

## Chapter 6 Social Life

**Derek Bowers** I formed an early friendship with Derek Bowers whose outlook on life seemed identical to my own. Is it possible to make a laugh out of any situation? If so, then let's do it. His birthday is just three days before me so Derek is also a Virgoan and I think this is a strong characteristic of people born at this time of the year. Derek's wit was always much faster than mine, and his retorts were instantaneous. I remember at Raymond Review Bar, he capped the comedian's line. The comic tried his drop dead routine, but Derek captured the entire audience until, after a row of Derek' ripostes the professional had to capitulate.

**Blind Date** Sent to the Berkhamsted office for a year, I was to be the telephone operator and I thought I was good. In those days you had to make contact with the operator who would physically plug you into the line you required. Quite regularly I was dealt with by this lady with a peaches and honey voice. She sounded just so seductive that the day revolved around her taking my call. Eventually I plucked up courage to ask her out and she agreed to go to the cinema. Whoopee! It was snowing and I was early. At the stated hour this rather ordinary looking lady arrived; not quite how I had imagined her and maybe she had a similar thought. Nevertheless into the back row and within minutes she got to work on me.

**Parental advice** Looking back it is a shame my father did not instruct me in conduct with the ladies: certainly advice to avoid direct action would have considerably shortened my learning curve. One of my first passions was Patricia Woollacott a lovely who would grace The Sweat Box weekly dance at New Mill. She would usually allow me one dance: full stop. I did not have the sense to realise that a less

attractive target would be so much more likely to yield results.

**Telephone** It does not happen now, but at this time crossed lines were a frequent occurrence and you could eavesdrop on a conversation. One that comes to mind related to a chap ordering a very high specification length of 2mm copper tube coated with a material of which I had never heard. When the storekeeper went to see if it was in stock I left a decent interval before saying “Fred, we only have 3/4inch galvanised” - little things.

**Round Table** A friend, Johnny Mewha, told me I should join Round Table and he would propose me if I so wished. I agreed and Johnny duly put my name forward. He was somewhat embarrassed to tell me that I had been blackballed, the reason being that a number of the members feared for their wives (I know this is hard to believe when you look at Round Table activities these days). Nevertheless, Rotary took me on since presumably I would be performing a good service if I could amuse some of their wives to leave them free for their mistresses. This was altogether too boring and vocational service I thought was dreadful. All this led me on to the 505 sailing dinghy lot, which was a sort of travelling rugby club. Derek subjected himself to crewing with me. Out on his trapeze, I've dumped him in the water in most of the seas around Europe, but he still came back for more. Perhaps the worst episode was in Denmark where I dropped him at every mark of the race; it was also in Denmark that we had our finest hour, coming second in a world championship race.

In a paragraph relating to being black-balled perhaps I can relate a 2018 event. I was proposed and seconded for the local Probus club and attended several very enjoyable lunches. News has just reached me that I have been black

balled there by four members on the grounds (1) I was black balled from Round Table 65 years ago and (2) I am a ladies man (very sinful – it is a men only club)

**245 Club** Jack Cavill lived at 245 Tring Road, Aylesbury and had a large swimming pool in the garden. Since Jack was well endowed, both financially and physically, the pool was a magnet for attractive ladies: that, in turn, caused Jack's pals to drop in on him unannounced. We called the place the 245 Club. On this particular night we had prior knowledge that Jack had arranged a bathing beauty parade. However, when Derek, Jerry Gates and I tried to gain admittance this was denied. Now Jerry was then a television aerial erector and had ladders on the van in which we had arrived. Lights were going on and off in a bedroom and I concluded that this was the changing room. Now it does not take long to fathom that, with ladders, there was an obvious course to follow. Atop the ladder the three of us had a wonderful show of the damsels one by one. I think it was the sixth one who seemed shy and moved into a corner to change. This necessitated me inserting a hand into the fanlight to squeeze the curtain back a fraction for an unimpeded view. She saw and blew the whistle but Jack then relented and we were admitted to the performance proper.

Jack's son John carried on in his father's vein and had a string of glamorous girlfriends. Usually the relationships petered out when the girls started issuing maternal noises. I remember one stunning lady with a magnificent figure. I must have spent half an hour pleading with her not to have breast reduction surgery. Some years later Jerry Gates was taken up for a joyride from Booker Airport near High Wycombe. The plane crashed and Jerry was killed.

**Hunt Balls** The Vale of Aylesbury Hunt Ball was held at Hazell's Hall for what turned out to be the last time. The reason was that a raffle prize was awarded in the shape of six two pounds bags of flour. Needless to say, as missiles, these caused complete mayhem. I seem to recall that Pat Eddery had a particularly good arm. The National Hunt Ball at The Grosvenor in Park Lane was to be a glittering occasion. However there was a strike of some of the staff and guests had to run the gauntlet of the picket line to enter the building. The dancing had just started when drops of water started to penetrate the ceiling. The drips became a stream and the management provided a huge plastic laundry bin on castors to catch the fluid. Hunting people are used to adversity and it was not long before one of the debutantes was cast into the brown liquid. Meantime the band changed the tune to "Dancing in the Rain" and all did circuits of the waterfall including, Princess Anne, the Princess Royal. (The strikers turning on bath taps, having inserted plugs, caused the problem).

**Rosemary** Margaret has a life long friend from her school convent days. Her South African husband Jack, arranged a honeymoon in a most romantic hotel on the Garden Route, situated on a peninsula jutting out into the ocean. Rosemary pointed out that Jack (who tragically died suddenly in 2015) seemed to know his way round the buildings very well: his response was that he did because he had spent his first honeymoon there too! Jack was a magician and he performed close-up magic for the Queen's table. An aide supplied a coin for her Majesty and Jack did his coin disappearing and re-appearing trick. He then told the monarch that she would know it was her coin because it had her face on it. She left clutching his rather slim balloon dog having been advised that it was a corgi going to a fancy dress party as a poodle. They have two high achieving daughters, Caroline and Susie. Aged just 16 Caroline

qualified as a glider pilot. She was eyeing a career as a spy but eventually decided on Geo-Physics. At Durham University in 2008 she came out as the top student with a First Class Honours degree in Geoscience and won all the prizes. Within a couple of months she found herself principal advisory geo-physicist on a ship surveying the route for a fibre optic cable from Cornwall to Nigeria. Here she was, aged 22, the only female on the vessel, telling twelve men what they should, and should not, do – sounds like Rosemary's daughter. Susie is very flamboyant and has floated about on stage as a magician's assistant. Now she is in the world of television and seems to be responsible for buying advertising which takes her round the world.

**Phantom Train** I acquired a new fangled tape recorder with eight-inch spools upon which I recorded all manner of special effects sounds. My favourites were the trains. At this time, close to where I was living in Weston Turville, was the Chequers Inn. From the front parlour you could see a couple of hundred yards down Church Lane. We arranged an extension lead from this room, over the roof of the pub and along the hedgerow: at the footpath we passed the cable in a small trench and then along the roadside hedge for one hundred yards. On a summer's evening we could watch customers approach and played the Flying Scott at full pelt for a few seconds before turning the sound down. On them entering the premises we ridiculed their talk about hearing a train – the line was fully a mile away. We had great fun with one particular regular at the inn. He would go towards the speaker and as it went quiet would walk away and then return for the next blast. At the turn of my finger on the control I eventually had him climbing the bank on the far side of the road, then running towards the speaker then back up the bank again – repeatedly, He came in for a drink completely flummoxed.

We also did the same trick from Evett's Dairy in Park Street, Aylesbury. The difference here was there was a railway line and level crossing but Dr. Beeching had closed it a couple of years before. It got people's attention. The train effect became well known and there was a front page headline in the Bucks Herald about "The Phantom Train of Weston Turville".

**Garage Lady** I was instructed to sell a cottage on the Green at Wingrave and the key could be collected from the local garage. Whilst quite happy to go unescorted, the lady manning the garage insisted on closing the pumps and coming with me. There was a large cumbersome lock: having undone it she then removed the key and we entered. At this point she inserted the key from the inside re-locking it, declaring that we did not wish to be disturbed - scary!

