

Eulogy by Peter Vickers at JFV's funeral , 11<sup>th</sup> October 2013

My mother, my sisters and I and our whole family greatly appreciate the messages we have received during the last three weeks. It has been very moving to read so many testimonies about Dad's impact on the lives of others, and to sense the respect and affection in which he was held by so many. We think that he would have been genuinely astonished at what has been said about him.

As far as we are concerned, today is all about thanksgiving. We miss him enormously, and wish that he hadn't gone, but we are grateful for the wonderful life that he lived, for his extraordinarily good health and vitality, for his abiding interest in and care for everyone he met, especially his family, and that we have had the chance to live alongside him.

We have had some cracking tributes to my father. One of the church wardens who are helping us today described him as "an upstanding and an outstanding man". An American friend has written of "the sheer genuineness of the man, a total absence of guile... [an] extraordinary harmony of life and conviction – the absence of any discernible gap". Another friend commented that "many of us want to try to make a difference. Your Dad very definitely did".

On a lighter note was one from another of the congregation here today, who is now running a very successful recruitment company, but who in childhood some years ago was a next door neighbour of my parents. He wrote: "He was such a lovely sincere guy. With my football and general sporting skills as a child, I got to know him probably more than an average 8 year old should. I can, with authority, confirm he had the patience of a Saint, not once, in over 20 years, raising his voice at me for kicking the ball over into the garden."

Perhaps I should explain, before we go any further, about the coffin. As you can see it is made of wool. These coffins are promoted as being environmentally friendly and indeed they are; but that's not the sole, or even main, reason for our choice. The wool used in this coffin has been processed and converted by one of our long standing customers, AW Hainsworth & Sons at Stanningley (another family business, 225 years old, in its 7<sup>th</sup> generation). So the wool in this coffin has been spun in one of Vickers Oils' wool processing lubricants – YARNOL FF, renowned and used the world over. We thought it would give Dad particular satisfaction to go out of this world surrounded by traces of one of our own products!

I wonder if one way of looking at my father would be to consider him as an eye witness to a variety of bits of twentieth century history.

- Born three months after the start of the First World War, he remembered hearing his uncles describing some of their experiences in the trenches;
- at Gresham's School in Holt, Norfolk he was a couple of years behind the composer, Benjamin Britten, who used to play the piano at house prayers! [*Incidentally, the tune "Woodlands", to which we will sing the hymn "Tell out my soul", was written by the music master at Gresham's, Walter Greatorox. Woodlands was the name of Dad's school house*]
- While at Cambridge, he studied economics under John Maynard Keynes (and freely admitted that he'd been lost by the end of the first lecture)

- In America in the early 1940s, Dad drove then Senator (later President) Truman on part of the Senator's fact finding tour about wartime industrial production in the USA.
- In the 1950s, living in both Switzerland and Holland, working across Europe (and learning some French, German and Dutch), my parents helped to contribute to one of the greatest achievements of the last sixty years: the healing of bitter hatred between Germany and its neighbours, especially France, which helped to underpin the creation and growth of the ECSC and EU. Moreover, in Holland, Dad developed one of his most treasured friendships - with Dr Frederik J "Frits" Philips, head of the famous Philips electrical business, a friendship which lasted to the end of their lives.
- Later, in the 1970s as president of the British lubricants trade association, and in parallel with Britain joining the EEC, Dad initiated the first contacts with sister organisations in the rest of Europe and the United States that has led to strong and important links in daily use today. Uniquely, as president of the trade association, he made time to visit every one of the hundred or more member companies around the UK.
- Even more importantly (!) he attended two of the greatest sporting triumphs ever seen in Yorkshire – the North's victory over the All Blacks at Otley in 1979, and (two years later) the legendary Headingley Ashes Test with a rather shell shocked Australian friend
- And in 1989 my parents were, as tourists, in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, on the day before the People's Liberation Army moved in to clear the student protests.
- Quite a catalogue!

