

Charles Alan Wood (Sh '36)

Before I begin, Bridget and I would like to welcome you all and thank you for being here today to celebrate Bridget's and my father's life. It's good that so many are here - though not totally surprising, for my father was a person with a great ability for drawing people together – just as he has done and is doing so successfully today.

So how does he manage this? What makes so many of us want to be here celebrating his life today? No doubt we all have different reasons, but I would like to start off by considering some of the ideas and principles which drove him on – which I believe underpinned the affable and generous host he was to become. As well as a generous host, I would like to take this opportunity of celebrating him as a person of some steel and determination – for whom sociability was a conviction, as well as a natural gift.

The younger son of a miller with strong Quaker principles, and a gentler mother more in touch with the culture of her times, he was sent to schools which broadly represented progressive alternatives to traditional Public Schools – the Downs and Bryanston - both run by charismatic individuals with eccentric and sometimes anti-establishment views. For both of these headmasters – Geoffrey Hoyland at the Downs and Thorold Coade at Bryanston, he retained a life-long regard.

One rather surprising legacy of my father's time at these schools was his discovery of Withyham, and I will allow him to speak for himself on this subject, quoting a short memo which Bridget and I discovered just a few days ago:

Withyham first came into my life in 1934. The Society of Friends, the Quakers, had taken four men off the Embankment and set them up in a smallholding in a village called Withyham, in East Sussex. I assume the connection with the Bryanston Pioneers came through Frazer Hoyland: anyhow a spell on New Hope Farm during the school holidays became very much part of the Pioneers' menu. It was notorious as one of the tougher choices.

He goes on to describe the four men they found living and working there:

The four had one thing in common; they were broke and had finished sleeping on long seats on the Embankment where the Friends had picked them up. In those days anyone who fell on hard times landed with a bump and there was precious little to help them back on their feet again.

My father's views were now moving to the Left, and arriving at Oxford, he became a member of the University Communist Party, with other young radicals, such as Dennis Healey. At Oxford, he was part of a generation who came to maturity knowing that sooner or later there would be a war to defeat Fascism, and this was one of the defining features of their lives.

Although his father had been a pacifist in the First World War, my father joined the Oxford University Air Squadron, and after completing his Finals in 1939 was soon training at Cranwell. From here, but for a freak motor accident in the blackout, which put back his training a couple of weeks, he would probably have joined Bomber Command, where his chances of survival would have been slim, rather than 204 Squadron of Coastal Command,

where they were better – and where beginning the war as a pilot-officer, by the end of the war he was commanding his squadron – still only a young man in his twenties.

It was as a young pilot officer too that he married my mother in 1940 - an event overshadowed by their learning on the day of the wedding of the death in the Battle of Britain of his Best Man and best friend from Cranwell – Brian D’Arcy-Irvine – requiring his brother Peter to step in at the last minute.

One feature of 204 Squadron – stationed at various times in Scotland, Iceland and West Africa – was the group of friends and colleagues he gathered about him, with whom he remained in contact for the rest of their lives. One of these was the writer Brian Inglis, who always claimed that he was admitted to the squadron more for his prowess at the bridge table, than for his prowess in the air. Later, Brian’s flat gradually became another kind of centre for my father – a place where he sometimes stayed when in London – and the focus for a group of friends and writers – such as Katherine Whitehorn and Bernard Levin.

Following the war, my father joined his father’s company, Hovis, as its Advertising Manager, a post he held for about 16 years, before moving to the same post with Guinness. He had never much wanted to work in an office, and I will let him speak again from the same short memo about the rather unusual next step he took:

After the war, I found myself struggling to come to terms with life in civvy street, wholly dependent on my job in London to support my emergent family yet yearning to have at least one foot in the country. I used to rush to the property columns in the *Farmer and Stockbreeder* and one day up came the word I had forgotten for so long ... Withyham. And so of course I had to have a look and soon after bought myself a rural foothold, just within range of that London office.