**Tasty trout** A competitor of mine was the firm Hamnett Raffety whose offices adjoined mine. Their manager was a keen fly fisher but he made sure not to give me any of his catch. His benevolence did extend to a member of staff Anne; never have the fish tasted as good as the ones she cooked for me.

**Great Train Robbery** Between 2.30 and 3.0am on the 8th August 1963, returning from Ross-on-Wye, I traversed the Oxford/Aylesbury Road and quite possibly crossed the train robbers going in the opposite direction, from Cheddington to Leatherslade Farm, Oakley. At this time the regular lunching venue for Derek and I was the Millwrights Arms, which happened to be the nearest pub to the Crown Court where the accused were charged. The pub trade was therefore swelled from the ranks of the Press, the Police, Lawyers for both sides and some of the accused. All these types like to party, and party they did. At this time Derek was building a close of houses at Cheddington. He proposed

to call it “Robbers Ride”. The Council rejected this for “Breachwell Close”. Later I had to auction the premises in Linslade where Ronnie Biggs had been held. I do believe that his signature scratched in the wall of the cell did inflate the price.

**Richard and Peggy Salmon** It was at this time at the Millwrights Arms that I encountered Richard, married to Peggy, and we have been close friends more or less ever since (there have been times when Peggy quite understandably sent me to Coventry but she invariably relented after a year or so). They live next door to us and Richard features in various activities which I recite in this book. The Salmons witnessed the event at the moon which catapulted me on the astronomy path.

Peggy’s brother Peter married Marion who has considerable talents in business. Marion progressed to a post with Reuters until she found herself located in Hongkong and responsible for the Far Eastern operations of the company. A meeting was scheduled when she would meet President Jiang Zemin in Beijing. At the briefing beforehand it was intimated that the meeting might be short. Now Marion is no mean female: she is tall, blonde and has striking good looks - all this topped out with a quick mind. Zemin might have been seventy-two but these talents were certainly not lost on him and he named her “Ying” meaning “Golden One” The session lasted well over an hour and I have seen photographs of the participants seated in huge red dragon crested chairs whilst Zamin directed his gaze at Marion: his thought process is clear to see. Both of them, and the interpreters, are laughing in the photograph so I enquired why this might be: Marion had commented that the air conditioning was rather cool – Zamin explained that President Clinton was arriving the following day (just after

the Lewinsky affair) and he adjudged this a necessary precaution!.

**A Lady's Mind** A prominent local farmer and his wife came to dinner. During the meal the topic of drugs arose and, intimating that I had a supply of cannabis, I left the room to duly return with the weed. What it actually comprised was a cigarette from which I had extracted the tobacco and inserted pot pourri: it looked authentic. Lighting up I took a draw and offered it round the table to uniform rejection except for the farmer's wife who took a few lungful. The following day the husband phoned asking where he could obtain some smokes: his wife had gone ballistic in the car throwing her clothes in every direction on the way home. Alan Dixon, the coach proprietor, was at this dinner and regaled us with stories of his encounters with jealous husbands. Not long after this I was at Alan's house and was curious about half a dozen strange vehicles in his drive that looked as if they might be cesspool emptiers. The Israelis had just blown up an Iraqi nuclear facility and these were nuclear waste water carriers bound for Iraq.

**Asprey Jewellery** I found myself at a dinner seated next to Bea Asprey of jewellery fame, a most charming and elegant lady. Jewellery came up in conversation and she had not had a very good time of it. The bulk of the family jewels had been lodged in a safe deposit box at Harrods and was lost in the heist there. On another occasion, at home after she had retired, she awoke to find a burglar in her room: she made sure to feign sleep and he made off with the jewels from her dressing table. She told me that she was sad to lose her favourite zircon ring. Can you imagine the burglar's reaction when the fence told him that Mrs. Asprey's diamond ring was made of paste!



She went to a Mansion House Jewellers' banquet and the man seated next to her gave glowing praise for her emerald pendant earrings. She did not have the heart to tell him they were Cabouchon costume jewels. (Daughter Rosemary tells me that her mother wore these earrings at many Royal functions – proof of what I have always said, unsuccessfully, to Margaret – if you have the style you can get away with the make-do stuff)

**Flying in Africa** David Macdonald flew all manner of aircraft for a variety of airlines in Africa. One of his main routes was flying munitions and mercenaries into Biafra, Nigeria for the IBOS and missionaries and refugees out. He flew from Luanda, Angola and Lisbon into Enugu and Port Harcourt at night. He tells me about a colleague, Dick Pringle, who was taking off from Mala Mala on the Western border of the Kruger National Park, when two giraffe ran across the airstrip, each taking off a wing of the Cessna 421. There was no harm to the aircraft passengers although neither giraffe survived

**Bob Muddimer** A good friend is the irascible Bob Muddimer together with his long-suffering wife Rita. Bob was a director of the conglomerate Tomkins and Chaired a whole raft of companies from Smith and Wesson to Rank Hovis McDougall. He tells me that at S&W he was looking to grow the business with accessories such as bullet-proof vests. It was arranged that a manufacturer of vests would demonstrate their product: so confident was the President that he modelled the vest himself. It failed and he died. Bob's comment was that this was a job for the Vice-President, not the President. Bob is used to overcoming daunting opposition. Early one summer morning we arrived at Ellesborough Golf course. I advised Bob that long socks were required: he pulled his ankle socks up to mid-calf and declared that they were long. Emerging from the changing

room we met the redoubtable Secretary head-on who declared that Bob could not continue thus dressed. Back to the changing room where Bob enquired if I had a spare pair of longs. Not so. In response to his next query I did have a spare pair of short socks so out came the scissors and Bob went about his game with white bottoms and brown tops. Some years later on Christmas Day there was a news item that Bob's village in Leicestershire had had a power failure. I phoned to say they were welcome to come down and join us for some turkey. Bob's response was that there was no problem. The generator was running and they had all the lights on to indicate to the rest of the villagers, with their cold ovens, that his repast would soon be ready. Enquiring of Rita if she had ever thought of divorcing Bob she quickly responded that divorce had not occurred to her although murder had.

Bob had a sumptuous birthday party at Noseley Hall (where the photograph was taken). He seated me next to two interesting ladies. The young one was one of the "Pukka Pies" family: very attractive at the dinner table and even more so once you got her on the dance floor. The other older lady had a husband with whom I rapidly fell out. He had just sold his business for a huge amount: once he learned that I was involved with development he immediately charged that I wished to concrete over the whole country – a charge to which I of course pleaded guilty. I felt his wife had a bit of a raw deal and asked if she had ever taken a lover: that hit the nail on the head! The plumbing at the Hall left something to be desired: turn on a tap and the knocking reverberated round the whole wing of the house.

The following morning Baron Hazlerigg gave us a tour of the grand estate including the 13<sup>th</sup> century chapel which had been used by Oliver Cromwell as a stable. The wood carvings were most ornate, there was a crypt and various

effigies. One of these depicted an early Hazlerigg accompanied by his wife, each lying face up: also in the sculpture was a third younger lady shown on her side. (I enquired if this might be the origin of the expression “a bit on the side”? Seven of us were on the visit including two billionaire American widows: on learning that the crypt was flooded one of them enquired “are they all floating about down there?”

**Film model maker** Guy, son of close friends Basil and Connie, makes models for film and TV work both in the UK and in America. The quality of his work is astounding and I was particularly impressed with the Father Christmas model of a reindeer which folds its ears over its eyes as it flies because of its fear of height. The whole creature is 100% anatomically correct. His terraced house at Wendover was interesting. Internally it was arranged as a Viking’s lair whilst the long and narrow garden was set with a series of huge grey painted plastic stones used in one of the Bond films to sidestep the crocodiles. (somewhat incongruous in urban Wendover). Guy was on the set in Carolina whilst “The Crow” was being made featuring Brandon Lee, son of Bruce Lee. In the shooting death scene they all thought Brandon went down brilliantly until he failed to rise. The gun had been improperly cleaned and a dummy bullet tip hit his abdomen. He died from the wound.

