers John being a natural 'showman' with 'razzmatazz'. Nick observed John's paintings becoming more psychedelic as a result of their mind-expanding experimentation. Previously John's style had been more reminiscent of the 'kitchen sink realism' of artist John Bratby and the fisherman turned artist Alfred Wallis, who was known for his 'naïve style' art painted on scraps of cardboard.

Unsurprisingly, John had a propensity to say and do things for maximum shock value. He would entertain me with a captivating mix of wonderful and outrageous 'out there' tales of Brighton in the 1960s and 70s where he established himself as one of the local creative lynchpins. I was regaled with stories of psychedelic experiences, LSD trips, sexual experimentation, beatnik culture, acts of art and the Brighton Unicorn bookshop:

'The Unicorn Bookshop at 50 Gloucester Road is a largely forgotten gem of Brighton's cultural history. Perhaps Brighton, if it exists as some kind of incorporeal psycho-geographic entity, finds its treatment of the shop and Bill [Butler] slightly embarrassing. Directly opposite (in more ways than one) the austere Regency façade of the Galeed Baptist Chapel, the shop on the corner with Frederick Street had been painted by artist John Upton with rainbows, the moon and stars and the rising sun. A fine prancing Unicorn projected from the second floor out over the pavement.'[14]

[14] John Shire, *Bookends,* (Invocations Press, 2011) p. 39

Figure 7: Unicorn Bookshop building then and now.

The Unicorn bookshop was opened in 1967 by Bill Butler and his partner Mike Hughes. Born William Huxford Butler, Bill was an American beat poet, occultist and alternative thinker. He also wrote and published a few of his own books. Under the name Hassan I Sabbah, he wrote *Leaves of Grass: the Hash Cookbook*. Later in life he wrote a couple of tarot books and his final book, *The Myth of the Hero* was finished shortly before his untimely death from a drugs overdose in October 1977.

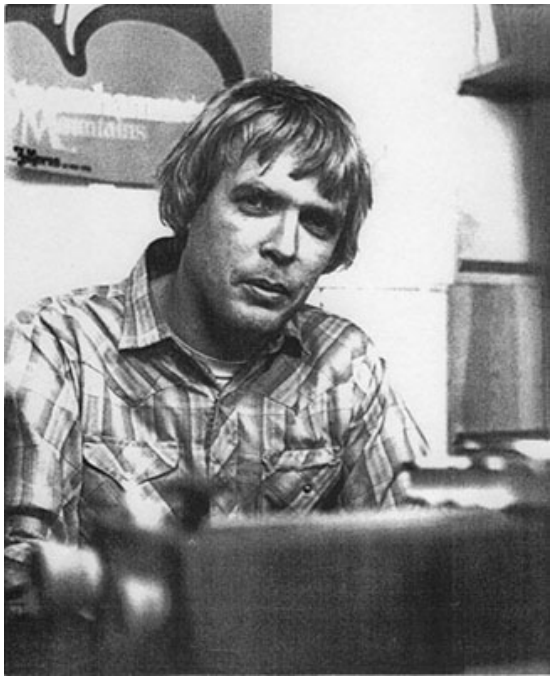


Figure 8: Bill Butler

Unicorn specialised in modern poetry of American and British writers and many aspiring poets and authors were able to get their work read there. It also carried a large number of books and pamphlets on such diverse subjects as macrobiotic cooking, survival techniques, magic, esoterica and science-fiction. It had its own publishing arm, Unicorn Press, and the well-known authors J. G. Ballard and Michael Moorcock had some of their early work published there. The Unicorn quickly became a hub for alternative, counterculture thinkers, artists and anarchists and John Upton became a good friend of Bills.

