

Hadyn Foster Interview

This interview is with the distinguished Haydn Foster, 7th Dan

conducted by Frank Burlingham, of the Broadland Aikido Club, UK.

abridged

Haydn Foster is the one of the founders of Aikido in England and began his study in 1958.

The interview took place at summer school in Durham (in 1999. At that stage Sensei Foster was 6th Dan, Ed). It is a great honour to be the first person ever to interview Sensei formally and it was a great pleasure, Thank you Sensei.

Frank Burlingham (F.B.)

F.B. Thank you very much for doing this, I know it's not something you like doing, it's an honour. Would you tell us about your life before Aikido, your childhood, and illness etc?

H.F. The sad part of my life is that my mother died when I was about four. We were a Welsh immigrant family actually, and came to where we live now (London), sometime in the early 1930's. Unfortunately, my mother died at quite a young age, there were four of us. I am the youngest.

F.B. How many brothers and sisters?

H.F. A brother and two sisters. We moved to Uxbridge Middlesex. We lived there for some considerable time, then moved to where the old Hut (the Dojo) is now, and there is where we settled until I got married.

F.B. When did you start practicing Aikido?

H.F. What happened was, Martial Arts were very few and far between in those days, end of '56 beginning of '57. I would say '57 - it's 40 years, could be a little either way

F.B. So you'd be about 28-29, which was quite late really to start a martial art.

H.F. How it came about is that my son came home. I would say he was 8 maybe 9, he said, "Dad there's a club opened up the road." He told me where it was, he said it was a Judo club. He said, "I'd like to go." I said, "If you want to go we'll go, I'll take you along." We went along, I walked in and I saw a group of people, not very large, they were practicing. Basically at that time (it was) a Judo club.

F.B. This was at the Hut?

H.F. At the Hut. Still the old club I'm at now from all those years ago. I watched for a while, my son was watching, taking it all in. As I remember there were 2 groups practicing Judo and this other thing, which I inquired about. When I asked, "Could you tell me what you're doing there, I'm rather intrigued?"

Self defence was a thing you that you knew about and you were quite capable of looking after yourself. It was natural - the war was bad times. Anyway they said they were doing what is called Aikido.

The name came to me I don't know why (I) thought, well if that's the name it's got there must be a lot more to it than I'm seeing, so it became, really a finding out - I had to find out. Plus the fact of my illness a few years before left me a little bit, say negative -very careful of what I did.

F.B. [You had] Tuberculosis?

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H.F. Yes tuberculosis, I thought I had to be careful. What I was concerned with was being fit and able to bring my family up. As long as I was well enough to go to work to look after my family, pay my way, that's all I was really concerned with. But I thought there's got to be something more there for me to make me think differently again. So really I was searching for something. So I made a few inquiries. The first two people I met were Ken Williams Sensei and his brother David Williams Sensei, so I asked a few questions.

F.B. Were they teaching the class?

H.F. Yes

F.B. Were they Dan grades then?

H.F. No, no they weren't. The first thing they said (they had a children's class running) was that they'd really just started. I said, "Well my son wants to join. I've made an agreement with him that if he starts, I'm paying out good cash, he stays here until he gets his black belt." What little we knew about black belts was very mystic if you like, but I said he stays until he gets it. He did but pretty soon after he gave up. It was Judo he went for.

I got talking to the William brothers, there was something about them I liked. They seemed very genuine about what they were trying to do. So I said I have a bit of a problem, I would just like to try. Well immediately, they invited me on, not this particular night but later. So I tried it and it really got to me. We had the good fortune of being taught by Abbe sensei then when I decided to join, take up membership. At that time David Williams sensei had the distinction of holding a 1st kyu in Aikido.

F.B. Awarded by Abbe sensei?

H.F. Yes, Ken Williams sensei had also been awarded his 1st kyu in Judo

F.B. Also 1st kyu in Aikido?