Dad was called up to the US Armed Forces during the Second World War but was rejected because of his eyesight and instead spent the war working in morale building programmes across America, especially assisting wartime production; for example at the Boeing aircraft factory in Seattle, perhaps his favourite city in the world . Those years gave him an abiding love of the United States.

His major responsibility was organising the transportation of large groups of civilian volunteers across the United States. During wartime, driving speed limits were restricted to 35 mph, to save petrol; priority on trains was given to those in uniform; domestic air travel had hardly started. So it wasn't an easy task, but his administrative skills and tenacity came to the fore.

I think those years in America were absolutely decisive in his life, and were a constant reference point thereafter. There he learnt to take **final responsibility** for projects; but also to **work in teamwork**; to make **friends** with people, not just to make a contact; unashamedly to **reach out to the leaders** of any organisation; and to **expect the possibility of an unanticipated, at times seemingly miraculous, intervention in events**. He carried these lessons and habits for the rest of his life.

So who was he?

Well, most of us knew him as a "**people person**". He loved meeting people and was genuinely interested in them and in their families. But it hadn't always been like this: he lacked self confidence at school and was painfully shy as a teenager. What a contrast with how he was later!

People remember him vividly and with appreciation. He had a real consideration for everyone he met, from neighbours whom he would greet while pushing his wheeled walking aid up the street, through the stewards at Headingley cricket ground, and strike workers who were (wrongly, as it was

shown) picketing our premises during the “winter of discontent” of 1979, to the crews of the Caledonian MacBrayne ferries on beloved Scottish holidays. I think it was the sincerity of my father, and his innate courtesy, which won people’s respect.

His friends and acquaintances, from around the world, were legion. I am privileged to have grown up knowing an extraordinary range of interesting people. They are far too many to mention but happily, some of you are here today.

Most precious to him, of course, was our family. He enjoyed a lifelong romance with my mother; they were in love with each other for almost 70 years and would have celebrated their 66<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary next month. As his children and grandchildren (and now great-grandchildren) have grown, he has followed our doings with a mixture of amusement, amazement and sometimes bewilderment – but always giving us his care, advice and support.

It was not all sugar; there was steel inside, and he was prepared to confront what he regarded as not good enough – whether in terms of moral behaviour or of planning and organisation. He was ready, too, to challenge others to expand their hearts and thinking beyond their immediate concerns to the needs of the world. He never lacked moral courage to stand up for what he believed.

But it is equally true that he was spontaneously generous. Go to him with a problem and you would come away encouraged, with sound advice, a sense of his personal interest in you, and - very often – some practical, often financial, help.

He was a **naturally capable administrator**, a skill used first in the full time, unpaid work with Moral Re-Armament (MRA) in which he was engaged until the age of 46, and then in the running of the family business and in his involvement with numerous trade associations and civic bodies.

He carried on his work, organising global travel for MRA groups, post war. Indeed, it remained a lasting interest - I remember him relaxing, sitting with the big, old ABC guides which listed every flight in the world, planning how he could get from a to b via the most interesting route and connections! He used to say it was his version of doing a crossword.

Moreover, he enjoyed the *mechanics* of travel. One of his last trips to the US was on Concorde, which seriously impressed him, but his first love, I think, was ships. Dad loved going down to the engine room of the vessels and chatting to the Chief Engineers about Vickers’ stern tube oils! My parents had an unwritten deal about their Scottish motoring holidays; they could go on as many boats as he liked, provided they would stop whenever she wanted to do some bird-watching.

In 1960 he returned to Leeds and took on the running of the family business, manufacturing and marketing special lubricating oils for the worldwide textile and shipping industries. He and his brother David and his cousin Gurney, were the fourth generation of the family in the business which started in 1828 (and is still going strong today). Dad saw his role as leading a team of skilled managers and Directors, who over the next forty years oversaw the company’s emergence as a global leader in its markets.

Dad was around long enough to see the cycle of boom and bust at least three times. He was a Director of the company and / or of an associated trust for 60 years; and led the company through its fastest growth, its deepest slump and its subsequent recovery. To the end his greatest interest

was in the people associated with the firm – customers, suppliers, shareholders and (especially) current and former employees and their families.