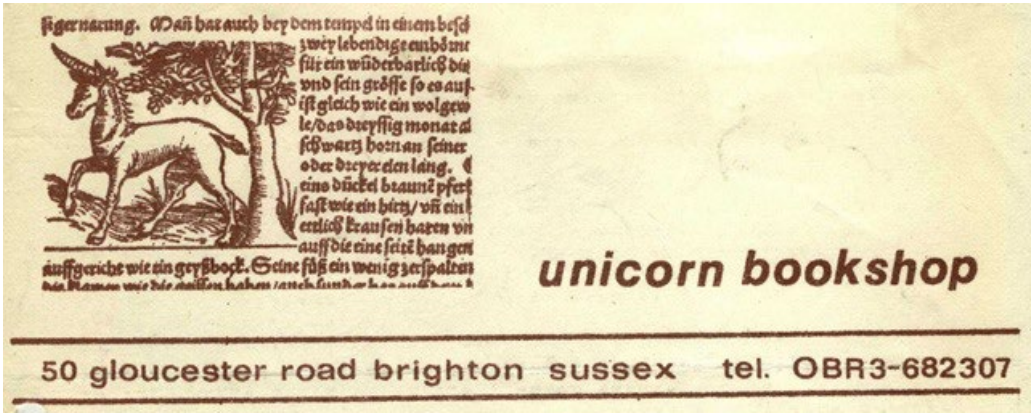


Figure 9: Unicorn bookshop letterhead

For a brief spell in late 1967, Bill returned to America. A friend he left to look after the Unicorn decided to start selling marijuana from there which may, or may not, have been related to a police raid that subsequently took place there on the 16th of January 1968. This caused quite a stir at the time as the police seized much of Butler's stock and he was prosecuted for selling 'obscene' material. By 'obscene' we are talking here about the works of some of the well-known counter-cultural greats like William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg as well as a plethora of other alternative books and magazines.

Amusingly, an early chapbook by J. G. Ballard entitled *'Why I want To Fuck Ronald Reagan'* became a much-mentioned piece in the court case following the raid. Written in the style of a scientific paper it details a series of bizarre experiments intended to measure the psychosexual appeal of Ronald Reagan, who was then the Governor of California and candidate for the 1968 Republican presidential election. I feel there is some kind of irony in that originals of this book, are now worth about £1500.

