

Tribute to John Francis Northridge – ‘Pa’

Introduction

I would first of all like to thank you all for joining us here today. I know my Father would feel very proud of you all for taking the time to pay your respects and he'd be honoured to that you are here to celebrate his life with us.

There have been tears of sadness in the last couple of weeks since we lost my Father, we've been through anger and dismay over the way his health and faculties were being eroded to the point he couldn't recover from a fall. BUT gradually this has been replaced with nostalgic thoughts and smiles, for the way my Father, with his many idiosyncrasies, has left a permanent mark on his family and many friends.

Childhood

Born 20th May 1932 in Ealing West London. A Taurean, but I'll come back to that, but with the loss of his Father at age 4 and whilst no doubt still grieving, dumped into a boarding school at the same tender age, life must have been tough. He didn't really talk much about his childhood so I know little beyond his life between boarding school and his extended family in West London.

Into Adulthood & Rowing

However, during his teens at St Paul's he discovered the sport of rowing which proved to be an enduring passion and pastime throughout his entire life. John Pitchford and Mike Gleeson delivered a wonderful obituary to Pa on the BBRC website that elaborates on his many achievements in the world of rowing. His friends from LRC are currently writing an obituary that will focus on his achievements as a young man in the 1950s.

I'm sure the LRC obituary will exclude his one night in a police cell, after a regatta in Belgium, when post celebration dinner, he and a few fellow wags thought it a good idea to climb up the front of the British Consulate in Gent and relieve them of their Union Jack only to be caught by the local Gendarme and locked up! ☹

Across the 2 obituaries you will all get a much fuller picture of Pa's rowing career as an Elite and Veteran Oarsman than time allows me to expand on now. However, I was tickled by the 'very rounded' portrayal of my Father in the BBRC obituary and good to know that his demeanour as perceived in some circles as that 'placid, unassuming chap' is truly known beyond his immediate family and a fair few startled pedestrians and motorists down the years! ☹

Rowing had to go on hold for a couple of years due to.....

National Service

My Father had some interesting anecdotes from his time in the Army in places such as Cyprus and Egypt, being scared witless in the back of a truck by an RAF Meteor Pilot who flew so low over them he ripped the radio mast of the truck, to being withdrawn from the firing range for being an RASC Sergeant with better marksmanship skills than the Soldiers in the Brigade of Guards he was attached to; and finally on making Senior NCO, an achievement for a conscript, entering a Senior NCO's mess full of gentleman twice his age who often sort him out to help with reading and writing!

Career

Post National Service, my Father worked in refrigeration for a while before moving in to Financial Services. He specialised in the Life Assurance business, passing CII exams and had a long and successful career with the Phoenix. Thinking back the period when he operated out of Fleet Street and King William Street, driving his office to place more Phoenix business through the City Brokerages than anybody else was when he got the biggest buzz, and I remember in my teens, him, on more than one occasion returning home from the City well and truly 'buzzed'! ☺

His next role fronting Phoenix's International business seemed to be a good period in his career, flitting between London and Guernsey managing the off-shore business.

Once Sun Alliance got their mitts on the Phoenix the lustre seemed to disappear, but being shipped out to Croydon is enough to take the shine off anyone! ☹ It was then all about serving out his time and protecting that now much mourned and envied, final salary pension.

And into retirement

On taking early retirement, Pa taught for a while at the CII in Sevenoaks and West Kent College in Tonbridge. And of course spent a good deal of his spare time in a rowing boat.....

My Father loved his music, and music of all sorts, Classical, Jazz, and even some of 'that modern stuff – you like!' Mum and Dad loved dancing together over the years, putting Linda and I to shame with their slick moves on the dance floor at our wedding.

He took up the trombone, played in a local band, including a few concerts. There was a downside, in that his teeth weren't the best and my Mother is convinced that blowing the trombone finally blew out his poor old front teeth! ☹

Politics and Thrift

My Father politics were, ever so slightly right of centre! ☹ Both Mum and he were active with the local Tory party, fund raisers, you name it. They were involved. On the debating front it would have been far more interesting and lively had we lived in a marginal constituency rather than 'true blue', leafy East Sussex, because had a 'Red Rosette' appeared on our door step the only blue thing around would have been the language judging by the response most Labour Politicians got who appeared on our TV! ☹

A keen Thatcherite, he was very proud to have nominated her in the late 70s when surveyed about the next Tory party leader. Thatcherite Consumerism, however, didn't catch on with him, items when purchased were meant to last a life time and I've often thought his famous pauses for thought were down to 'can I get it cheaper somewhere else OR preferably NOT make the purchase at all'! ☹

To be clear he was never mean with his family or friends.

Family and Friends

My parents had been together for 60 years and married for 58. Becoming a father 54 years ago, he put the single child thing down to 'being so exhausted from creating such per perfection, he couldn't manage it again' – Flattery and charm like that I'm sure got him in and out of trouble many times over the years! ☹

Richard is the 3rd Northridge 'only boy' in a row, it is up to you son to 'break the mould' – No pressure! ☹

Mum and I were looking through all the photographs last weekend and what started as quite a sad exercise became uplifting because it made us realise what a full life Pa had had before his illness, great trips, family do's, my parent's drunken cavorting on the Kent and Sussex dinner party circuit and the odd regatta or fifty, both here and abroad.

He became a very proud Grandfather, finally! In 2003, I remember him clearly sitting on the sofa in the house in Greenwich, cuddling Richard and getting him off to sleep in his arms. Later on, he could be 'Grumpy Grandpa', scowling at slow progress eating, but Richard, he was immensely proud of you and loved you being there and talking to you on the phone on a Sunday about school, hockey and whatever else you were up to.

The end and in tribute

Pa's last few years, like his first, were tough, prostate cancer, onset dementia, diabetes – it all came at him – apart from the odd curse, what else would you expect? He handled the whole thing with quiet dignity. Before I pay a final tribute to my Father, I'd like to pay tribute to my mother, who in the Autumn of her years found herself in the role of prime carer, battling hard to keep Pa at home and going toe-to-toe with Social Services and the Medical Profession, whatever it took to give him a quality of life he'd never have got in a nursing home and keep him in the home he'd so loved for 36 years – Thank-you Mum.

A final anecdote from towards the end of his life; on arrival at a nursing home in Burwash for respite care, which he accepted with good grace, we sat having lunch and a lady sitting no further away from the front row burst in to song and after a while, bearing in mind by this time Pa was very quiet and frail; he looked up, did the Northridge scowl; and as clear as a bell announced to the entire room 'I hope it won't be too bloody long, before they come and take her away'; the old Pa in full flood! ☺

So there you have it, John Francis Northridge loving:

- Husband
- Father, Father-in-law
- Grandfather
- Uncle and Cousin
- And friend and mentor too many both in and outside the world of rowing.

Finally, I'll leave to reflect on my Father, the ultimate Taurean, Taurus the Bull. And what does a Bull need? Plenty of:

- Wide open space
- Female company
- Good food and drink, especially Wine

And very definitely a sign on the gate that clearly states 'Beware of the Bull – Placid until Roused'! ☺

THANK-YOU!