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Footprints in the sands of time

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From the earliest age, I only knew a life with surfing in it, and I realise now that the life of surfing in my family started long before I was born, long before even my parents were born. None of the surfers in my family are known as 'surfing legends', and none are much likely to grace the walls of any surfing museum, but they were right there, back at the start, and have woven the wind, tides and seasons into their lives ever since.

My family's dalliance with surfing began in the village of St Agnes, which stretches along green valleys carved into tall Cornish cliffs. I know that for sure. What I'm less certain of, is when.

I do know, that in 1960, a surfer and surf life saver from Sydney's Northern Beaches, called Bob Head, visited St Agnes and joined the surf club, representing them to become a national champion in the SLSC national championships. Bob Head and his mate Bill Bailey left two surfboards with the surf club, going on to set up one of the first UK surf shops in Newquay, Bilbo. Before that, I've only found a record of two surfers, mates Gerrad Simmons and Trevor Greenslade, who would stand up on the enormous old hollow wooden boards used by the surf club at that time, riding the waves rolling into Trevaunance Cove, also known as Aggie Beach.

Figure 1: Doug Luke, 1967. (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

My dad, Dougy Luke, rode a board left by Bob. His mate Willie Stephens rode the one left by Bill. The third friend and budding surfer, Mike Ricks, rode a polystyrene board that was easily melted by the resin when they tried to fix it. Mike was as lean, blue-eyed and blond, as my father was broad shouldered and dark-eyed, with black curly hair and a thick moustache. They were all members of the local surf club and sold their mothers' cakes to help fund the building that still stands today. Mike's mother swam almost every day of the year at Trevaunance Cove, riding a wooden belly board whenever she could. My Gran, Connie Luke, didn't approve of any of it. She used to wait on the shore until Dougy paddled in, she was worried that surfing was going to ruin his life – it certainly changed it.

They began surfing in summer, and continued into winter, when the stream running down the beach could freeze solid. They tried everything to stay warm, wearing woollen rugby shirts and socks. Dad said he tried goose fat only once, because it made him slide all over the board. Walking down that same beach about thirty years later, dressed in five mm thick neoprene and booties, it was still bloody bitter cold. I don't know how they kept it up! I don't know what started the tradition, but up to many decades later about five of them would surf together on Christmas day without wetsuits. Maybe it was to remind them of how it all began. They got away to the sun too, roaming down the surf coast of Europe.

A nearby beach called Chapel Porth was becoming more and more popular with both locals and tourists. Dad urged that lifeguard patrols should start there, which was not initially well received, and he found this frustrating. The final straw came when he was instructed by another club member to come in from the surf when the red flag was up, a sign to indicate the beach is closed. Up to this point, he was used to making his own decisions about when it was safe or not to surf, and he liked it when it was big. Dad was never one for being told what to do, 'I

won't be told, and I won't be led,' he's been heard to say. So, he left the surf club, but he kept surfing. Around this time in Australia, the surf clubs were given powers to ensure that surfers had board licenses, and were viewed as the water police, which opened up a bit of a crack between surf clubs and surfers that is still sometimes felt today, though in St Agnes, thankfully I never perceived this as an issue. The surfers were the lifeguards, were the surf club, and most of the lifeboat crew too. They were also the skaters, with most of the surfers also skating around the village for both transport and fun. There were a lot less cars then, and Dad was known for skating from the top of the village to the beach without stopping.

Figure 2: St Agnes' first skateboarders, 1969 (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

Taking after Dad, I also liked to surf when the red flag was up. Choppy waves smashing on tall cliffs, it was a thrill. Thirty-five years later I was a grommet at Chapel Porth when one of the lifeguards asked me to come in, said I wasn't setting a good example for the swimmers. The beach was busy and I had a great deal of respect for that lifeguard, so reluctantly I agreed. Not much else kept me out of the water at that time. I was an addicted surfer, just like my father, and my mother.

In 1965, surfing began to become popular on the island of Jersey, in the British Channel Islands. Enter my mother, Maggi, who had recently returned to the islands where she had become a mother herself four years before, with her husband, Al Fraser. Perhaps an unlikely surfer, Maggi had been born slap bang in the middle of the UK in a little rural town called Didcot. Maggi left Didcot aged sixteen to become a nurse, which wasn't really for her. Nurse training sounded a great deal like boarding school, and my mother didn't like being told what to do any more than my father did. She snuck out after curfew and found herself a fine naval husband, married at a shotgun wedding, becoming a mother to my sister Melanie and my brother Tommy by twenty-one. Doing their best to conform to the expectations of society, once Al was done

with the navy, they bought a café in South London and tried to make it work, but Jersey called them back.