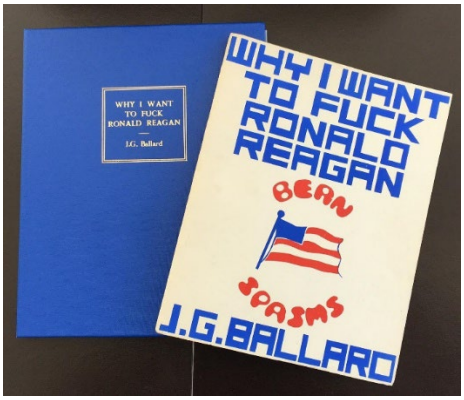
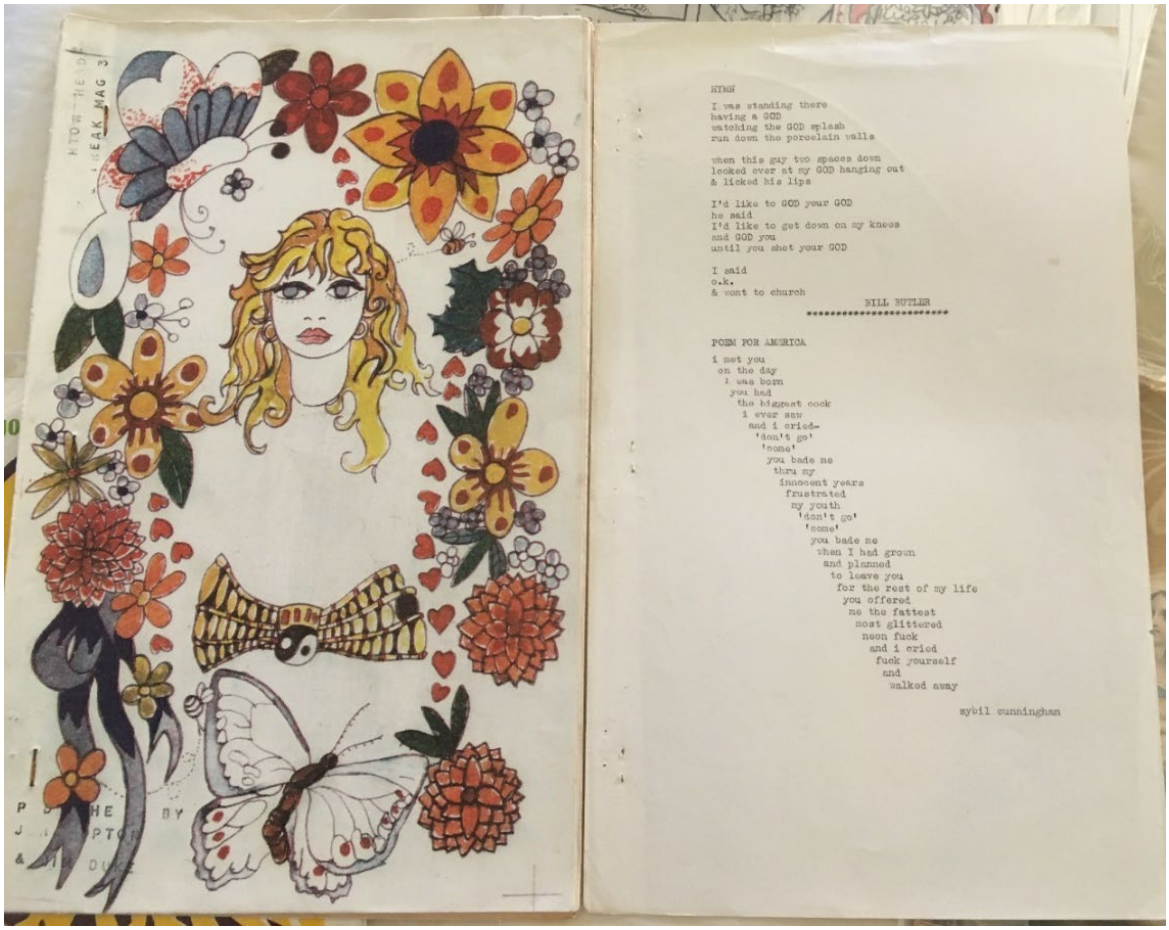


*Figure 10: Why I want to F*ck Ronald Reagan cover.*

In a travesty of justice, Bill lost the court case and didn't have the money to pay the fine, believed to be £400 (roughly equivalent to £7000 today). A group of fellow poets including Alan Ginsberg, Thom Gunn and Elaine Feinstein, contributed work for a volume of poetry entitled *For Bill Butler.* Published in 1970, the proceeds went to help Bill.[15]

Amongst the array of 'obscene' publications seized, was the beautifully illustrated, *Brighton Head and Freak* magazine which John Upton edited and lovingly adorned with colour. It contained poetry by Butler, the Australian anarchist and poet Jim Duke, and various other bards. Printed by Unicorn Press, it was sold in their shop.



HYMN

I was standing there
having a GOD
watching the GOD splash
run down the porcelain walls

when this guy two spaces down
looked over at my GOD hanging out
& licked his lips

I'd like to GOD your GOD
he said
I'd like to get down on my knees
and GOD you
until you shot your GOD

I said
o.k.
& went to church

BILL BUTLER

POEM FOR AMERICA

i met you
on the day
i was born
you had
the biggest cock
i ever saw
and i cried-
'don't go'
'come'
you bade me
thru my
innocent years
frustrated
my youth
'don't go'
'come'
you bade me
when I had grown
and planned
to leave you
for the rest of my life
you offered
me the fattest
most glittered
neon fuck
and i cried
fuck yourself
and
walked away

sybil cunningham

Figure 11: Pages from 'Brighton Head and Freak' Issue 3 (1969)

Figure 11 shows a couple of pages from *Brighton Head and Freak* number 3, from 1969.[16] The artwork on the left is John Upton's - Women and flowers were his favourite subject material when I knew him, but he could also turn his hand to landscapes, animals and objects.