**Manslaughter** At a party Pauleen was being most friendly and insisted that we dance. Naturally I obliged but I had some reservations about pushing the relationship further. A year or so before her man had died with a knife in his chest. The judge bound her over on the manslaughter charge and said she must not do this again.

**Rye Wedding** Jo’s best friend Anne was to be married in Rye Parish Church. I always thought the bridegroom, a

psychiatrist, was rather dry and on the day of his wedding he was certainly very slow: I ended up taking his bride out of her bridal gown.

**Fly Fishing** A business acquaintance, Brian Furzer, was a brilliant fly fisherman – he wrote the books. Spotting a brown trout on the far side of the stream, his fly would settle on the water just upstream and be taken. As for me, if I managed to avoid getting the hook caught in the bush behind me the lure would flail the water and the fish would dart off. Brian took me for a weekend of salmon fishing in Devon. As we walked towards the water I suggested to Brian that we share whatever we caught. With a smile, he agreed. I ended up giving Brian half of my fish! To put things in perspective, Brian was into five fish which all escaped. As we worked downstream I was to fish “Cockshilly Run” a fast and shallow part of the river Tavy. Brian gave precise instructions about casting every six inches of the water and, Bingo, a twelve-pound fresh run salmon. Brian had a most interesting wife, Rosa: she had three daughters from a spread of fathers. Whilst fishing with another friend in the Tweed, the weather was dismal. In fact it was so bad, wet and cold, that on leaving the ghillie’s hut, his Jack Russell dog stood on the threshold and refused to go. You had to suck your fingers to stop them freezing. With no luck whatsoever the two ghillies and John retired to the hut for a sandwich and no sooner had they gone than I hooked a good salmon: trying to be clever, I put it on the fish tray stand in the entrance to the hut thinking I would surprise them. Not so: these canny old boys have seen it all before. “Did ye catch a fish?” “However did you know?” “Your mittens are wet”. The next day there was no fishing because of a flood so off to the pub we went. They produced a beaten up old television set and put a bet on a horse which won. We then joined in: not until the fifth race did we realise the whole thing was a set-up. They thrashed us at

dominoes too, just as they have been doing to the English for centuries.

On a salmon fishing trip at Hay-on-Wye our party had taken a private room at the pub; hearing the boisterous goings on, a man in a white suited enquired if he and his protégée could join us. We off course agreed and it transpired that the ward was April Ashley, one of the early transgender persons. As the evening progressed it became apparent that she took a shine to me – not everything in my life has been perfect!

**Coming Out Party** My first public outing with Margaret was at the birthday party for Jennie Junkin, wife of John. We shared a table with the singer Tony Christie and his wife. The lady was most friendly and I spent some time under the table with her, admiring her Escada dress adorned with apparent “escargots”. Not for eighteen years did I see them again, at John’s funeral. The congregation was addressed by the president of the Red Lion, Wendover drinking club, by Dave Lee Travis the disc jockey and by Tony Christie; each in turn had the assembly in fits. The piece de resistance came when Tony revealed that he and John, many years ago, had recorded a song written by John: the words “and when I am gone” repeated frequently and I would guess that many years will pass before the crematorium is raked with so much laughter. The quality of the recording left something to be desired and when it had been played Tony put the disc on the coffin with the instructions that it should go with John. I am sure John would have been delighted with his magnificent send-off. (Margaret has plans for me – something about a rocket)

**Roger King** Margaret and I had a few days in the West Country: at breakfast there was a flamboyant character at the far end of the room: he was just leaving the hotel but I had to talk to such a bright individual: we conversed for half

an hour, leaning on his Rolls. He told me all about his business in Saudi Arabia and the purchase which was then going through of Stoke Park Golf Club: he has now carried out an exquisite refurbishment of the Club and constructed a magnificent Spa. His father was a Bond Street Jeweller, specialising in bedecking the ladies, and Roger, as a young man, wanted to do something in the same line. Though short of cash he formed a company “King Mines”, founded a relationship with a respected financial institution, hired some offices and invited exporters of Russian diamonds to a meeting. He won the concession to import the stones and that got him started with a vengeance. Roger came to our wedding celebration together with his father: they made things happen!

Roger also owned Alexander House, a most gracious Country House Hotel not far from Gatwick, and we took to staying there if travelling from that airport. The very first time we were upgraded to the Honeymoon suite. This comprised a magnificent chamber with a grand four-poster bed, embossed with images of the Goddess Diana, the virgin, and fleurs de lys, surmounted by a Faberge canopy, which had apparently been given by Napoleon Bonaparte to some General. The bathroom had so many mirrors you could count yourself twenty times over. I survived. On the next stay we were upgraded again – I promised Margaret I would do the best I could.

**Toy Box** If invited to a party it is useful to be in a position to take or wear something suitable. In my Virgo style I try to shun last minute arrangements and came upon the toy box strategy. If you see something amusing, just buy it and put it in the chest to await its moment. The contents are a whole ragbag extending from balloons of all manner, battery operated toys, headgear from most of the countries I have visited, blow up things, a polystyrene ball and chain and

some mini vibrators to name just a few. The last named have to be used judiciously but can have most rewarding results. If the speaker at a dinner has gone on too long, a few two-second bursts on the underside of your table will soon cause him to desist and, late in the evening, the dancing vibrator in a glass is invariably good for a chuckle. The highlight for this equipment for me had to be at Cardiff. I had been to see Wasps beaten by New Zealand and was in the downtown pub following the match. Talking to a young lady from New Zealand, I leaned against her with the thing switched on: she was transfixed. In fact she was so impressed that she brought half a dozen girlfriends over with instructions that they should rub up against me. I reckon that the £4.50 expended was one of my better value purchases. (£54 actually – I buy them by the dozen and the lady in Thame “Adult” shop gives me free batteries, and a kiss).

**Russian Admiral** At Sevastopol, a spiv was selling a few items hanging on a fence. Amazingly, there was the pristine cream summer outfit of an Admiral of the Russian Black Sea Fleet. It comprised jacket, with epaulets and medal ribbons, waistcoat, trousers and much braided dinner plate peaked hat. It was of my size and I bought it for \$50. Two occasions when I wore the uniform come to mind. The first was, of course, on the day of purchase when I arranged to have my photograph taken with the soldier guarding the customs man, for which I thanked them with a bottle of champagne (later, returning through customs, the officer waved me through – no need to look at the passport of a champagne bearing passenger). The second time was on Christmas Eve. It is my wont to have a massage on this day at Linda’s salon Mulberrys at Beaconsfield. All the girls are in an excited mood wearing all sorts of sexy gear. In the street my greeting to strangers of “pajolsky” was universally rejected. Getting close to the car on my return I saw a policeman standing right by it and was looking forward to

the encounter. On seeing my approach he made sure to hurry away.

**Judicial rites** Margaret and I met an acquaintance of mine in a pub: I do not see the signs very often but Margaret took an immediate shine to him. He is a polished barrister, dark and with something of a Christopher Lee appearance. Should we invite him to dinner? Yes!! Explaining that his wife was busy at the proposed time he declined my proposal to delay the meal. "Should I put you down for two?" This received an emphatic affirmative response and he duly arrived with his glamorous young barrister lady friend. It seems they had been appearing on opposing sides of a manslaughter trial at Luton and the accused was aware of the connection between them. No doubt the verbal sparring of the Courtroom was continued in a more physical sense in the bedroom. I have lost count of the number of relationships he has had but understand he has now amassed seven children in various directions.