Maggie worked for a photographer and was posing for some bikini shots in the dunes when she was shocked to see people sitting really far out in the ocean, yet no one seemed to be worried about their safety.

She watched them.

When she saw them paddle for a wave and jump up to ride the board into the shore, she just knew it was something that she had to do. She strode straight on down to the beach in her bikini and one of the surfers asked if she would like to have a go. After paddling her out to the back of the waves he asked her if she could swim. She said yes, and he left her to tread water while he caught a wave. Fortunately, the other guy was a bit more of a gentleman. ‘Wheels’ Williams invited her onto his 9ft board and told her to paddle, hard. As they caught a wave, Wheels pulled her up to standing with him and they rode all the way into the beach. By the time they toppled off onto the sand, the course of my mother’s life had changed forever. She was now an addicted surfer.

Figure 3: Maggi, 1968 (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

Boards were not easy to come by at that time, so she had to rely on getting a second-hand board from whoever was passing through. The men said that she was too small to surf, but not much stops my mother when she puts her mind to something. Her first board was a balsa wood board,

and it was heavy as hell. She heaved it up onto her head and strutted down the beach in her white bikini, dropping it down into the water with a splash before jumping on and paddling out on her knees. She recalls sawing an arc into the big rudder of a fin to give it some rake. She also recalls a bit of chauvinism, when her board was hoisted up a flagpole by a group of local surfers (men). In her own words, she went ‘apeshit’, and it came back down.

Like my dad five years before, she didn’t have a wetsuit either. She made it through the first winter wearing a t-shirt for warmth, until her parents bought her a ‘beaver suit’, made for divers. It did not take long though for her to figure out that the best cure for the cold was to move to California, and to take the kids with them, of course.

There was a catch, however. To get their green cards, the easiest way at the time was to first move to Canada. They started off in Toronto and quickly moved to Vancouver Island. There, they surfed with ice and bears, and my mother was a founding member of the Canadian West Coast Surfing Association.

After about a year they crossed the American border and drove down to California, settling on Malibu beach as planned. Al worked as a chef and mum worked as waitress and a ‘bunny girl’. They travelled down to Mexico, surfing up and down the coast, right in the heart of surfing golden days. In my eyes, they were probably extras in my favourite movie, *Big Wednesday*, just off-camera having their own fun. One of their best friends was called ‘The Bear’. They went to Las Vegas and met Elvis Presley. They were at an American Ball when they heard the news that JFK had been shot. They were at Malibu beach when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were shot in in 1968.

In the winter of ‘69-70, it was time for things to change again. Back in Didcot, my grandfather, Bill, passed away, so they spent six months working hard and saving like hell before returning to England to be closer to Maggi senior, the grandmother I never met. They found that in the six months of saving in the US at that time, they had enough to put a deposit down on a house, equivalent to what it took their friends about ten years to earn on a British wage.

They took their brand new 6ft single-fin and went straight to Cornwall, to be close to the waves, of course. Two cheffing jobs were advertised, one in St Ives, and one in St Agnes. They spent a couple of weeks in St Ives before they first visited St Agnes to interview for head chef at the Driftwood Spars Hotel. A family friend remembers their first visit, said they stood out like nothing else. The six-foot-four, sun-bleached Al, and the exotic, dark skinned and curvy Maggi. With her long dark hair, she was rumoured to be descended from American Indians.

Maggie walked the short distance from the Driftwood Spars, down the sharp narrow hill to Trevaunance Cove, the beach of mine, my father’s and my grandparent’s childhood. On a glorious summer’s day, the Cove is a jewel of sapphire and emerald surrounded by towering cliffs and an old, ruined harbour. There were surfers out there of course – handsome ones – as my mother recalls. She grabbed her board and brand-new Californian wetsuit, and paddled out to join them. Walking back up to the pub, Maggie noticed a house for sale, convenient. The

house was called Dun Roamin', which they certainly had not, so they re-named the house Goofyfoot, which is the less usual surfing stance when you put your right foot forward. My mother is of course a goofy footer, as am I.