The poems on the right are by Bill Butler and Sybil Cunningham. Let's take a look at Bill's poem, for it captures the rebellious and vocal spirit of the counterculture kickback happening in the late 1960s, and which Brighton became an epicentre for.

[15] http://www.northlainehistory.me.uk/bill-butler.html
[16] https://blogs.brighton.ac.uk/radicalpress/title-attila/

HYMN

by Bill Butler.

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& went to church

Bills cottaging poem comes from a time when homosexuality had only been partially legalised though the 'Sexual Offences Act' of 1967. Backed by the Church of England and the House of Lords, this Act only legalised same-sex acts in the UK between men over the age of 21, that were conducted in private. Scotland and Northern Ireland followed suit over a decade later, in 1980 and 1981 respectively. The Sexual Offences Act represented a stepping-stone towards equality, but there was still a long way to go. The 1960s were a unique time on many levels, people started being brave and standing up for their beliefs even when they bucked against mainstream thinking.

In keeping with the revolutionary spirit of the time, John Upton organised open-air gatherings at Brighton's Fishmarket Hard on a Sunday straight after the Salvation Army had their spot.[17] They were co-organised by Richard Miller who had helped to found the Brighton Anarchist Group.[18] These inclusive-of-all gatherings, or 'happenings', consisted of poetry readings, action paintings and satirical announcements. One time, someone was arrested for reading Ginsberg's poem, *America.*[19] How times have changed.

In 1967, John along with Dr Josephine Klein, a social relations reader at Sussex University, organised another 'happening' in the form of a 'Paint-in' on Brighton Promenade. It was reported in the *Daily Mirror* who referred to the participants as 'flower people':

[17] https://twitter.com/DonLickley/with_replies
[18] https://libcom.org/article/duke-james-herriott-1939-1992
[19] https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49305/america-56d22b41f119f

To the flower people, it seemed a beautiful idea. Let's hold a paint-in. They selected a blank wall and started slapping on the paint. Soon flowers and the start of a crucifixion scene appeared on the wall – the lower promenade at Brighton.

Suddenly a man stepped out of a crowd watching the artists and painted the words 'Make Wilson walk the …' Then he stopped and walked away.

Next an elderly man took up the black paint and drew a Charlie Chaplin-type figure. He too walked off.[20]

The police arrested seven of the 'flower people' but all were later released. John was arrested several times for random acts of art and mischief but it was something he was very nonchalant about.

John Upton used to say that artists cannot lie, they paint the truth as they see it. Words that are reminiscent of and I suspect, inspired by something Bill Butler said during his obscenity trial in August 1968:

'You regard it as important that we tell the truth in your court, and you put us under oath to do so. When any poet writes or an artist paints, he is under oath to something inside himself to tell the truth and the whole truth. Not to tell just those parts of the truth which are palatable and pleasing but all that is true – the good and the bad parts. Until he does that, he is incomplete as an artist and a poet.'[21]

Figure 12: John Upton and family in the 1960s

[20] 'Paint-in On The Prom Gets The Brush-Off, *Daily Mirror*, 21st August, 1967.
[21] https://www.holli.co.uk/unicorn/text.htm

Figure 12 shows John with his family in the 1960s, bare-footed and in a white bear suit, you wouldn't have quickly forgotten him. John lived some of his Brighton years in St Michaels Place; an area equivalent to hippy Haight-Ashbury in San Francisco, surrounded by like-minded, alternative people.

In his older years, he retained his love for wearing bright and unusual clothes and suits. After inheriting some money, he travelled to Japan and had several custom suits made in the maddest of fabrics.

One thing I want to point out in Figure 12, is the shopping bag – John loved a good shopping bag and always had one because they were large enough to carry his pens, pencils and large sketch pads. In all the time I knew him, he rarely went anywhere without them and would often be found sitting sketching scenes that caught his eye.