**Amorous Surveyor** A colleague of mine had a very outgoing manner. One of the ways in which he expressed this was that no lady's breast was out of reach on the dancefloor. His wife, on the other hand, was rather demure. They went camping with another couple where the strengths of character were reversed and he found the challenge of a strong lady interesting. Nevertheless he loved his wife greatly and had no desire to change the status quo. Much later, he confided in me that the "bedroom department" had been non-existent for a year!!! "You must invite me to dinner". We sat at a very long mahogany table; the wife at one end, husband at the other and me in the middle. You could sense the love wafting down from husband to wife but it was a one-way trade. After much questioning it became apparent that there was a total impasse. My advice was to either:-a) Retire immediately and make amends or (b)



Separate. Course (b) became the chosen path and each party settled with their camping companion.

**Eddie the Eagle.** Margaret and I had a meal with Eddie and I enquired what affect his boldness on the ski-jump had on his popularity with the ladies. He intimated that it was a considerable enhancement. The downside was that, in the pub, fellows were always trying to pick a fight with him and this had become physical on more than one occasion.

**Bond Street** Margaret wanted to shop, so you will understand that I was somewhat nervous, as we called at Aspreys in her third favourite shopping street. She remarked that a lady was looking in our direction, who seemed familiar to her. We met and quickly established that we had been mutual guests at Ascot of our longstanding friends, Marion and Jeff Archer. She intimated that her daughter had recognised me. However I queried this in that her daughter was not at the lunch. No, but she recognised you from the photograph of you carrying the all singing and dancing mechanical sunflower! I gather from this that my appearance is not mundane.

**The Vangelderens** Nick, being Dutch, is big in stature and strong in mind; Sylvie, a Parisienne, is small and chic – a regular visitor to shop in Rue St Honore in Paris. Nick provides the highest quality of linens etc. to the likes of The Ritz Hotel, Heston Blumenthal of the Fat Duck, Air France and to Russian Oligarchs. He has a factory in Lille providing top quality embroidery (I have danced in the works with the number one embroidery lady there). He also has jacquard looms weaving for him in Portugal, Italy and Indonesia. With Nick you get the quality but you pay the price – I have heard him at work. At home, guess who is in charge – yes – Sylvie. They have been good friends of ours for many years and I am eternally grateful for Nick's action

on the day Patrick died. He just drove up to the house unannounced in the evening and gave Margaret a talking to. Margaret said she was no longer a mother – “Nonsense” said Nick, “Once a Champion, always a Champion”. I have endless admiration for the way in which Nick takes on bureaucracy: he will not let go and the perpetrators must dread his telephone call.

(I remember calling at the premises of Louis Feraud in Rue St. Honore when Margaret was in full flow. Monsieur Feraud had a way of retaining the attention of the male fraternity – over each of the two screened changing areas was a mirrored ceiling giving a clear view of the events unfolding below)

**Vice Admiral Jacques Dore** Nick VanGelderren introduced me to his friend and business associate some years ago and subsequently the Admiral came to see the observatory. He is a ladies’ man so we have something in common. At this second meeting there was time to ask some questions about his life: the answers were fascinating. In 1940, aged twenty, he escaped Vichy France on foot into Spain whereupon he was arrested within the hour and cast into jail. He was held at several fortresses and could hear the regular morning fascist executions. He became friendly with another captive, an Englishman, Flight Lieutenant Lewis Hodges whose Hampden bomber had been shot down. They managed to escape but were recaptured. Part of the punishment was to have their heads shaven: Hodges looked odd with a bald head and full RAF handlebar moustache (Hodges flew over 200 combat missions including many for the Special Operations Executive delivering agents by Lysander to France – and later similar assignments against the Japanese. He won a DFC (and bar), a DSO (and bar), Croix de Guerre and Legion d’honneur and also was promoted KCB. At the time of the Falklands war, at the request of Margaret

Thatcher, he was brought out of retirement as Air Chief Marshall of the RAF.) Jacques and Hodges eventually escaped after a year of incarceration by clinging to the underside of a truck. The British embassy provided papers maintaining that Jacques was Canadian enabling him to travel to Gibraltar and hence to England by ship. (In recent times he visited the Castle where he had suffered most of his imprisonment. Entrance cost three euros “but why is this – on my last visit there was absolutely no charge for admission!”)

He served in corvettes providing convoy escort: one such convoy left Halifax numbering 61: arriving at Scapa Flow the convoy had been savaged to just 16 merchant vessels. Escorting another convoy his ship was sunk off Greenland and he was rescued by a tanker under the command of Captain Weissmuller who had worked with Nick VanGelderens’ father! Later he sailed on the dreaded Russian convoys. For a time he was at Portsmouth with the motor torpedo boat squadron. On returning to harbour orders said that you should lower your ensign for the Commodore and then a second time as a salute to the Victory. Initially they understandably refused to honour the Victory but with the passage of time things changed. Some WRENS were stationed on Victory and if the ensign was lowered twice rapidly it meant the girls would see them that evening.

In 1993 Jacques visited Saddam Hussein in an attempt to secure the release of French families from a hostage situation. In this he failed but he did secure the freedom of some Italian and English hostages. Asked how he found Hussein he replied “alright – he did not kill me”.

Jacques was interviewed on television by John Snow who gave him quite a hard time: at the end of the session he

asked Snow what he had done during the war and of course the answer was “pass”. Jacques took out of his pocket his decorations: quite a few DSO, DSO....etc saying “this is what your Queen gave me – I rest my case”

On the lady front I have the feeling many experiences have faded from the memory but he does recall meeting an Italian heiress, in 1941 at a Services Club in London. They were to marry and have two daughters. There was a brief relationship with a German lady: years later she was in touch with the news that he had sired a daughter for whom she was seeking French Nationality – a blood test proved the line.

**Ignorance** At a dinner in 1998 I found myself sitting next to an interesting young man, Carl. I asked what he did and he said that he was a jockey. Having established that he was of the jumping variety I enquired what was his greatest achievement. “Well, I won the Grand National this year and in 1992!”

**Humbling** On the train to London a blind man took the seat across the aisle from us: he duly bought a coffee from the trolley attendant. Seeing he had finished the drink I offered to dispose of the cup and we fell into conversation. He was going to “see” his football team play York: the commentary there was very good and his friends would keep him informed about the play. Asking how he would get to Kings Cross he said the railway people were very helpful and would escort him to the tube! Saying that our taxi ride would take us past the station he agreed to accept a lift and I left him third in line in queue number two with a description of the rather nice lady who would be serving him. The taxi driver volunteered not to charge for the diversion.

**A winner in adversity** I played golf with Eric Sykes, who was registered as blind. On the 125 yards second he turned to his daughter, who was caddying for him, for advice about the pin placement. Establishing that he could discern the bulk of a background tree she gave him a line to take and club advice. He put the ball a yard from the hole and won the “nearest the pin” award. Following the game he regaled us with stories about some of his experiences with Spike Milligan. They had a first floor office at Shepherds Bush adjoining an undertaker’s establishment. One morning Spike lay down in front of the undertaker’s calling out “shop!” On another they had an almighty row about a minor script matter culminating in Spike hurling an ornament at Eric – he ducked and it went out into the street through an open window.

**Quirky Golf** On the golfing front I drew as a partner for The Oxfordshire 2008 Turkey Trot a 19 years old young man called Craig Hinton. Exchanging pleasantries on the first hole I established that his handicap was 31.4 shots better than mine. At **plus 3.4** he was a member of the EGU “A” Squad who has to score three birdies to stay level. Now golf is a funny game: after thirteen holes he had one and I had three: he did finally catch up on the last. He qualified for The Open in 2011.