H.F. No, only in Judo. David was basically the man who was teaching Aikido and Ken was teaching Judo. They used to go to town to Mr Abbe's dojo in Sandwich Street. I went there many times. They started to run the club (the Hut) and invited Mr Abbe down and I started to train. I would say that Abbe sensei was the best - I would go so far as to say this, the kindest and the nicest Japanese teacher I ever met.

F.B. Would you say he was the most influential of all the sensei's you have met and practiced with, would you say he was the finest exponent you ever saw?

H.F. No, no, I wouldn't say that. He was a man of many arts, he knew so much; he was what we would call today a budo master. He knew so much about everything.

There were no names given to techniques then.

F.B. Just numbered form?

H.F. No, not even numbered. He just showed you a technique and you remembered it and practiced it.

F.B. Could he speak good English?

H.F. Very good. Well, he was an exceptional man, really. He was one of the youngest Judo champions in Japan. He was brought here if I remember properly by the London Judo Society. They were an organisation in the city, which belonged, if I remember, to the British Judo Association.

A funny thing, at the time there was a family of South Africans living in south London. The names evade me. The father was a very high grade in Judo, and his two sons also. Anyway there was a film made of Abbe sensei contesting with one of the brothers, a wonderful bout, what little I knew about Judo, but

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they decided actually that it was a draw. What I was told by the Judo exponents is that Abbe sensei really won it. Abbe sensei I would say as a man of 12 stone if that, the other guy was like a monster, it was incredible to watch, but I only saw it on film.

F.B. You hadn't practiced any other martial art before, any boxing?

H.F. Not really, I'd done a little bit of boxing, took a few thumpings. I used to get into a few scraps.

F.B. That was not through playing, that was through boxing?

H.F. Oh well, that was being a bit cheeky sometimes.

F.B. Your first sensei's would be Abbe sensei and the Noro sensei?

H.F. Well what happened, Abbe sensei trained us and I had the good fortune then to meet Pierre Chassang. He came over for a very short time. I just met him, I never trained under him. The other lads did but I didn't have the time - work commitments. Abbe sensei brought him over to do a display in Red Lion Square I think it was. He came over and then taught a few days the following week. He went back to France. Abbe sensei, having left the Judo association, had decided to start his own association. He taught Karate, the sword, Aikido and of course his main stream, Judo. He was a man of many great talents. Quite a formidable character really.

F.B. Of the present day principle coaches as the B.A.B. like to call them, you've mentioned Williams sensei, who else - who's still about in the organisation from that time?

H.F. In the original group, there was also Harry Ellis, there were others who came after, but weren't in the original group. I remember my very first meeting with Harry Ellis - we were going to Grange Farm, the summer school, my first summer school.

F.B. How long had you been practicing before your first summer school?

H.F. I had the distinction of being an orange belt holder.

F.B. So that was quite early in your career?

H.F. Somewhere around 1960, maybe before that. On our way, we took a party of children. They were going for Judo.

There were three of us, David Williams, Harry Ellis and myself. We were the only three actual Aikidoka there who were going for pure Aikido. Abbe sensei had so much going on, he left us to our own devices. He came took part with us in practice and gave instruction when he could manage. We didn't have as many hours as the rest. We went morning, afternoon and night at that time. We made progress, you know.

F.B. Okay, who do you think has been the finest over all the years - with us now or in the great dojo in the sky? Obviously O'Sensei was pretty good. Who do you think?

H.F. I suppose you speak of someone who influenced the most. I would say Noro sensei and Nakazono sensei. They were the influence.

I've seen lots of others. I mean, when we brought Saito sensei over in 1985, I think it was, I said to him through an interpreter when we were dining, sitting in the kitchen in his flat at the university, I said I thought that he stood out as the man who had given so many things that maybe a lot of people thought were missing in their practice. We had heard of the Jo. I remember practicing under Nakazono sensei with the Jo. He never did go into any depth but I remember the techniques he taught me as [if he] were doing them now. I think it was the influence of Saito sensei. I don't follow him, but I respect what he did.