For many years, Forstal Farm bore some similarities to New Hope Farm – tough, rigorous and very cold. One of the men he had met on New Hope Farm, Ted, was even now the postman, and a regular caller. By coincidence, my father’s landlord, the 9th Earl De La Warr, with whom he was soon on friendly terms, had been a pacifist like his own father, and I am told, the first hereditary peer in England to join the Labour Party. Here, at his own ‘New Hope Farm’ – my father – with his new wife Jean – raised chickens, pigs and a field of wheat, often rising early to work out of doors, before a full day in his office in London. For many years he kept his demob suit for this purpose, and one of my defining memories of him is of a tramp-like figure, out tending his farm at all hours of the day and night, driven by some elemental force, which perhaps even he did not fully understand. For me, these outdoor images are stronger than those of him later in life – in more urbane surroundings; and it’s important for me at least, to hold on to this memory of a very dedicated man – living his dream – whom I always felt was not far beneath the surface of the more polished exterior of his later years.

After the war, my father joined his father’s company, Hovis, as its Advertising Manager, a post he held for about sixteen years, before moving to the same post with Guinness. I don’t believe my father was ever particularly keen on business – in any conventional sense of the word - but after his early misgivings he did succeed in making a successful accommodation. These were both unusual companies – with strong principles and identities of their own – through which he began to develop his own interests – commissioning books and

educational films, joining the Board of the Philomusica of London, and creating a network of friends in journalism and the arts. One summer, Bridget and I appeared as children in the Hovis film made just down the hill from this church and first shown in the Witherham village hall. With Guinness, there were films with Paddy Nolan – who became a close friend, and strong links with Glyndebourne and the Wexford Festival – leading to friendships with Brian and Victoria Dickie (*former Bryanston parents*), who were key figures at both of those. At this time he came to know the defence lawyer Sidney Kentridge; and was to become a resolute supporter and follower of the cellist Gemma Rosefield – who will be playing here today.

It was relatively late in his career that he saw the opportunity to move to Guinness Overseas – a neglected part of the company – seizing the opportunity to travel, enjoying the informality of life away from the more constrained atmosphere of the Guinness Board.

Challenged with the view that he had compromised his political views, he maintained that his key motivation was always ‘people’ and his actions were consistent with this belief. He successfully opposed any involvement of Guinness in apartheid South Africa, for example, became an advocate of positive discrimination around the world, and fought a rear-guard action against Guinness becoming a mere asset in a financial game, a campaign which he was unfortunately ultimately to lose.

Recently I have encountered his correspondence with various government ministers concerning the privatisation of nationalised industries, which he opposed, and especially his concern with the very large salaries of those placed at the head of those industries, and the bonus culture which began to prevail.

After his retirement from Guinness, he had no desire to stop working, bringing his administrative skills first to Riverside Studios – where he worked closely with David Gothard and Jackie Hall – and then Sadler’s Wells – where it is a testament to the man that the team that he worked with most closely – Jan Eade, Tim Tubbs and Theresa Beattie – are all here today. He continued to serve on various boards – including the Stroke Association – where by now in his 80s, he stood in for a period as its CEO, gladly enjoying the opportunity of once again being fully and usefully employed.

Another community he was able to continue to nurture and develop was that of his grandchildren – to whom he gave unstinting encouragement and support.

With his love of freedom, he was never particularly suited to marriage as an institution, but he remained intensely loyal and supportive of my mother, acting as her primary carer during the last years of her life. Later, Michele happily took on with equal care and dedication when he eventually came to need the same level of care and support himself.

To the end, he was very positive in his relationship with the world and other people. He worked hard for us to be here. If he had been here himself, he would have been the first to welcome us and the last to say goodbye.

I would like to end this attempt at summing up the life of such a busy, complex and active man by quoting from a text I received on the day that he died, from someone who had known him well, at various times ‘He was a good person, and was kind and generous,’ they wrote. What better epitaph could a man receive?

*Nick Wood (OB and Alan's son)
as read at Alan's funeral*