

Tribute to Geoff Jones

WHILST looking through Dad's papers a few days ago I found his school report for the Christmas term of 1944. It is a single sheet, headed, rather ominously, *Terminal Report*. It seems to me that these few words I have to say to you today form a Terminal Report; and whilst schoolmasters in wartime England had to summarise 3 months of Geoff's activities, I must try to summarise 84 years of them.

Dad was born in 1931 at Bank Farm, lived there with his parents and sister Margot and went to school nearby at Kingsland Grange. Both his grandfather Harry and his father Arthur lived and farmed at Bank Farm and Dad was evidently destined to follow in their footsteps: his Latin Master reporting, in 1944, that -- *He is by no means a fool... at this subject and could do quite well if he pays enough attention to it. But to me he thinks more of "the good earth" than of Latin; I believe he has farming in his blood and it's a good profession.*

A further report mentioned that he had ability in maths *and would do well if his studies were continued*. However, that was not to be: at the age of 14 Dad's formal education ended and he went to work on the family farm, later becoming a founder member of Dorrington Young Farmers Club. A few years ago my wife Hannah asked Dad whether he had actually wanted to be a farmer. He replied that there hadn't been any choice, but he'd actually wanted to be a vet. Bank Farm was a mixed farm so Dad was able to work with animals (once he had been persuaded to get out of bed, a problem he had with me about 40 years later) and indeed in addition to pure farmwork he was engaged to buy and sell livestock on behalf of others. I have happy memories of going round the livestock markets at Shrewsbury, Bridgnorth, Craven Arms & Ludlow with him. On one occasion when I was perhaps 5 or 6 years old I shared the back seat of Dad's Wolseley with a big sheep on a journey from I think somewhere near Welshpool to Bank Farm.

It may have been at about this period that Dad and his friend Bryan Farmer (and others, no doubt) used to go about on a motorbike. I expect that Dad rode pillion otherwise he would have been unable to light his pipe as they

went along. His pipe was a long-term companion and many of the photographs we have of him include a pipe gripped between his teeth. (Once he dramatically set fire to an entire box of matches *with one hand*, whilst trying to light his pipe *and* drive the car; mother was not amused). He told me that, as an asthmatic, he was taken to a doctor in Harley Street whilst in his teens and was advised by the physician that the recommended remedy was to smoke a pipe. How times have changed! But, if a coughing fit started, Dad would light his pipe and the coughing would subside. About 20 years ago Dad went on a bus trip to a tractor factory in Austria: he returned having seen the price of tobacco in the Duty Free and, realising the amount of tax he was paying, quit smoking immediately. Well, that was his story: I personally believe that he gave up his pipe after accidentally setting fire to his tractor and melting the dashboard.

It must have been in the 1950s that Dad noted that (or perhaps took advantage of the fact that) Bank Farm shared a boundary with the Domestic Science College at Radbrook, whose inmates must have been not only predominantly young and female but also presumably good at cooking and housekeeping. I will not dwell too much on whether there was a hole in the hedge otherwise this will start to feel like a Carry On Film; but he met Radbrook student Mary Bott, marrying her in September 1963 at Meole Brace church following a courtship involving many trips to Liverpool and then Ellesmere where she worked. Obviously Christopher and I cannot comment about their early years together. In photographs and cine-film they look very happy, with Dad grinning so much he probably bit his pipe in half, even whilst trying to light a primus stove in sand-dunes and a gale at Borth or Abersoch.

The happiness was surely tested in the 1970s by my mother's illness to which she finally succumbed just before their 16th wedding anniversary. It is difficult for me think of that time, now 35 to 40 years ago, and Dad very rarely spoke of it; as well as having to cope with that illness and two young sons, it came at a time when arrangements had to be made to sell Bank Farm and see the farmland destroyed for housing, though the house remains. What does stick in my mind, however, is the practical help, generosity and support of my parents' friends and relations -- you know who you are -- some being here today.

The move in 1981 to the farm of his late uncle Billy Brookes, at Eaton Constantine, marked the beginning of the last third of Dad's life, fresher in the

memory, starting with his well-intended, but sadly short, unsuccessful remarriage. New activities, in addition to existing interests in photography, birds and maps, beer and whisky, included researching family history, going to evening classes and a visit about 12 years ago to the Public Record Office in London: I joined him there and we were thrilled when he found the original papers detailing his great-great-grandfather's service at the Battle of Trafalgar. Similarly he got to grips with the internet and was moved to obtain, by email, paperwork regarding his grandfather's upbringing in a Bristol orphanage in the 1870s. But his more difficult and more impressive hobby was wood-turning. At the house there are many chisels, and books and video-tapes teaching turning skills, and some of you have seen the round wooden things he made, from egg-cups to bowls to table legs, and we are proud of the pedestal he made which is in Eaton Constantine Church. It is regrettable that Dad's infirmity in recent years prevented him from sitting at his lathe turning logs into articles of beauty, and using the rejects and offcuts for lighting the fire.

Early one morning at Eaton I heard from my bed a sudden gunshot in the house. I went down the corridor to Dad's bedroom and found him in a nightshirt, at his window, holding his a shotgun, having missed a rabbit on the lawn. A cat appeared, looked disappointed at the lack of a corpse, and slunk off. The shotgun was used to rather more frightening, if practical, effect 16 years ago when Chris was at home convalescing following a few months in hospital. A large rat had got into the back kitchen so Dad got Chris, who had only recently re-learnt to walk, to get up onto the table, with instructions to use a broom to poke a pile of stuff in the corner where the rat was lurking, *and if I look like firing put your fingers in your ears!* Dad later told me that he'd used both barrels to kill the rat, he and Chris had gone deaf for a couple of days, and the rat looked like spaghetti bolognaise with a tail.

It may owe to his not having had the opportunity to become a vet that neither Chris nor I ever came under pressure to go into agriculture and we *hope* that our careers elsewhere have been no disappointment. I know I'd have been a terrible farmer. By contrast, we *know* that our marriages, first Chris to Karen, then Hannah and me, and recently his 3 young grandchildren, Ryan, Megan and Toby, brought him happiness. The first time Dad met Hannah he even put in his hearing aids after a while, which I thought most encouraging. Having had the

nickname *Grandad* at school, eventually, not before time, he became one in reality.

In the summer of 1945 Mr D P Biggs, MA, Headmaster of Kingsland Grange, reported to my grandparents that *Geoffrey is a boy on whom I can always thoroughly rely: he is always interested and keen in everything that he does*. 70 years later Chris and I can agree that Geoffrey / Geoff/ Dad was a man on whom we could always thoroughly rely; we did rely on him for nearly 50 years and we are grateful to him for that.

The shock of Dad's sudden death is mitigated by the knowledge that it was quick, probably very quick. He had returned home towards midnight from the pub, had a small meal, gone upstairs and died. They say "you can't take it with you" but he seems to have taken at least beer and black-pudding with him, so his departure was in keeping with his character, so he left us in some style, leaving a loving family, a valid driving-licence and 20 acres of the Shropshire countryside that he knew so well.

JR Jones
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