**Flabbergasted** Margaret and I found ourselves at a grand party in Shropshire where the marquee and its adornments were pink; likewise the champagne. Early on, a rather nice young lady caught my eye and I fell into conversation with her. Standing a couple of yards back from her was a man of around six feet four inches. Asking if he was her man I nearly fell to the floor on hearing the response that he would “have her like a shot if she had a willie”. Our host at this event was Howard Franklin who had been a Court floral arranger providing floral displays for Elizabeth Queen

Mother, Jackie Onasis and Princess Diana. He very kindly invited us to a luncheon of the Floristry Guild of Great Britain at the Savoy. Four hundred persons were present of whom only eleven were male. Our side comprised six Chelsea Pensioners, Howard, me, The Duke of Kent, Max Hastings and Jim Davidson. Good odds and there was a fair number of young ladies. I thought I should balance the pre-meal discussion and had a chat with one of the pensioners: fascinating; he had been a member of the Long Range Desert Group in Egypt. It was a privilege to talk to a hero about his activities. (Did you know that German speaking members of the Group would regularly flag down any lone German vehicle and ask for the use of a tyre foot pump and then stick a bomb on the vehicle when the man went to get it!). Howard was almost in a state of terror as to what Jim Davidson would say and Davidson did lash into David Blunket and was very risqué with the Queen Mum. As Davidson spoke the Duke of Kent was slinking lower and lower into his chair with his hands covering his eyes and ears.

**Golfing Ladies** The Oxfordshire Golf Club was hosting the English Ladies Championship and members were asked to accommodate competitors. Like a shot, with Margaret's concurrence, I put my name down. The brochure for the event featured Laura Davies on the front: the rear cover had a photograph of a young blonde lady retrieving a club from her bag and sponsored by Pringle jumpers. Yes!! They sent me the lovely Malin together with her glamorous friend Sara, both from Sweden. They knew how to wind me up. Walking along the landing, Malin called me to her room for a talk with one leg half way up the wall. They missed the cut and both had time to spare for tennis. Now Richard, as a ritual, would go to the office on a Saturday morning, but, to Peggy's amazement, not this one. As we played we were rewarded for good shots and chastised for the bad ones. It

started to rain: warm rain. The girls decided to continue playing in their wet shirt mode and we were happy with this arrangement, even though the deluge became so strong that the water butts filled up. The highlight of the visit for Margaret and Peggy was the moment when, congratulating the girls for their grasp of English, they said that all Swedish people speak the language except for the really old ones over sixty.

**Valentine's Day** What an opportunity to create havoc? I have certainly sent my share of cards, some in earnest and some in jest. There was a particular local government officer whom I met on a fairly regular basis. He was exceptionally good at his job but had a reputation for being a little "stiff". He had not received a Valentine for years but he confided in me that suddenly they had started to arrive each year. We debated whether it might be one of the girls in the typing pool but I could not bring myself to confess.

**Golfing physicist** The Club was short and I was asked to make up a team (they must have been desperate). I was matched against a man who was an even worse golfer than me. Naturally I enquired what he did. That brought a mine of information. Around 1950 he had manufactured his own computer and he went on to be Director of the famed Rutherford Appleton Laboratory. He designed and built a particle accelerator, would you believe: to this day it is the best provider yet of neutrinos. The surprise to me was that with such an in depth knowledge of physics he had no interest in the Cosmos.

**Mike Kilby** Mike had held some high level posts in the advertising field. He was socialising following a business meeting in Scandinavia and found himself conversing with a most interesting older man of some distinction. Enquiring what he did, the reply was "I am still King"!

**Pilates** The lovely Emma ran a course of pilates and the membership eroded until just Miles, Earl of Buckinghamshire, and myself were the only two under instruction. Emma would tell us to watch her demonstration of the exercise and we certainly complied with her orders. Miles invited me to play a game of Real Tennis at Leamington Spa. Now that was novel: a most peculiar court arrangement, lines all over the place, points to be scored if you hit the ball or got the ball into the side netting, service off the roof, a knuckle to hit for a shot deviation all with a tiny racket and a pretty hard ball. A sort of cross between lawn tennis and squash and you needed a degree to fathom the scoring system.

Miles's kinsman, Major-General Sir Percy "Hobo" Hobart, did great service in World War Two. He was a prime mover in the promotion of special weapons such as Flail Tanks and Flame Throwing Tanks which, with other designs, became known as "Hobart's Funnies". These "Funnies" were offered to the Americans for the D-Day landings but were declined. What a difference some of these weapons might have made at Omaha Beach. Nonetheless, these modified tanks proved their effectiveness elsewhere during the D Day landings and in the Allies' push through France and into Germany. Hobart went to the same school as Miles, Clifton College: his sister, Betty, was married to Viscount Montgomery of Alamein but tragically died at a young age.

**Sisters** Dear friend Nikki, mother of Margaret's son Patrick's best friend Henry, knew that she was adopted and on the adulthood of Henry and his sister Amy, Nikki approached an expert in an attempt to discover her family background. Within a few days he phoned and enquired if Nikki had family present – she did. The news was that she had a twin sister! Meeting could be a dangerous move but Nikki on a venture is unstoppable. I think Nikki would agree



that she is something of a drama queen. Her sister is a drama teacher; further, one sister was wearing a blouse identical to one in the wardrobe of the other. Both share the same view of the world and the life of each one is now enriched.

**Randy Dentist** My dentist was an everyday (I thought) sort of guy with whom I had played golf on Thursday afternoons for some years, but that arrangement had now finished. Entering a bar at lunchtime he was there with his wife, whom I knew well. She gave me one scathing glance and the man was then frog-marched from the room. I phoned saying “whatever have I done?” “I should come and see you” The explanation was that the man enjoyed sailing offshore and he also enjoyed ladies. He decided that golf was not a priority and stopped playing with me. There was a storm in the Channel and his wife was concerned for his safety. Upon phoning the Coastguard they needed the number of his yacht, which she did not have. She thereupon went to the surgery and broke open his desk in search of the number. What she found was the bundle of fifty or so replies to his advertisement seeking female company! He explained to me that, after the interviews, he had selected four ladies, each about twenty or thirty miles distant, at the four points of the compass so that he had one for each Thursday of the month. (The wife blamed me for all this).

**Randy Doctor** Another friend had a strong relationship going as evidenced by some explicit pictures, but where should he secrete them? His choice was not too smart: the wife’s Spring-cleaning campaign revealed them stuck to the back of wall pictures!

**Pre-Nuptial Agreement** Stuart Crossley hit the headlines with his divorce from Susan Sangster, a case that will be cited in the law courts for years to come. Many years ago

Stuart asked my advice about affairs of the heart; maybe I should have done better.

**Divorce terms** A co-guest at a Scottish house party was introduced to me by the host saying that I had experience of the parting of the ways and could give advice. Married twenty years with teenage children, he owned a house in Belgravia, an estate in Devon and a villa at Cap Ferrat . The cause of the split was a young heiress. Easy, said I “50/50”. “She has already turned that down!” On our return to Heathrow I met the new young lady; she was clearly worth fifty percent or more.

**Complex household** Margaret was behind schedule (what’s new) and asked me to take one of her hats to a neighbour for Ascot. Knocking on the door, the said lady received me in her negligee and I just about escaped intact. She had married a man considerably older than herself, with whom she had a son. Later they took in a young lodger: over the years the situation developed that the husband became the effective father and lodger became husband. The son’s subsequent wedding was memorable. The BBC decided they wanted to do a series of programmes covering events from birth to death and chose this as a typical marriage. The BBC cameraman and the video lady were at loggerheads, the lodger was walking about, the official spare prick, and the bride fancied the BBC manager. Needless to say the following festivities were a disaster with some of the principal participants walking out.

**Alan Clarke** Margaret and I were at a small gathering where the diarist Alan Clarke was the speaker. When he volunteered to take questions I intimated that we had lived similar lives regarding the ladies and whereas I had given away a series of houses I was not aware that he had provided any. He assured me that whatever happens you

hang on to castles. Margaret loves white chocolate and she won fifth raffle prize – a tattered box of white chocolates. With a leer, Clarke advised Margaret that he had saved them for her. Later, Margaret said she had nearly replied that she would do anything for a box of white chocolates. I would have loved to have seen the reaction!

**Chelsea Flower Show** I went with Margaret to the Chelsea Flower Show. We were wandering down one of the back routes when a television crew approached Margaret and asked her if she were a flower what sort would it be? In a flash she replied that she would like to be a big blousy deeply scented old English rose and then she could be just as prickly as she liked to suit her whim. I was programmed to be a red-hot poker standing guard over the camellias to save them from the deer – but I was not asked. Mother nearly fell off her chair when the BBC closed the programme with her lovely daughter.