Goofyfoot was set to become an epicentre for the St Agnes party scene. Before that time, it was reported that the more strait-laced local surfers hung out at the Surf club and the Driftwood, and the less straightlaced hippy 'newcomers' hung out in a place called the Malthouse further up the valley, with fragrant smoke wafting from the windows. My mother reminisces that it was Goofyfoot, along with Maggi and Al's excellent set of brand new vinyl on a ten-stack player, that brought them all together.

Unfortunately, it also split Al and Maggi apart, as a striking Cornish lifeguard came around a little too often to borrow the vinyl from the recently washed-in dark-haired surfer girl. You guessed it – that would be Dougy Luke.

Rather than saying 'they lived happily ever after', I may as well skip over the next decade ... because it was a bit of a mess. Al left, but Mum struggled to decide between her passionate new love and her responsibilities as a wife and mother. She returned to Al for a short while, then lost them both.

What I will say is that both Dougy, then Maggi, were the first two people (at quite different times) to ever leave a job at the local 'tax office', the exemplification of stable work and a conventional life. Neither of them were built for quiet society. Mum tells the tale of how she won the English surf titles in Sennen, '72, and took off to sell surfboards down the West Coast of Europe with Steve Harewood; she bought a yacht with the proceeds from selling Goofyfoot and went off sailing around the Mediterranean. Dad married a lovely woman called Pam, but it didn't work out, so he went back to being a beach lifeguard... Then Mum was back, walking down the beach in her bikini, board balanced on her head. It took them until '79 to finally walk down the aisle with family all around, including Al's sisters.

I came along in 1980, and by 1981 they'd bought their first tickets to Australia. The cheapest tickets were with Air Garuda (the Eagle), which went via Bali. This trip set the patterns of what I call the swinging pendulum of my life: Cornwall, Bali, Australia, Bali, Cornwall, repeat. Chasing summers and running from winters, we lived a life that so many live now but was relatively rare back then. Travelling up and down the east coast of Australia in a Mazda van; up and down the West Coast of Europe in our orange Kombi with butterfly stickers on all the windows; boards on the roof.

All the family piled in at some point or another, my brother Tommy, my sister Melanie, their partners and all our friends. Already by then we could punctuate our holidays up and down the east coast of Australia by staying with people from St Agnes. From the former vicar of St Agnes's daughters in Sydney, to the Clay's in Port Macquarie, right up to Mike and Karen Ricks on Stradbroke Island, we've never really been that far from St Agnes and its people. Many of the earliest surfers from St Agnes still live along that same coast today.

In Bali, we travelled in the open back of a Balinese Beamo, chickens to the right, children everywhere and sarongs on all the legs. Green palms and lush vegetation surrounded all the little villages scattered along the beaches. Mum and Dad surfed the Balinese reefs together, far out to see at Nusa Dua, and after a long walk, at Uluwatu, still my favourite wave.

Figure 4: Uluwatu, 2012 (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

We stayed at Legian Inn, with Made and Oka, walking through ‘Butterfly lane’ so Mum and Dad could surf along black-sanded beach-breaks while I played with the Balinese kids on the lush, tropical shoreline. Under banana-leaf shades the Balinese women sat chatting cutting up fresh sweet pineapples which I would eat with glee, juice running down my chin. Still, the lilt of Balinese women chatting and laughing takes me right back there. Their loud exclamations, their straight, white teeth, and long, black hair. Their colourful sarongs.

When I was around three or four years old, it was right there on Legian Beach that I caught my first waves, taking it in turns to share a board with Mum and Dad, riding the warm, white water up onto the sand, before jumping off with a cheeky smile, ‘Can I have another go?’!

Mum took to the import business in about the same way she took to surfing, she jumped straight in and made it a success. She designed clothes, got them made in Bali and sold them at markets and festivals in England and Australia, from Glastonbury and Elephant Fair to the Byron Bay Markets. She made an excellent profit and re-invested until she had enough to set up a 'surf boutique' in Perranporth, a short and winding lane away from St. Agnes. She called it 'Maggic Island', after Dad's company 'Magic Carpet Cleaners'.

Figure 5: Maggic Island Surf Boutique, 1988 (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

She hired out boards and wetsuits, selling her brightly coloured designs from the 'Butterfly Collection', which she wholesaled around the UK and had just about every woman in St Agnes wearing one of her dresses or jumpsuits. Mum and Tommy set up Burli-Hi surfshop on the Gold Coast.

