

Blue Plaque ceremony : Friday 16 June 2023 : 4pm : Sir Leslie Kirkley : 25 Capel Close

Paul's Speech

In 1927, when Dad was just 16, Max Ehrmann wrote in "*Desiderata*" ...

"Go placidly among the noise and haste and remember what peace there may be in silence."

"Speak your truth quietly and clearly and listen to others, even the dull and ignorant, they too have their story."

It seemed that Dad adopted that approach through life, which he took at a steady to brisk walking pace. He had met his first wife, Elsie, through a walking club, took us as children on seemingly endless walks on Sundays and Christmas Day (often through mud) and participated fully in the Oxfam Walks in the 1960s, including walking the full 30 miles from Reading to Oxford overnight. And never with boots – just stout shoes.

That exemplifies his solid, basic nature. Not at all pretentious, but he was well-read.

His favourites were the biographies and autobiographies of great people. But he also enjoyed John Le Carre's spy stories and stories of political intrigue.

Such reading must have helped his approach to his work, and to the great variety of people that he met. He regularly watched Match of the Day on Saturday nights, but not as a team supporter – probably more for the co-operative endeavour and strategy than for the score. His favourite card game was a form of patience which involved strategic thinking about many options with no going back once a move was made – like chess – and perhaps like leading Oxfam.

I have been told that he could not only "speak his truth quietly and clearly and listen to others", but that he could do so for hours on end until he won others over (or perhaps wore them down?):

In other words – "He could talk the hind leg off a donkey".

He would have out-walked one too – especially after talking to it.

In the early days of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, Dad did all the travelling to monitor aid projects.

Mum often had to load "The Camel" for overseas trips. And no ! – IT WASN'T A LIVE ONE:

It was a camel-hide bag acquired on an earlier journey.

Perhaps just as well, when visiting Muslim countries, that it had superseded its predecessor "The Pig".

We had a World Map on the wall at home where – for one particularly long 6-week absence – we tracked his progress right round the world. News then came by telegram – or telex.

It was the telex address – OXFAM – that the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief soon adopted as its name.

He once flew into Biafra. It was on a night plane, flying without lights to get through the Nigerian blockade, delivering aid to the beleaguered breakaway state. He said there were no seats, and suspected that the boxes he sat on were full of ammunition for Colonel Ojukwu. That seems quite likely. His sole fellow passenger was Frederick Forsyth researching for his latest book *The Dogs of War*.

On a much more comfortable flight, his neighbour asked what he did, so having told her, asked her line of business. The answer came back, "I am Joanna Lumley!" He'd had no idea!

I was privileged, through the generosity of a family friend, to accompany Dad on his last Oxfam field trip – to Bangladesh. Going up country in an unassuming Jeep (*with a live chicken in the back which our guide later fed on cockroaches, then fed to us, curried, the next day*) we were held up waiting for a ferry.

There was an interminable delay.

Eventually the guide went to seek the cause and was told that the ferry was waiting up river for some important passenger to arrive at the quay, but the big car hadn't arrived.

It turned out that Dad, in the Jeep, WAS the expected passenger, so was waiting for his own arrival!

As children, we used to be fascinated by the strange gifts he used to bring us from far-away places. However, he once sent Mum a pair of wooden bowls, addressed "Kirkley: Care of Oxfam". Oxfam took care of them alright! They'd assumed that these were a donation and sold them in the local Oxfam shop – a small beginning to many years of Fair Trade.

On retirement in 1974, Dad and Mum moved from Upland Park Road – just up the road and also within walking distance of the Oxfam office then in Summertown. They went to just outside Oxford, so as to be less readily-available to staff who were having to adapt to work with a new Director.

However, he never seemed to stop working – evenings and weekends included - and had to travel often to London, so it was not long before they moved back into Oxford: to this house.

He had been pivotal in setting up the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC) which meant that leading charities took turns in administering Emergency Aid appeals, rather than competing with each other for donations.

He became a Crown Agent, one of three appointed to sort out previous mismanagement of that organisation, and had a role in many charities.

He was honoured in many ways:

- a CBE – from Queen Elizabeth
- a Papal Knighthood – Knight Commander of the Order of St Sylvester
- The Victor Gollancz medal
- Head Shepherd of a remote hamlet in Greece: he came home with a small shepherd's crook
- A Knighthood – from the Queen, conferred by Prince Charles

That last resulted in Oxfam's publicity agents sending a caricature of him as a Knight – in his beige woolly cardigan (but, as a pacifist, carrying no weapons) with a helmet under one arm and, on the other, a shield emblazoned with ...

- Red & white roses of Lancashire and Yorkshire (for his origins);
- Paint pots and brushes (for the Quaker firm which employed him after dismissal as a conscientious objector);
- Oxford's **Ox** and **Ford** – of course!
- and Oxfam's logo – a schematic plant: I paraphrase from Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*: "... **whoever could make two ears of corn ... grow ... where only one grew before, would deserve better of mankind, and do more essential service than (most)**"

That drawing came with a corruption of a biblical phrase ...

"An honour is not without profit, except in its own country"

However, as a modest man, Dad took little note of honours:

But one likes to think that Oxfam reaped the profits, to apply to its projects abroad.