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John Platt

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Portrait of a Collector Interview with John Platt

Transcribed by Kate Browne

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

John Platt: Hello, it's John Platt here.

Meg Miner: Hello, this is Meg Miner calling —

Platt: Hello.

Miner: —from Illinois. How are you today?

Platt: Hello, there. Good to hear you. My name's John, by the way. We could use Christian names, there.

Miner: Oh.

Platt: Yes. So there we are there, Meg.

Miner: Thank you so much, John.

Platt: Perhaps I should explain my, my contact with Minor.

Miner: Wonderful.

Platt: I mean—

Miner: Why don't you give us your full name and, um, your association?

Platt: Yes, my full name—John Em—well, yes, my full name is John Emerson Platt.

Miner: And how did you know Minor?

Platt: Right. Well, um, for many, many years, um, I was senior research fellow and Chaplain of—and a member of the governing body of Pembroke College, Oxford. Now, in the, uh, the, uh, 1990s, uh, we set up—well, I was—set up an arrangement with a number of American schools for a visiting student scheme. Whereby they selected, um, a group of students—usually junior year abroad it was—and they would come to us to the College, Pembroke, for one year, in their junior year abroad. And Minor, who met one of my colleagues—another fellow at the College on some, some—I don't—I must admit I don't know how he first met this fellow, this colleague of mine, but he met him and they got talking and he, and he—the upshot was that one of the schools that in the 1990s—roundabout the middle of the 1990s that started sending us—I think about three or four students every year for their junior year abroad was in Illinois Wesleyan, okay? So that's how the connection to Pembroke College began. Um, as it progressed, I—I got—he came over and I got to know, um, uh, uh, Minor and we, we struck up a—quite a friendship. Some would say, he invited me out and in February of 1998 it was, uh, he paid for me to come

and visit Illinois Wesleyan and to talk to students there and, uh, and so that was a big thing. And, um, we—I remember he put on—typical of Minor—he put on a concert, a special concert which—for my arrival which he played the harpsichord, and the recital included the works of a Pembroke alumnus of the 18th century. A chap called John Mudge who had been at the College in 1780. Matriculated then. So, typical Minor. That was absolutely typical of him. And so, we got good friends and, um, yes, and then that led on to the business of the, uh, the windows. The College windows, which you've got all the information, of course, about those, haven't you, in the Ames Library?

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Uh, the windows from Pembroke College. Now, I was instrumental in that because, well, the story's told—you are—are you aware of the background to that?

Miner: Um, I know what's printed in the brochure and we—

Platt: Right, well, that's it. You know that. You know that. And yes—

Miner: But I didn't know you were involved—

Platt: I was the person in the College. Oh yes, I was the person that really made it happen. I helped it to happen. There were quite a few, (*laughs*) quite a few people dragging their feet in the College about it, but I, I, I, I pushed that through. Yes, I can say that yes I did.

Miner: Thank you.

Platt: Yes. And Minor was, of course, duly grateful. Then comes a very interesting thing. That in 2001—the middle of 2001—our Master of the time retired and therefore, as you're probably aware, that in Oxford College the Master is elected by the Members of the Fellows. Members of the governing body of the College and Oxford Colleges are independent, self-governing institutions who are governed by their fellows. And, so, I had been so impressed by Minor that I suggested to him that he might like to apply to become Master of Pembroke College. (*laughs*) Now, he was so excited about this, given his background, you know, his love of, um, his love of all things English, particularly of all things English with historical—like Oxford College.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Um, he was thrilled to pieces. And we went quite a long way towards this, but in the end, it came, it came to nothing because, quite frankly, it was his wife in the end that wouldn't, um, wouldn't (*laughs*) come over and talked. But his wife didn't want to move. She was, you know, it would have meant a cut in—a cut in salary, of course. Oxford College is—did not pay the same rate as, uh, an American university. So, that was one of the big things she didn't want—and I don't think generally she wanted to leave America anyway. So, in the very end, at the last minute he really, effectively, withdrew from that. So that was the end, the end of that particular very exciting possibility.

Miner: My.

Platt: Yes, and so then—well, it wasn't very long after that I suppose that he died. I mean, he died in 2003, didn't he?

Miner: Yes, he did.

Platt: He and I stayed in touch, but only just to—because I retired also. I retired in 2002. I'm an emeritus fellow, but I retired. So that really, in a nutshell, is my, um, you know, my contact with Minor.

Miner: Do, do you think he would have been elected?

Platt: But—

Miner: Do you think he would have been elected?

Platt: Because it would have been absolutely no relevance. I'm sorry. Could Minor have what? I can't hear what you're saying. Could Minor have been elected?

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Well, he couldn't. He wasn't elected, no. He wasn't elected because, in fact, at the very end, when once it became apparent that the pressures were so great from his, and I think, I'll be quite frank about it, it was his wife that didn't want to do it. And so what happened then at that point, in the election, he started making, um, uh, demands—well, demands. So much more salary. Now, you know, he wasn't the only candidate for the election. There were a number of candidates. And, um, there was no way in which the College would have paid much more over the odds to have him, you see. Quite a few people liked him and would have had him, but not if he was going to ask for, um, you know, a bigger salary. A bigger stipend. And, um, which he would not have done. I know because, he did it because—he did it in such a way that in the end, for his—for him to be elected, that was undoubtedly—because I had a lot of conversations with him and I also met his wife. And I just—I know. So that was what happened there. Yeah. He would have been a very good—he really would have been—he would have been an outstanding, uh, Master of our College. No question in my mind at all. But it was not to be for the reasons as I've outlined. And, yeah. And within two years he was dead, of course. But that was just—that's...so that's the situation. In a nutshell, you've got my, um, and may be of no use to you at all, the information that I've given you. But it's, it's—that's what happened. And undoubtedly, within—at Pembroke College, I was the, um, the best—the strongest link. With Minor. Yes.