Mum bought a fluoro-pink wetsuit to match her hot pink

Best Ever surfboard, and surfed as often as she could, in Australia, Bali and Europe. Stevie Bunt made Best-Ever surfboards, and he and his wife Sarah were close friends of my parents. Stevie managed Magic Carpet Cleaners when we were in Australia, and Mum and Sarah surfed together often, while my grandmother Connie, looked after me very often. The 1990 recession saw an end to the surfshops and the Butterfly Collection, so we had a few cold and dismal Cornish winters before the pendulum swung back our way again.

Figure 6: Burli-Hi Surf Boutique, Burleigh Heads, Australia. Only picture we have... (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

My brother Tommy is a keen surfer and a chippie (now Master Builder) who moved to Australia in 1987. He won the first ever juniors held in the 'Cornish n' Open', as well as the South-West Juniors, retiring from competitive surfing at 18, just after coming second in the British. I always looked up to him. As a twelve-year-old, mum took me surfing in France, and I'll never forget my own first green wave, gliding all the way into shore at Anglet. I began to ask, 'Am I as keen (a surfer) as Tommy yet?' Mum would say, 'No, not yet'. Finally, from fourteen, Stevie and Sarah's daughter Nicola also started surfing and from then, nothing could keep us out of the water. Dropping our school bags by the bus stop, skating down the hill to surf and run back up again in time for the bus. Two fun summers and two cold winters passed before we emigrated to Byron Bay, Australia, so mum could surf The Pass as a sort of retirement wave.

I left home shortly after and as soon as I could, I was back swinging on the pendulum between the British and Australian summers, chasing waves and working in bars, farms and restaurants to fund my next surfing adventure. I didn't take my driving test until I was nearly twenty-one

because my skateboard got me just about everywhere I needed to go. Back in 1996 I was the only girl zooming through Byron Bay on a longboard skateboard, but I'm happy to report there are a great number of zoomers today.

I met my first love, Marc Gajardo, halfway through the millennium. I was a die-hard shortboarder and he loved the classic malibu logs. We continued the journey back and forth between Byron and St. Agnes until we were caught up in the 2002 Sari Club bombing – but that's another story. Very sadly, Marc passed away there, and as a tribute to him I started riding his longboard. With a fair bit of help from the surfing community in St Agnes, but especially thanks to Robert 'Minnow' Green, we organised a "Surf for Bali" contest on the winter solstice, with many of the UK's top surfers participating, and raising \$12,000 for a new burns unit in Bali.

Ten years later, I wrote a very cathartic book about all of this, called *Shock Waves* (Luke, 2012). When the proof copy of my book arrived, a young fellow called Kieran was helping me with some survey data related to my PhD. He filmed the emotional moment when I opened the precious little package. We had our first date a few days later and we connected through a love of surfing (and a great care for our tenacious grandmothers). My husband Kieran also loves longboarding as much as he loves riding his shortboard. Now, with two little surfers of our own, the kids are gaining confidence all the time. The last time they were taking it in turns to surf on their little green foamy, after every wave, Tristan called out: 'Can I have another go?' Connie called out: 'I wanna do it again!'. Just last week, Mum was out surfing, riding a peeler at The Pass to celebrate her 80th birthday.

So, the surfing bug continues through the generations, and it goes back further than even my dad knew. During my last visit to my great-aunt Pat, she revealed that she and my tiny grandmother Connie would sneak down to Chapel Porth with wooden belly-boards, against their father (the Coastguard)'s wishes, and they would surf together, back in the 1920s. So, Connie and Tristan are fourth-generation surfers, part of a legacy of people who don't always conform to the usual ways of society, yet who create their own communities and societies around the pursuit of surfing. A global community I am very proud to be a part of, although I acknowledge that the expansion of the surfing world is far from all positive.

The last time I went surfing out the front of Butterfly Lane in Bali, the regrowth from what had for a while been a rubbish-tip between two hotels almost resembled the lush fresh growth of the early 1980s, there were even a few butterflies. But walking back out of the surf I had a shock. For just a moment, I saw a clear vision of what this paradise island used to be like; the palm-tree lined coast with the Balinese women in the shade of the banana palms, but then I blinked and saw nothing but beachfront hotels as far as the eye could see, and tears came straight to my eyes. The normalised drugs in the surfing community that have been a danger to many surfers young and old. The crunched-up coral reefs, the plastic waste coming out of surf camps. The new frontiers we're still pushing – and there are definitely lots of surfers who really do care and are trying to do things better. I hope that we can learn from our mistakes and that there is a bright future in the waves and on the shores for future generations of surfers.

Figure 7: Maggi's 80th birthday board (Image © Hanabeth Luke)

Reference

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