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Everything I see that he does, I'll use it and change it around a bit. I'll use it because I think what he did for me he provided the missing link and that was the training with the Jo and Bokken.

F.B. How do you see the Institute in twenty years time?

H.F. Well that's a difficult one because I'd like to see a few more members. Someone is going to come along and take over. I hope they do, I hope it doesn't fold up. The foundation of the Institute goes back further than any other organization in this country.

F.B. It was the birthplace of Aikido in this country?

H.F. Yes, although people would deny that. I remember we were visiting people - we were dan grades then. The group was very close. I remember a course we went to in Sunderland. Mr Williams took one tatami and I took the other. We had enough students to have a beginners' class in one dojo and he had the senior grades in the other one. Always there were some of our own [students]. They'd find their way there, we were a very close group.

F.B. So in twenty years' time how do you see [things]?

H.F. Well I'd like to see the Institute go on. I've shown the way I feel about Aiki. I've shown the way I feel it can be done. I was a bit concerned that everything we did was a free running system. It was too free, too dysfunctional when it came to it.

F.B. Too unstructured?

H.F. Maybe, yeah, because it became maybe a dance.

I don't think that because I saw these men [aikidoka] - when they moved, the power in their movement would take you off your feet, just with the movement. A martial art, I believe it should have a solid basis from the solid state and go on from there. Lets progress through the system, don't let's miss something and jump up into a [free] system that we consider 'X' amount up.

F.B. You mentioned Saito sensei and the weapons system that brought it all together. How do you see the relationship of weapons in Aikido?

H.F. If you study them correctly you will see the relationship. Our posture is triangular we hold the weapons triangular when we make technique. It isn't hard to understand that our posture in each one of them is the same. We don't alter it.

F.B. The circle, triangle, square?

H.F. Yes exactly. I didn't finish really about the Institute.

F.B. No, sorry, please.

H.F. I would really like some of the younger people, like yourself who come along and will continue. You [Frank] go to other places to study, you bring that back to us which is a help, any rate.

F.B. I sometimes feel I overstep the mark.

H.F. No, no, it's good to have that there. You see Frank, you bring something back. Other people, , Ronny [Ron Russell], Henry when they were with me, they used to go all over. They'd come back tell me what was going on, show me and then off they'd go again. You see there was a little more knowledge.

F.B. I teach for a living, I've been on lots of courses through my trade, teaching career and Aikido. Sometimes one person will move a certain way and everything falls into place. I think people get confused that if they go to another course they're looking at another style of Aikido. Sometime they go there just to see someone put it differently. How do you feel about that?

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H.F. Yes, they come back, it may have been a better way. You see I must admit the last Japanese teacher I studied under was Saito sensei in 1985. They obviously give you something if your mind is open enough and you have enough experience.

No doubt about it you've got to have experience, you can then continue on with what they've shown you. These books that Saito sensei put out, people say, "Oh, they learnt it from a book". They didn't learn it from a book, they're good exponents. What they did was use the book as a reference and through the reference they improved their technique. Because a person can get one of those books written by the master, look at it and get everything wrong, but what satisfaction when you get it right.

F.B. As you said I go out to other organizations and you get me to show some things sometimes. There's a very fine line of controlling the dilution of what the Institute direction and fundamentals of Aikido are, as to other organizations who do it slightly different. That doesn't seem to worry you. Do you feel that's the way Aikido will develop and grow?

H.F. Yes I think so. You see somebody do something and you think, "That's a bit tidy". If it just ended up there it wouldn't be so good, but if you could say, "That's the beginning of something", the sequence rolls on then. Aikido is prolific - there's no limit to it so you only need to see one thing. If you have the good basics the rest will fall into place.

Coming back to the organization, I would like to see it carry on, but where will it all end? We have how many organizations in the B.A.B.?

F.B. I think it's about 26-27

H.F. We have Bill (sensei Smith) has always kept his Japanese connections. The man deserves everything he's got. He's worked damn hard and I admire him immensely for it. There were no short cuts for Bill. He went straight down the middle, good luck to the man. He has a sound organization, good administrators and still has good connections with Japan.