For John, one of his proudest moments was when he found out that one of his paintings hung next to a genuine Andy Warhol. I think he may have been talking about his painting 'Let Brian Breathe' about the original Rolling Stone member Brian Jones who was to die young. It is (or at least was) owned by the producer of two cult classics: *A Clockwork Orange* and *The Man Who Fell To Earth*, Si Litvinoff. As someone who knew David Bowie, it is quite possible that it was on Litvinoff's wall that it hung next to a Warhol.

Figure 13: Let Brian Breathe by John Upton

John knew the experimental film maker and fellow Brightonian, Jeff Keen and John took parts in various experimental films.[22] Keen's work was similar to the mystical and magical offerings of Kenneth Anger and Derek Jarman and was honoured posthumously at the Tate Modern with an exhibition in 2012. Figure 14 is a still from one of Keens short movies, the 1978 *Mad Love*. John is at the back standing next to Jeff Keen's wife, Jackie. John featured in a few other of Jeff's films, such as the 1960 short, *Wail.*

Figure 14: Still from a film made by Jeff Keen

[22] 'bright-on-ian *adj.,* a creative, fun-loving, person who cares – bringing a positive change' Agent Petruscioni (https://www.flickr.com/photos/litost/28941120478/in/photostream/)

In 1979, John moved to the new town of Irvine in Ayrshire, on the West coast of Scotland to become their artist in residence. He set about creating colourful murals, transforming empty shop fronts into a riot of colour and became a well-known character in the area.

Figure 15: John Upton's mural in Irvine 1987

Figure 16:Detail from 1987 Irvine mural.

Ever the left-wing anarchist, John was quick to get involved in local controversies and once organised a naked protest march through Irvine in response to the threatened closure of its nudist beach. Alas, I have no pictures of this.

John was generally unfazed by more unusual behaviours and was quick to see a certain ridiculousness in life. At a fetish club in Glasgow called 'Violate', he witnessed a row of men, their genitals all wired together, lying in water. Periodically, someone pressed a button and electrocuted them, causing them to wildly flap around like a shoal of fish out of water; a scene John thought hysterical.

In the 1980s, John pioneered a transformative project in Barrowfield, a notoriously troubled part of Glasgow where social workers and emergency services feared to tread. This estate consisted of three and four storey tenements built from stone to a 'Rehousing' level grade, the cheapest form of social housing in Glasgow. The attic space was open and unpartitioned and people hiding from the police would live there and 'escape' into an adjoining property if the need arose. The area was heavily associated with gangs, murders, and drugs. John secured funding from the council and worked closely with willing residents, utilising the money to employ them in ways that improved their own, immediate environment. He paid them to do things like clean the streets and gardening. Meanwhile, John painted them bright and colourful murals. He also took a series of stark and hard-hitting black and white photos. I don't have any of these, but some of the images were haunting. I remember one with a small girl, dirty, tear-stained, squatting down by a blocked drain on the litter-strewn road. Another showed a dirty mattress and a pair of knickers lying on the floor…

The Barrowfield photographs and John's involvement and passion for the project make a great piece of social history. With his open mind and liberal thinking, many of the residents liked him and allowed him to share in and document their lives. In return, he was a key for bringing about change for them. The tenements were finally knocked down about 15 years ago and the area redeveloped.

<u>John and 'The Art'</u>

John become a lynchpin of a very different kind, when it came to an important role he played in modern Gardnerian Witchcraft. One that seems incredibly magical, even fated.

I first met John in 1993. I had driven up to Dreghorn, just outside of Irvine, with my then magical partner, David Johnson. Our friend and Priestess, Iona, had recently started living with Upton. This trip was going to mark a significant turning point for me of the sort that was to fundamentally shape who I was to become. But I was still in blissful ignorance at that time…