**Thespians** Our near neighbours, Bob and Penny Fowler, moved to a retreat in the Lake District where they could perform their arts. The whole family is theatrical. Furthermore Penny is a gifted artist and Bob will pen an incisive poem. Calling to see them, it emerged that Bob was going to do some “life” posing; something he had not done before. I enquired how this would work. Would he walk out in the buff or would he wear a robe and divest himself on the rostrum? Amazingly Bob had not considered this and it brought a twinkle to his eye. Entrance is everything and I can see that much thought will go into planning exactly how he will display his charms.

Son Hal was making big moves in the Theatre and we visited him in his dressing room on several occasions. Hal is a proper man and I was in the habit of producing a programme of the Show and asking him to put ticks against

the photographs of lady performers, as appropriate. The pencil wore down pretty quickly! Then I learned that he was to star in “Tommy” and made sure to have a quick word with him. I knew that also starring in this show was Kim Wilde so I exhorted Hal to make sure to put considerable effort in this direction. He took my advice: three months later Penny phoned telling me they had just become engaged to be married.

**Instant justice** Several years ago I was at the barbecue of a friend, Graham, and fell into conversation with another guest, Jim, of splendid physique. On enquiring his occupation it transpired that he taught jungle warfare: one of the skills was to jump from a helicopter hovering over the jungle canopy with a rope and grappling hook – the hook should snag a branch! Jim accompanied Graham to Baghdad after the second war acting as his bodyguard.

Subsequent to this Jim was in a McDonald’s restaurant in the Home Counties when an ex-serviceman entered in a wheelchair with a collecting box for old soldiers on hard times: he duly inserted one pound. Next he asked three youths at the adjoining table if they would contribute which resulted in an insulting response and one of them kicked the wheelchair over. Jim righted the chair, put the old soldier back in it and turning to the youths said “there was really no need to do that”. This got a mocking response and Jim was asked if he wanted a fight. He answered negatively but cautioned that if they did have a fight he might kill them. Their assault of Jim then commenced. The outcome was that each one of them received a broken leg, a broken arm and a broken nose. All this was recorded on the security camera and no charges were brought against Jim.

**Mouse** Our cat Lexie caught another mouse and Margaret called me to endeavour to save the poor thing. As Lexie

released it, I managed to get it in my hand whereon it bit me. The surgery said I should have a course of anti-biotics. The pills caused me to come out in a rash all-over. Margaret and friends have not laughed so much for ages.

**Boris Johnson** I had retired from the Management committee of Thame and District Housing Association but the Chairlady kindly invited me to the ceremony when Boris Johnson would open the new block of flats which had just been finished. This was immediately prior to him becoming Mayor of London and he was still the local MP. A pair of curtains covered the stone plaque inscribed with the date and naming him as the luminary to open the building. After a witty address he went to open the curtains, which refused to part since he was pulling both strings. The Secretary suggested he pull just one string, which he proceeded to do – the wrong one. On the third attempt the curtains parted. (I do wonder if all this was a ploy) Boris was impressed. This was the first time that he had seen his name displayed in this fashion and he wondered if he should put his name down for one of the magnificent flats in his dotage. Talking to him subsequently he seemed to be amused when I told him of the time, a couple of years before, when the Secretary advised the committee that there was considerable disquiet at the Thame premises. Predominantly the residents were female but one of the few males had developed relationships with three of the ladies. What should the committee do about this? Immediately I said there was only one course of action we could take “give him a medal!”

Subsequently I stumbled on Boris poised with his basket at the soft drinks cabinet in our local Waitrose. I could not miss the opportunity to remonstrate with him for putting a Spaniard on top of the bus at the Beijing Olympics instead of Katherine Jenkins and would he please do his best to put her on show in London? His response was that he thought she was rather lovely: he failed me here too!

**Phantom/Jaguar conflict** We were at a party in Wiltshire when we met John Griffiths, an airline pilot. During conversation it transpired that he had been an RAF fighter pilot and he knew well an individual called Steve Griggs. Steve had had the misfortune, whilst flying a Jaguar, to be shot down by an RAF Phantom during an exercise in Germany on the 25th May 1982. John put me in touch with Steve and he very kindly gave me a note about the event:- “Bang! Aircraft rolling violently to the right. Canopy shattering. Paddy’s voice from the other aircraft yelling “Eject! Eject!” Horizon alternating between brown (land) and blue (sky). Thought process – he must know what is going on because I certainly don’t! Result – eject when brown comes around again hoping it will be blue when the seat goes out! Violent explosion, head driven down to breast plate of lifejacket, vision of floor of cockpit dropping away, snatch of parachute opening, wrenching pain in right hand (fool, let go of the seat handle!), moment of blissful quiet – land completely out of control in field and it hurt. Look up and think momentarily that I might be in heaven as a blonde vision of loveliness dressed in tight fitting jodhpurs ran over to me, followed by her father (blast!). “It must be your birthday” Gerd Molleken, the father, said. Still distracted by the vision of Germanic loveliness peering (fondly?) at me, I somewhat confusingly replied: “No, that’s not till September, which seemed to perplex them both”

Incidents such as this are invariably caused by a combination of errors: the list of events leading to this catastrophe is incredible. Dissecting reports I have tried to enumerate the problems in simple language:

a) Precautions for flying with live weapons involved taping the pilot’s Master Arm with red tape. On that day the Squadron had run out of red tape; though complaining, the pilot was prevailed upon to accept the aircraft without it.

Once scrambled the pilot threw the Master Arm switch forgetting the aircraft was armed with live munitions! (you cannot see the missiles from the cockpit).

b) The navigator omitted his duty to monitor the pilot's actions and was not aware that the pilot had rendered live one of the two safety switches (At the Court Martial it was not explained why the experienced and well qualified pilot forgot the real situation.)

c) It was found that a circuit breaker in the navigator's rear section, a secondary safety device used to isolate the firing system, was unreliable in that it was possible to depress the switch and make contact without throwing it. In the event the Navigator was of substantial build and carried a holstered pistol adjacent to the switch: the pressure completed the circuit.

d) Exercise rules prescribed that a "check safety switches" radio warning should be issued but this did not happen because of a breakdown in communications due to a simulated exercise emergency.

e) The Weapons Event panel had a fault and showed one AIM7 – Sidewinder on one wing - (it should have showed all four) and one AIM9 on the other (there were four)

Towards the end of the sortie the Phantom crew carried out a filmed training attack on the Jaguar that was returning to Bruggen. The Phantom pilot pressed the Fire Committal Switch to get the completed attack filmed!

Steve decided to celebrate his lucky escape in the Mess that night: to demonstrate that there were no hard feelings he invited the Phantom crew, whom he did not know, to join the party: they had the guts to come over, apologise and join

in enthusiastically. I understand that the Phantom ended up as a show aircraft at Stornaway in the Outer Hebrides with the words “JAG KILLER” stencilled on the nose.

This reminds me that, whilst the Cold War was at its height the Americans at Upper Heyford sponsored an English/American night. Several of us were driven past the loaded and crewed stand-by response force bombers to one of the concrete shelters containing a Phantom. I was permitted to sit in the cockpit but the American sergeant loudly instructed me “don’t touch the yellow lever - you will be spread all over the ceiling”. The lever operated the ejection seat and was live.

**Tennis** I play tennis with Steve Back and his wife Julie who are both pretty powerful in business. Tactics on the court are an essential part of the game and you have to understand their characters to obtain the best results against them. If the rally has been good and long Steve will play a ball that is going out to maintain the flow. Julie most certainly will not. When they loose a point after a good rally it can be most beneficial to praise Steve for being such a sport and playing an outward bound ball. That should get Julie wound up and before long the barbs are forthcoming. One memorable exchange between Steve and Julie was on a day when Julie’s tennis was not at its best. In very direct tones Steve made reference to the motivational courses that he ran. In answer to Julie’s question about how that would apply Steve said that she should get her arse in gear or she was off the team. This made the fur fly and Mike and I were able to take it easy and accept the win that we were then gifted.