Miner: Do you collect anything?

Platt: No, I'm afraid no. I'm afraid not. No, no. I—he collected—he collected a number of recipes—he liked—from our chef. The College chef. He collected—I just have the note in my

folder here. I'll just read it. If I can just find it. Oh, yes, here we are. He, um, "Thanks to you and to the chef"—that's the head chef of the College—"for the recipes which are now in the hands of our chef." Who—he got the—he got, um, um, the whole collection of recipes that were served in the College, from Pembroke and passed them over to the chef at Illinois Wesleyan. I said, I will send you some of our menus. But I have to say that he, um, he never did send me any of the menus. That's all he collected at Pembroke. No, he didn't—obviously when he was in, whenever he visited the College he spent his time, of course, looking in bookshops and all the rest of it in Oxford. As you can imagine, but I don't know any precise details about that, no.

Miner: That's okay. That's great.

Platt: Okay? It is a sidelight to Minor of something you probably perhaps didn't know.

Miner: It's not widely known. Um, when you—

Platt: I don't think you can probably—you probably can't publish it, no.

Miner: But I can tell people about it.

Platt: Well, yeah. Some of it is a bit, sort of—not for publication, but I've told you, I've told you what I know.

Miner: Certainly. When you visited our campus, you said that the concert was typically Minor.

Platt: Everything about it. He was such a, you know, such a flamboyant figure. I mean, with a huge knowledge of the English past, of English culture. It's a—so, of course, typical. I mean, it was typical of him putting on that concert for me, now it's absolutely amazing. He should know the works of this minor—so, this composer I mentioned to you, John Mudge, is, in fact, has an entry the Dictionary of National Biography. He was not so very great—he was not very well known. But Minor Myers knew him and knew his music and, as I say, played some of it in a concert for my—honoring my visit with he himself sitting at the harpsichord playing his parts. That was typical Minor, you know?

Miner: So the typical Minor is that he would make a connection to make you feel at home? Is it that—typical that he made a connection?

Platt: They put that on at the College. They put that on in Illinois Wesleyan. As a public—small, but a public concert, yes. Yeah.

Miner: Okay. And you said the windows—the stained glass—

Platt: Yeah.

Miner: —windows. People at Pembroke did not want them to leave?

Platt: Oh, no, no. It's just that they couldn't be bothered. They had all sorts of—it was too much effort. We might have to pay. There might be some customs problems with getting—exporting

historic material from England to, you know, to abroad. In fact, I kept the pressure on and in the end there were no problems. But if I hadn't kept the pressure on—inertia. You know, the College could not have done it. Nobody could really be bothered to do it. It was too much effort. But I kept pushing and pushing and pushing and in the end—and, of course, Minor was pulling from the other side and making it quite clear that there is no expense for the College or anything like that. And I did go into consider detail and discovered that, in fact, because of the nature of the particular material, there wasn't going to be a problem about getting it exported from England to, um, to the United States. No. So that's the situation there. No, without—I, I can honestly say that without me, it wouldn't have happened. Simply because, um, yes, it wouldn't have happened.

Miner: I understand. Thank you. They are very much appreciated and loved and referred to every day that tours come through our library. So thank you.

Platt: Yeah, well, he sent me—of course I got all the brochures about it. They are—it was a beautiful job. They are—the people at your end obviously made a superb, superb job of them.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Of that. And I'm very proud to think that it's there. I must admit—I am long retired from the College and I only go in there occasionally because I live now fifty miles away from Oxford. Um, but, um, uh, yes, I, I, I, I think, um—you know, well, anyway. I think that—I don't even know, to be honest, I don't even know now whether they still, whether Illinois Wesleyan is still sending junior year abroad students to Pembroke.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Do you know that?

Miner: Yes, they do.

Platt: They are still doing it?

Miner: Yes, at least one a year.

Platt: Good, good.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: Because I know that the numbers have been reduced all—across the board. Not just from Illinois Wesleyan. But the number of American visiting students has, has been reduced. The problem—we did it in the 1990s because the college went through a very bad phase financially. Financially went through a bad time. And that was one of the schemes that was put in place to increase the college revenues.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: And I'll be honest with you. One of the reasons Minor, apart from all these other, may splendid other aspects of his character, I knew that he—if he came to the College, he would raise, he would raise a very considerable sum of money for the College pretty quickly.

Miner: Yes.

Platt: You know, because he was obviously a most gifted fundraiser. Yeah, so, okay?

Miner: What is the name—what is the name of the colleague who introduced you, and is he still there?

Platt: Uh. He's long retired.

Miner: Okay.

Platt: He has long retired, yes.

Miner: Okay. Thank you so much, uh, for your time and your memories.

Platt: Okay. And I wish you well. Um, um, I wish you well with this because I have to say you can gather from what I've been saying that I have a huge, huge regard for Minor. And I was very, very sad when he died so early, you know. Yeah, yeah. So.

Miner: Yes. Thank you for your help.

Platt: Okay, then. Good to talk to you.

Miner: Okay, thanks.

Platt: Not at all.

Miner: Bye.

Platt: Bye bye, then.

END TRANSCRIPT