But as well as leading the business towards its present position, my father was also **concerned about industry's wider role**. It is perhaps hard to remember now just how divided Britain was in the 1960s and 1970s. Class conflict had been a feature of British industrial society for more than a century, and still was so. Many thought that the only way to make good the injustices of the past was by structural change in society and in ownership. But my father always felt that this would be inadequate by itself. He believed that there could be what he described as an additional, “x” factor – the possibility of a change in behaviour and motivation, on the part of owners, management and employees alike (and he made common cause with trades unionists who felt the same). Through this, he believed, a new spirit of teamwork, common purpose and vision could come in and transform industry and indeed society.

In particular, he had a deep belief in the special role that women and men of the lubricants industry could play. “Since” he said “we are the people with the expertise to reduce friction between warring surfaces in industry – shouldn’t we also be the people to help society do the same?”

In the 1980s, the then Vice Chancellor of Leeds University visited the firm and said at the end “I understand that you aim to lubricate not just fibres and machines but society too.”

So what was at the heart of this belief? What led him to have such faith that human behaviour could change; and to hold, through thick and thin, to a vision of a better world?

It was his Christian faith – informed by his own personal experience.

He grew up as a Methodist – Roscoe Place Methodist Church in Chapeltown had been founded by his great-grandfather, his grandfather and some of their close friends, and the family continued to worship there. *Incidentally, during the last 40 years, Dad worshipped much more often here in St Giles, an Anglican church and greatly appreciated the friendship of many, especially in the Supper Club. It was always the practise of faith, not its theology, which interested him.*

His father and uncle ran the local Boys’ Brigade battalion (*Some of you will have recognised the BB anthem, “Will Your Anchor Hold?” played as we came in*). Many of his parents’ siblings’ on both sides were church or medical missionaries in Burma and China; others concentrated on social work in Leeds. So there was a family background of faith, mission, internationalism and service. But that did not mean that everything was perfect either at home or in his own life!

The turning point for him came in 1933, while skiing with family friends (the Appleyards, whom some here will remember owned one of the biggest garages in Leeds). Margot Appleyard lent Dad a book about a group of people who sought to apply their faith in a very practical way, by taking time in silence each day not only to pray but also to search for God’s will for their lives; and then to obey any such thoughts that might emerge. Dad decided to try this; it was the start of a daily practise which lasted for the next 80 years and which was at the base of most things that he sought to do.

Dad’s experiment in 1933 with “quiet times” of prayer, bible reading and listening, led to changes in his behaviour so intriguing that the rest of his family soon made the same experiment. In turn that

resulted in a change in the way in which my grandfather ran the business and which, two generations on, still applies today.

From then on his own experience of the divine leading which he found in silence, and its consequences on our business and our people, became the basis of the message that he gave to everyone he met, from the post man to the Prime Minister. He saw our company as sort of test-bed or even prototype for a new model of industry. My father believed (in his words) “that people working in a company of our size can create a pattern that our country, and other countries, will need for the future care and provision for all”.

Over the decades Dad came to the conclusion that, in his experience, “what is morally right has always been economically viable”.

In 1972 he wrote about “an experience of faith and divine wisdom [which] is like a power-digger that scoops through the surface soil of petty prejudice, the clay of entrenched sectional attitudes and finally exposes the rock of character on which something solid can be built”... “it is the way to build a new society [and] is available to anyone, the moment they decide to change in attitude and behaviour”. That had already been his belief and experience for forty years, and would remain so for the next forty.

My parents and their contemporaries are part of the so-called “greatest generation” – the men and women who served, in one way or another, their countries in war; and then came home and built the peace. They stayed true to their values of personal responsibility, duty, loyalty and faith and added to them, zeal; zeal to build a different society based not just on structural change but also underlying changes in attitude and behaviour in every person, one by one, starting with themselves.

As he lived in faith, so he died in faith; and I believe that there is a great reception for him on the other side.

Peter Vickers