F.B. What's the funniest thing that you've seen happen on the mat?

H.F. Well we didn't use to wear anything under our hakama, only underpants no trousers. Mr Noro was holding a course in Brussels. He knew we did this, he'd never told us off about it. He was strict with us. He was always pleased to see us where ever he was if we rolled up. When Mr Nakazono re-assessed us we were presented with our certificates at the Albert Hall. This year was when Ralph Reynolds got his 1st degree. Like myself he has one of the oldest Hombu certificates in this country. Where was I?

F.B. The funniest thing.

H.F. We go to this Dojo, 4 of us: Hamish McFarlane, and Andy Allen became part of the original group.

F.B. They started at the hut?

H.F. Oh yes, a very important part of the original group. Noro sensei knowing we didn't wear anything under our hakama said, "Everybody remove hakama and fold it up." Well, you can imagine. The funniest part was that Hamish McFarlane had a pair of pyjama's on (laughing). Oh that was funny, that was. Another time Noro sensei said to Hamish, "Attack this man." Well he did and he crucified him. Noro sensei said to the man, "I told you get out of way because these people punch for real."

F.B. When I started at the hut there were lots of stories about yourself, and I believe Ronny and Henry Card, bless his soul.

H.F. Yeah, lovely man.

F.B. In the early days you used to go out and test it, go into pubs. Any truth in this?

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H.F. Yes there is really.

What we used to do at summer school, we'd break into two sides. We used to run to the pub in our zori. Mr Nakazono wouldn't let us go until the pub was nearly closed. We used to run like hell. One side would leave first and lay in waiting somewhere on the way back. When the other side arrived, there would be a free-for-all. One particular man who became a wrestler was absolutely terrified. I wouldn't have believed it, the man was in a state of fear that this would happen. I said just whack them and run. Then when we got back to the hut all the Judo blokes backed off. We were becoming something to handle - they didn't want to know about Aikido. This particular occasion we were in the hut - this would be 12 o'clock at night. Someone would say, "Right, contest time". Outside there was a big field associated with the hut. You'd name two people and they'd go out and knock hell out of one another.

F.B. Didn't you used to get hurt?

H.F. I hurt my leg one time pretty badly. I think I went over a tree. They said, "You let him beat you purposely." I said, "I didn't. I didn't go over that tree purposely." I said, "He put me over there." Anyway, Mr Abbe heard about this. He took it all in his stride and we cooled down a little bit.

F.B. This would be yourself?

H.F. Yes with Harry Ellis and Mr Williams.

F.B. I believe Ronny Russell and Henry used to do this.

H.F. I believe so.

F.B. Is there anything you would particularly like to say. Through this interview I've tried to do for the institute membership, to get a picture of the man, the governor.

H.F. I feel that the people who are still with us now. You've been with the institute quite a long time.

F.B. Yea I walked in the hut about 1975-76, I think it was

H.F. You've got various people who have been in it for years: Simon (Thackeray), Lawson (Moore) - this must be Lawson's 30 summer school. It's got to be, he came as a beginner in Barry.

F.B. Is there anything particular you'd like to say to the membership?

H.F. I'd really like to thank the ones that stayed loyal.

The gradings this afternoon, I'm very happy with that, quite happy with that. Everybody knew what they were doing. Nobody standing with a finger in their mouth. See what I mean, Frank?

F.B. Yes, yes.

H.F. It's sad that the numbers have dwindled, maybe for a reason, maybe we'll get stronger.

F.B. I think we will. One final question: how do you feel the current group within the hut and the institute compares with the spirit and camaraderie of years past, at the beginning?

H.F. It's good. The people of today associated with The Institute know a lot more than I did. Like the people in the future going for 1st dan - they will have to do a lot more than I did when I went for mine. There's no doubt about it, the spectrum has become vast even from our little organization. There's so much.

F.B. Well that's lovely. Thank you so much, it's brilliant.

H.F. Thank you (laughing).