**Skivvy** Steve decided he would put himself up for sale for the day on E-Bay for the benefit a of a children’s charity which he supports. I searched the site and found eight “skivvies”. Seven were items of apparel and the eight was



Stephen decked out in “Accessorize” gear! He thought the girls in the office might buy him to do the ironing but a supplier paid nearly £2,000 for him to be a sex slave. In the event he was relieved to find that his allocation was changed to being Father Christmas at Great Ormond Street Hospital.

**Chernobyl** Steve, the tennis player, was involved with a business using Russian liquid gas technology in the construction of refrigerated lorries. The manufacturing plant is located at Chernobyl of all places. Steve is clearly a risk taker: not only was he prepared to encounter the Chernobyl environment but he flew from Kiev to Chernobyl with an airline using rejected Aeroflot stock! Apparently all the seats were recliners, whether or not you wished for this attitude of travel.

**Katherine Jenkins** My affliction with this young lady is well known. We have been to a number of her performances and I wanted to see her at the Henley Festival. Margaret was not enamoured. “You sat within eight yards of her at Oxford and at Henley you will get lousy seats in the rain – further, it is not her show and you will only complain when other acts appear”. To prove a point Margaret pulled the page up on the internet and, sure enough, she was just one of four performers. Suddenly there was a demeanour change: she had just registered the identity of the final act led by one Ashley Hutchings. It transpired that as a teenager, before he founded Fairport Convention, she had “snogged” him. He subsequently called at Margaret’s parental home, after a party there, to collect his double base but Margaret had just washed her hair. She urged mother to tell him that daughter was out and she could not find the double base! At the Festival I had the good fortune to be able to have a few words with Katherine; she had not received my letter in Welch with the leeks on it but I enjoyed the warmth of her smile when I told her that for me she was the Marilyn

Monroe of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Subsequently she sent me a nice note when I wrote dedicating one of my Milky Way images to her for her heavenly voice.

**Dry Cleaning** Dave and Marie look after our house when we are away. Until recently they ran a high class dry cleaning business and I asked Dave about unusual experiences in the shop. Marie was fastidious about ensuring that all pockets were empty: anything found would be enclosed in a packet attached to the laundered item. This particular gentleman brought in a suit for cleaning and in one of the pockets Marie found a pair of rather nice ladies knickers. They were duly cleaned and attached to the suit which was collected by the wife. On hearing the answer to her question as to why they were attached she went completely beserk – end of marriage. A young lady, of whom Dave became quite fond, would enter the shop once a week, shed her blouse (braless) and don the cleaned garment from the week before

**The Duke of Buckingham** The raconteur Colin Forsyth lived on the Wotton Estate and invited us for a walk around the large lakes constructed in about 1710/1720 with much human toil since huge bunds have been constructed to contain the spring water and channel it from one lake to the other. So immense is the amount of earth that was shifted that one ponders the size of the workforce. There are numerous follies, including the Turkish Kiosk, The Rotunda, The Palladian Bridge and the unclimable Arched Bridge. The Pagoda from China Island has now been removed. I was especially interested in Colin's tale about the Gun Island where the Duke of Buckingham mounted a canon in the mid- 19<sup>TH</sup> Century. His lackies would have to sail model galleons across the lake and the Duke would take potshots at them. The fun was to sink a galleon but

sometimes a footman was killed. Apparently he made sure the widow was well cared for.

Colin decided to open the first of a chain of food shops in Bicester and the trading title was “The Sandwich Bank and Crust”. Quite amazingly this evoked a letter from the Chairman of the Bank of England saying that he could not trade under this style. Eventually Colin persuaded the Bank to relent and, in thanks, Colin invited Eddie George to pop-in for a complimentary sandwich if he found himself in Bicester. He also intimated that he was proposing to open a fish and chip shop under the style “Doggerbank” and he hoped this would be in order.

**Jobbing Builder** On a summer’s day a helicopter landed unexpectedly on our neighbours’ lawn. Since I knew that Richard and Peggy were away at this time I went down to check the situation and found two fire engines in attendance at the adjoining house: there was no sign of any smoke. It transpired that the lady of the house, whilst her husband was away at work, had decided to demolish a chimney. The system she adopted was that having freed a brick she would drop it down the flue. Eventually a blockage developed whereupon she descended to the ground floor and cut an aperture to the flue enabling her to free the jam. Unfortunately, once the blockage was cleared her hand was trapped. With great dexterity and presence of mind she managed to retrieve her phone from her back pocket and make the emergency call that secured her release. Fortunately she suffered no lasting harm

**The Worshipful Company of Launderers** Margaret and I were fortunate to be invited to the celebrations marking the grant of the Royal Charter to the Launderers as from 17<sup>th</sup> June 2010. The service for the reception of the Royal Charter and Act of Commitment was performed at

Southwark Cathedral, to the accompaniment of pikemen and drummer, in full uniform followed by a banquet. I sat opposite Bill Marley a colourful Past Master of the body who regaled us with stories of his beginning in business with a dry cleaning shop in the East End of London at Hoxteth. He numbered among his customers some villains in the shape of the notorious Cray twins, Ronnie Knight and John McVicar, nominated by Scotland Yard as Public Enemy No1: Barbara Windsor also used his establishment. Apparently they were all good customers except that when the Crays were sent down for thirty years, Bill asked the Crays' mother to collect their numerous suits which she thought was a rather pointless request.

**Foot in mouth again** We found ourselves well entrenched in the champagne department at the Banquet of Freemen of the City of London at the Guildhall when there passed by a man looking like a Christmas tree. He was adorned with badges, sashes, cuffs, ruffs and goodness what else so I had to have a word. I opened the conversation saying how resplendent he appeared and asking which Guild he presided over. "Well actually I am the Lord Mayor" was the response from Michael Bear, Deputy Governor of the Bank of England. His wife came to my aid by volunteering that all the bling was worth at least £100,000.

**Cold War** I bumped into Philip and Helen Goodall who had been proprietors of our local toyshop, the Pied Peddler. Over a cup of tea I asked what he was doing these days and the answer was "not a lot". "Come on, you must have an activity!" "Well, I have just written a book *My target was Leningrad*". Philip had progressed in the RAF and found himself Captain of a Vulcan nuclear bomber, then in command of a squadron of these wonderful machines and then running the whole deterrent force and writing the target

manual in the event of the outbreak of World War 3! – our toyshop man !

**Plastic Surgery** Jorge was a charming Canadian and at dinner it transpired that he was a plastic surgeon of the cosmetic variety. Asking about his speciality he said it was “nipples and breasts” – “so you are the devil who makes everything stick up unnaturally!” “No, mine behave like the real thing.” “By the way I have to do some plastic surgery for the wife tomorrow – cut up her credit card”.

**Italian Justice** Graham was rather young to be walking with a stick. It transpired that two years to the day he was in Naples when he attempted to retain his watch when attacked by a mugger. He was left unconscious with a complicated fracture of the leg. In hospital in Naples for a month, a police lady called saying she wanted to do an identity parade at the bottom of his bed. There would be three persons and he was to select the attacker: “and if you are in any doubt it is number two”. He did recognise number two as the assailant and he was sent down for nine years.

### **Spitfire Father**

Peter is my mower repair man and I was interested to learn how his parents met. During the war damaged spitfires would be taken to Oxford for repair and Peter’s father had the job of ferrying the mended planes to their home airstrips. On this particular occasion not long after leaving Oxford the craft developed a problem and father had to make an emergency landing. He ended up marrying the daughter of the farmer in whose field he had put down.

**Palace of Westminster** In 2014 I was fortunate to be invited to a reception in the State Rooms of Parliament. The wine flowed and this lady caught my eye so off I trotted.