John lived in a small, terraced council property in Stroma Court, Dreghorn. The exterior looked nothing special, but upon walking in, you were visually and mentally assaulted by colour and curiosities. Book and CD shelves made from simple bricks and planks of wood, bowed under their contents and very little was 'mainstream'. Dangling things hung in abundance, including witch balls strung up at the windows, reflecting and capturing any stray imps that deigned to attempt entry. Erotic art was in your face, incensed burned, and Moroccan rugs were strewn across the floor. John had spent some time in Morocco and particularly loved Marrakesh with

its richly adorned souqs (street markets) and pervading aromas of spice and pungent lime leather tanning pits. Whilst John was in Africa, he met the author, artist and counterculture great, William Burroughs who gave John some of his writings. John later sent them off to someone as part of a 'Mail Art' project.[23] Another African adventure saw him taking a hot air balloon ride across part of the Sahara Desert; he was chortling as he regaled how it partially crash landed and for a while, dragged the people onboard across the sandy terrain. John was a man who ***lived*** a life.

Figure 17: John in his riotous living room c1990s

He loved classical music and the drama of opera, one of his favourites being 'Lulu' by Alban Berg. In his opinion, only the Glyndebourne version with Christine Schafer was correct. Radio 3 or Classic FM were pretty much a constant background feature at his home in Dreghorn. Even when we went out classical composers were left on for his black cat, Sooty, to enjoy. John also adored *Come Dancing* – he found it incredibly funny the way people waltzed around the ballroom in swirling dresses and vibrant suits, he would watch the blancmange dervishes and chuckle at the madness of it. He did that a lot.

[23] Mail Art is an artistic movement centred on sending small-scale works through the post. This now-global movement initially developed out of what eventually became the New York Correspondence School and the Fluxus movements of the 1960s.

Figure 18: Another wall in the living room with John's broomstick!

Figure 19: Living room corner.

Having been told by Iona that John knew Doreen Valiente, I soon asked him about her. He delighted in telling us that she had a collection of broomsticks and would tell people that she flew around on them. Once, he phoned Doreen whilst I was there, slightly star-struck (I was about 20 years old) I did not want to speak to her directly, but I still remember that scene in his hallway as if it were yesterday.

In the 1970s, John was in a Gardnerian Coven in Brighton that Doreen Valiente used to visit. Thanks to information from Paul Greenslade, I have been able to confirm that this was ran by Anna and Len who had come from Eleanor Bone's London Coven. Two of their initiates, 'K' and 'R', remember John joining and found him a tremendously fun character to be around.

John told me how Doreen liked to play Tibetan Longhorn music as a background to rituals and he gave me an old cassette tape with it on. He also said another initiate was Gary Turner, the Brighton sculptor and lead singer of the band 'The Dodgems', best known for their late 1970s hit 'Lord Lucan is Missing'.[24] I don't however think Gary was in Anna and Len's coven but was possibly in another group, which John referred to as the 'Mother Goring Coven'. This traditional Coven, that Doreen Valiente believed predated the modern revival, reputedly met at the Iron-age hill fort of Chanctonbury Ring on the South Downs. They took their name from Charles Goring who owned the land and planted the ring of trees there in the mid-1700s.[25]

Figure 20: John Upton and Gary Turner

[24] https://youtu.be/y0xmLhkLYCw
[25] Info thanks to Paul Greenslade.

John had a piece of Gary Turner's rather eye-catching art (Figure 21); when I first met John it was the second thing that assaulted my eye after the blaze of colour. This sculpture was a 'firm' and delightfully imposing presence at rituals we performed in the living room.

Figure 21: Giant Phallus sculpture by Gary Turner

During my first visit to John's house, he told me about an elderly gentleman, Charles Clark, whom he'd met on the bus going from Dreghorn into Irvine. They had started talking about esoteric matters and Charles mentioned an old friend of his, Gerald Gardner. Whilst many wouldn't have, John instantly recognised the name. Charles told John how in the 1950s he was passed many letters from Gardner to deal with, effectively becoming a bit of a personal secretary for him. Gardner would travel to Ayrshire from the Isle of Mann to see Charles and vice versa. At that time, Charles lived just a few miles from Ardrossan, Ayrshire from which a regular ferry service over to the Isle operated.

Upon hearing this story David and I were sceptical. We were both well-read on Gardnerian and Alexandrian history and the name Charles Clark was not known to us. John informed us that Charles lived just around the corner and happily took us there.

