TELLING OBSERVATION about John Major, our all but forgotten ex-prime minister, is that he is a rare example of man who, in his youth, ran away from the circus – one of his father's occupations – and instead opted to train as an accountant.

Colin Beacock, who earlier this year took over from Alan Parrish as the RCN's learning disability adviser, chewed over a couple of contrasting career options of his own before entering learning disability nursing in the early 1970s. Before becoming a nurse, he sampled what must be two of the most divergent career options imaginable – acting and pig farming.

Yorkshire-born Colin was a pupil at Kingston High School in Hull when his acting talents were first recognised. The school has a tradition of sending ex-pupils to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London, and Colin was earmarked by the school to follow their lead. Following successful auditions, he was offered a highly coveted place. But, to his family's surprise, he spurned RADA's offer and instead left school with five O-levels and enrolled at agricultural college.

'Acting came very easily to me and as a young man you don't necessarily appreciate the gifts that you have. Hence, acting was easy for me to ditch,' he says.

But as anyone who has witnessed Colin capture an audience's attention from a conference platform will confirm, his talents as a speaker have not dissipated.

Farming in the blood
Having gained a diploma in animal husbandry, Colin then spent two years as a pig farmer. Farming was in his blood, he recalls: 'As a family, we'd always had a place out in the country. My father was the richest communist in Hull.'

But, scented in the wind the coming recession, which would trigger a downturn in agricultural fortunes, he gave up pig farming and became an industrial labourer, making the blue 'optical whitener' that gives a well known washing powder its unique selling point.

In his early twenties, Colin applied to become a student nurse at Rampton Hospital, the high-security unit in Nottinghamshire.

'One of the things that caught my eye in a newspaper advertisement was that housing was provided and there was a pay supplement, which made it affordable for me to train.'

The tutors suggested that he find a post as a nursing assistant until a place was available a year later, and Colin applied to Winestead Hall Hospital near Hull. 'My experiences at Winestead Hall probably shaped my career as a nurse more fundamentally than anything else,' he says. 'The hospital was isolated, but was a very caring environment for people with a learning disability. What surprised me was that it was an all-male environment with very few opportunities for the residents to integrate with society.'

Two years later, in 1976, Colin moved to Rampton, where he spent three years gaining his RNMS. At that time, Rampton was one of only two high-security hospitals in England for people with learning disabilities who were detained under mental health legislation.
Colin Beacock, child actor and pig farmer, was recently appointed as the RCN's learning disability adviser. He told Ian McMillan about his various careers.