Julia was the girlfriend of Rick who is a WW2 aviation fanatic and has just spent £1m repairing a Hurricane. He wanted to see the Crendon observatory and I agreed to this provided he would take me for a flight in his two seater Spitfire. He readily went along with this so I now have to think of a way out of undergoing this claustrophobic, nauseous, trauma. (my daughter Carole, who teaches police chase driving, has volunteered to go in my stead)

## **Engineering Faux Pas**

I drew Ken as a golfing partner and established that he had been a director of Costain the construction people. Enquiring about his most memorable moment in the business he said it concerned construction of the channel tunnel. A Tunnel Boring Machine had to be lowered down a shaft. To do this he engaged the best qualified crane driver and flew him over from America. The TBM had to be lifted off the ground and turned through 23 degrees to align it with

the shaft. Unfortunately during this manoeuvre the centre of gravity shifted and 500 tons of machine crashed to the floor of the chamber!

**Osama Bin Laden** I found myself at luncheon sitting by Caroline Murray, Governor and director of the British Academy of Graphology. The obvious question was what would be her choice of companion for a week on a desert island – a man with neat or a scrawly hand – the poor writing every time (I have a chance!). Then I asked about interesting assessments and she referred me to a report by her that appeared in the Daily Telegraph when asked to consider the signature of Bin Laden (the text of the piece was in type). The answer was that she deduced he may have been abused in childhood, had a very strong libido, may suffer from an inferiority complex and was over

compensating through aggression and violence. Seeing her comments in published print she became a little concerned!

**Rocket Scientists' Reunion** I read in the Bucks Herald that there was to be a reunion of Rocket Scientists at Westcott on the 9<sup>th</sup> April 2016. I managed to track down the secretary Ed Andrews and he agreed that I could go to do some historical research. Having found Ed I asked if there was anyone in particular I should speak with. Replying in the affirmative he went and found Malcolm Paul for me, clutching a pint. I explained my interest and he suggested we have lunch later, giving me his card.

I was agog when I looked him up: he is a senior development engineer at Reaction Engines and what they do is staggering. It seems it all stems from heat exchangers that they have invented that are 100 times lighter than existing models and can cool air from plus 1,000 degrees centigrade to minus 150 degrees in 1/100<sup>th</sup> of a second! Their "Sabre" engine will extract oxygen, hydrogen and helium from the atmosphere for combustion and their prototype plane will be capable of reaching Australia in under five hours. The engine is due to run at Westcott in 2020 and the government have invested £60m. They also have Skylon an unmanned re-usable prototype plane capable of launching satellites.

**Heavenly Angel** In April 2016 I had just parked my car in Berhamsted on a cold morning and was having trouble with the fastener of my coat. Seeing my difficulty this fair young lady approached me asking if I was alright. I explained that my wife had made me buy the wretched garment and I always struggled with the zip. So she had a go fumbling around well below my navel level with no luck. Ultimately I

succeeded and we had a chat. Emily with her lovely outgoing manner had to be a sales person and indeed she worked in the Town's gift shop. Conversation went here and there before she departed to post my grand-daughter's birthday card, clutching my visiting card as she went. (She was of the genus Gemini)

**Michelin starred Restaurant.** Driving us to the airport Steve mentioned that he frequently drove for Raymond Blanc the restaurateur. On this particular occasion he invited Steve to join him for a meal at a Michelin starred restaurant in London. The proprietor of the restaurant and Raymond embraced on meeting with much affection. Asking what they would like to eat Raymond said they would have whatever the owner thought appropriate. When the meal arrived Steve was not impressed and neither was Raymond. Moving the contents of his plate onto Steve's he said "you must eat" but this was an order too far. When the host returned to see Raymond's plate cleared Raymond said "Steve him philistine - he not enjoy your wonderful food"

**Donald Trump** At Royal Ascot in 2017 this chap joined our bench seat. Whilst my badge had just my name, his was crammed with two lines of squeezed together writing. Intrigued, I asked if I could take a close up look. In agreeing he said they always put far more on the badge than he wanted. It read "Baron Michael Woodley, 28<sup>th</sup> Laird of Manie". Establishing that this was a Scottish title and asking if it ran with the land or the blood he replied that unfortunately it was hereditary. "Unfortunate" in that Donald Trump had offered him £2m for the title. Had he met "The Donald"? Yes he had personally sold some of the estate to him for his golf course. Asking how that negotiation went he said the man swaggered in saying he was not as wealthy as people thought, he was only worth a third as much as General Motors!



**Inventor extraordinary** I had not seen my friend Glen Macfarlane since he moved to the south coast and met up with him in July 2017 and we talked about his inventions. There were several “defence” matters he could not disclose to me but how about :- refining the action of the catalytic converter, High Definition outside TV broadcast cables, sensors to check the oxygen supply to a baby in birth,, a sensor for determining the bacteria present in fish farms and a fibre optic control device for missiles! He currently has the prototype model of his printable foldaway golf buggy which one man can lift into a car boot. With his involvement in outside broadcast cables he found himself at the Atlanta Olympic Games in 1996 at Dinner with Donald Trump (owner of the TV company covering the Games) who was most concerned that the cables might break down during the 100 metres final race. Glen assured him that they would not fail.

Always fascinated by light, the properties of which he examined extensively after earning a scholarship at London University from his home in Jamaica, he found himself well placed when the fibre optic cable emerged finding various applications for it. He tells me that the entire population of the world could communicate down a fibre optic cable one fifth the width of a human hair!

**London Vision Clinic** The Clinic gave a party for 500 patients on a boat on the Thames in London. Sitting with four girls and asking about the success of the treatment three were very happy with the outcome. The fourth, Angela from Chislehurst, said she had not had the operation and I still looked handsome!! At the bar I fell into conversation with Ash who had that very day been elected Chairman of the London Freight Club. As a single man he said he would look round the ship to see what ladies were about. Some one

hour later, returning to my wife, I found him sitting alongside and in conversation her.

**Nuclear Power Stations** In 2017 the DHL man surprised me with a parcel I was not expecting: it was heavy and clearly addressed to me. Upon opening, I found it to be a thesis on the safety of nuclear power stations written by my good young friend Derreck Vangelderren. I must say that the 450 pages did not make much sense to me but did consult the list extending to one and a half pages of professors who had assisted in it's preparation – I have to admit to a degree of shock upon reading the last names: Gordon and Margaret Rogers. This place was earned when we took Derreck, as a teenager, down to see Sir Patrick Moore: this meeting ignited Derreck's thrall to be a scientist.

**Top Nurse** In 2017 I was a little late for a shoulder injection because there were two road closures on the way to the hospital: a little stiffly Ollie instructed me to follow her and we entered a cubicle where she instructed me to remove my shirt "not what it used to be" said I which earned the response "I can see that!" "Date of birth?" "Oh, the same day as me!" "I know all about you Ollie" "You are a Virgo" "Yes," "you are over punctual" "Yes!" "You are a practical joker" "Yes," "You are 100% female." In answering this question Ollie peeled her clothing back to reveal a very small tattoo reading "100%".

We had a bond and I refused to let the late arriving doctor know the location of this little work.

**Talks Bonus** Of appeal to me in the making of presentations is the variety of people to be encountered. An especially good catch was to be found at one event in 2018 with the people sitting round the luncheon table. I had just congratulated the chairman for his easy and authoritative

chairmanship of the meeting when in response to my question about employment he replied that he had just retired from MI5. Apparently he was one of 100 invitees for the post and had to appear before a committee of eleven. He spent three years in Moscow: asked if he could divulge his best achievement there was a pause for a moment before replying that he probably ought not to. At the same table was the vicar who explained his policy if needing accommodation overnight in London in the winter. At a cost of £55 he took the sleeper to Penzance, had a bracing walk on the front and then, for £15 caught the 10.15 back. Brian ran the Submarine training school and told me of the time when, with his machine sitting on the bottom off Scotland, there was great alarm when it started to roll down a shingle bank. John was a cardiac specialist who had been involved with the development of the balloon process for clearing arteries. An interesting bunch!