After warmly welcoming us in, any suspicions we had quickly evaporated when Charles started showing us letters from Doreen Valiente, Gerald Gardner and others. Charles had lived a quiet life, but there we were face to face with a previously unknown High Priest of the Wica. Having read Aidan Kelly's 1991 book *Crafting the Art of Magic*, I clocked that Charles was the deliberately un-named person referred to in it and who sent Carl Weschcke of Llewellyn Publications, original material from Gardner. This material, now known as the 'Weschcke

Documents', formed the basis for Kelly's book and date from 1957/58. With that realisation my inner cynic gave way.

From that point on mine and David's fate was sealed, though sadly David was to only live another eleven years. Before his tragic and unforeseen departure, he had been encouraging us to write upon Charles. With his death I knew that this was what I had to do, for David as much as Charles. The 'illustrious David' was with me in spirit, he is still with me now.[26]

Now, let's take a minute here. What I find fascinating about this part of the story, is that of all the places John Upton could move to, he had unwittingly and literally moved around the corner from Charles Clark. Back then there were likely less than a few hundred active Gardnerian initiates in the UK. If anyone wants an argument for the Wica having a living magical egregore guiding things behind the scenes, this could be it.

As a direct result of this, Charles story was told, our line was firmly established, and important pieces of our history were rewritten and amended to be more accurate.[27]

I moved to Irvine a few years later in around 1995 and spent a lot of time with John, Iona and Charles. We formed a Coven and initiated a few people. Life went on, John had art exhibitions, he got me involved in a postal art movement called 'Mail Art' where artists from all around the world, exchanged their work with each other. One of the highlights of John's day, was going to his door to see what papery delights the postman had delivered for him. 'Mail Art' was an expression of a global art community in the years prior to digital cyber-communities.

For me, it was a creative and very bohemian time. John would often be sketching myself, Iona or the cat as we sat watching Star Trek TNG on the TV and smoking joints. We would go to the theatre, attend art galleries and museums and wander around Glasgow's visually stunning Victorian necropolis. I was learning about art, life, and perception, whilst also buying into Gene Roddenberry's Utopian views. This was my wonderfully decadent and NOT misspent youth and John was the unceasing catalyst.

In the last couple of decades of his life John created several Books of Shadows in large elephant folio size, 20" x 14", black art books. Richly decorated, with copious use of Theban, I always found them a bit like a Postman Pat book for adults. You would find a little paper door flap behind which some fairy would be grimacing, spatters of blood, semen, clumps of bodily hair, pieces of underwear, photos of old lovers, his family, some razor-bladed. The books explosively express the dark and light energies, fertility and joy of the Craft, alongside gentler depictions of fay folk, elementals, and fantasy figures. Giant erections and splayed vaginas assault you on some pages, whilst on others, you find a near child-like innocence. For John, art was an act of magic and he used it to both shock and glamour at the same time.

In 2018 Hellfire Club Books published various editions of two of John Upton's Books of Shadows based on the stories of the Scottish witches Isobel Gowdie and Bessie Dunlop.[28] He

[26] 'Illustrious David' coined by Jackie Laxton (nee Salter) – thank you.
[27] Much more on Charles Clark can be found on my website www.thewica.co.uk
[28] https://hellfireclubbooks.com/product/witchcraft-confessions-of-isobel-gowdie/

worked on them whilst listening to James MacMillan's 1990 symphonic requiem, 'The Confessions of Isobel Gowdie.'[29] John, through the magic and art of manifestation, was completely immersing himself in the spirit of Isobel in order to tell his version, of her story.

Figure 22: An image from John's Gowdie Book of Shadows (spot the cat!)

[29] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvczSLC0vqk

All Good Things…[30]

In the final few years of his life, John took to decorating the ceiling of his room with stars and constellations, influenced by the tombs of the ancient Egyptians which were richly adorned in a similar style.

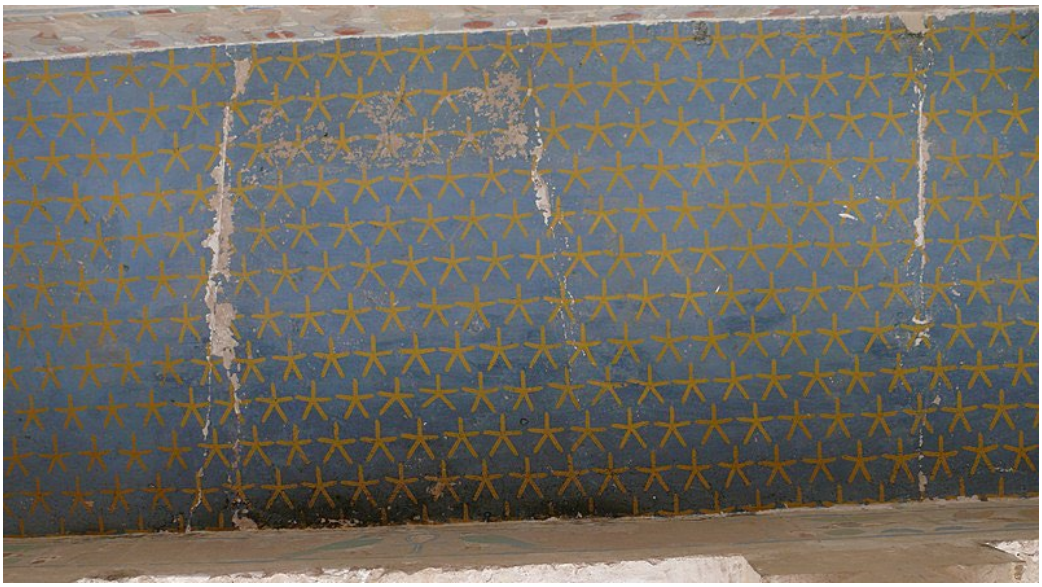

Figure 23: Ceiling of Queen Hatshepsut's mortuary temple in Egypt circa 15th century BC.

Figure 24: John Upton's living room ceiling.

[30] The name of the brilliant, final, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode.

Ever since I first met John, he said that when the time came that he could not mentally or physically do what he wished too, he would take his own life. I never believed him, but he was true to his word and in September 2005, by his own hand, John left this world to go on a new adventure. He requested that I was the only one to talk at his funeral, partially because he trusted me not to mention God or Jesus. His strong dislike of such still very evident at the end of his life. This I joyfully did, looking as bright and colourful as I could. I regaled the mourners with brief but edgy tales of John's LSD trips and anarchy whilst trying to honour some of his last words; he did not want people to be maudlin and upset at his funeral. To finish, I read out a poem by the Wiccan author Vivianne Crowley entitled 'The Dance of the Elements'.

John was 72 years old when he died and I unexpectedly learnt an important thing from his trip across the River Styx. When you know someone has chosen to end their life, their death is not tragic or sad. In fact it was the easiest death I have ever had to deal with. There is something tremendously comforting about knowing that it was entirely their choice and done on their terms.

It is also at these times, that we can fully appreciate one of the true gifts of an artist; when we realise that they have left us with a connection to them, one that has been permanently captured in the stroke of their brush or the glide of their pen. A lot of his art still exists, and you can still glimpse his mischief within it. If one of his flower's looks subtly phallic or vulvic, know that it was deliberate.

John taught me and many others the importance of art and how it can start revolutions, enabling people to be who they truly are. But first you do need to turn on, tune in and likely drop out, at least to some degree. John was someone who practiced, manifested and lived Art and The Art and someone who reminds us to not forget to live.

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John Upton related links:

https://www.forwallswithtongues.org.uk/artists/john-upton/

https://artuk.org/discover/artists/upton-john-19332005

https://archive.org/details/sparrowsnest-7944

https://johnuptonartisthommage.wordpress.com/

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https://www.thewica.co.uk/john-upton

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https://www.holli.co.uk/unicorn/text.htm