

FJW Funeral Tribute

Dad's political career, his objectives and ambitions in life were fundamentally changed in 1955 when his uncle, Charles Williams MP, unexpectedly passed the Caerhays Estate to him at his death.

Dad was a second son and the youngest of three children who were brought up at Werrington Park near Launceston as the threat of war loomed. His career path was a familiar one at the time for those who were not likely to inherit a large landed estate. He had little interest in shooting, plants, land management or following his father's interest in the sea. Once he was famously discovered in a summer house in Middle Wood reading a political book during a pigeon shoot and firing the occasional shot out of the window for effect. Quite a crime at the time.

So a conventional education, starting at Beaudesert prep school, and then moving on to Eton in the war years. Dad claimed to be the fifth closest boy to the bomb which fell on Upper School. Before he could move on to Cambridge national service was required from 1945-8. Dad donned a uniform and gained the unlikely title of Leading Aircraftsman in the RAF. His service seemed to mainly involve distributing the wages and the cigarettes to servicemen in Austria guarding POWs. He occasionally spoke about the horrors of Europe in the aftermath of war and of a colleague swallowing his own tongue when drunk in a nearby bunk. Such was the military career which he would have detested.

Dad became chairman of the Cambridge University Conservative Association in 1950 and, with the help and support of his lifelong friend, Henry Pickthorn, he became president of the Cambridge Union in 1951. A city job followed briefly with the accountancy firm Spicer and Pegler. However a political career path had now been firmly established. Dad contested the safe labour seat of All Saints, Birmingham, in 1955 and was then adopted for the safe tory seat of Plymouth Drake.

Politics had however to be set aside when he met Delia Marshall, eldest daughter of Campbell and Virginia Marshall from St Mawes. They were married on 10th November 1956. Inheriting Caerhays and a death duties bill of a million pounds must have been a life changing surprise. Who can imagine what Dad's full political career might have achieved?

Instead Dad approached his new duties as custodian of the Caerhays Estate with humility and trepidation. Family life was quickly established as my mother struggled to renovate Caerhays from the wartime evacuees. Having ignored gardening completely for the first 30 years of his life Dad became an ardent self-taught and knowledgeable gardener. Books rather than a spade were the key and Dad's photographic memory for maths and figures was diverted to learning about Chinese rhododendrons. Tours of the garden as children meant microscopes at the ready to determine the difference between lepidote and elepidote rhododendrons prior to making crosses. Evenings were spent removing endless camellia and staphylea seeds from their pods ready for sowing.

In the first 10 years of Dad's tenure at Caerhays manpower and horses gave way to machinery. Indoor baths and lavatories replaced the privy at the end of the garden. It was a time of great change and the need for capital investment had to take second place to tax until another uncle, P M Williams, passed Burncoose Estate and the last pieces of the Williams Cornish Mining business to Dad and covered much of the shortfall himself.

During this time Dad was totally reliant on his trusted farm manager, Jim Trudgeon, and Philip Tregunna, the head gardener. South Devon cattle breeding was as much of interest as Forrest's Chinese plant introductions.

Dad's ambition had not gone away; it now simply changed in emphasis. He regarded himself as uniquely fortunate to have inherited Caerhays and determined to spend his life giving back to Cornwall what Cornwall had so unexpectedly given to him. His lifetime was to be spent serving the community not for prestige or power and certainly not for any remuneration but to give back what he had not at that time earned or deserved. To understand Dad you must understand this. The previous Lord Waldegrave once told me that the next generation would never be able to commit to or afford such a lifestyle. He was entirely right!

We celebrate today a lifetime of service to Cornwall. If you live to 91 and have been retired for 20 years the cathedral is never going to be full and memories are short. There are however many many people, charities and Cornish organisations who have directly and indirectly benefited from Dad's tireless work. He would have vigorously decried such an accolade but few local politicians could claim to have done so much or left this sort of legacy. I quote Sir Richard Carew-Pole who wrote to me: Julian knew the county so well, its history, culture and how it all worked but, above all, he understood, respected and loved the Cornish character – independent minded, stubborn, true to his word, loyal and sometimes 'quirky'! Real people – not pomposity.

Dad was elected as an independent to Cornwall County Council in 1967. He remained as county councillor until he retired in 1989. He was never opposed at an election during that time or as chairman which he became in 1980. Cornwall remained the last English county council in which old fashioned 'independents' held a majority and party politics played a second fiddle. Dad always argued that this allowed Cornish taxpayers' money to be spent more wisely and judiciously. His opponents and many Tories felt he was too controlled by the officials. The argument was however conducted with respect. In the 1980s the chairman's job was more or less fulltime with many evening functions and innumerable speeches. Dad eventually also became vice-chairman of the Local Government Association and greatly enjoyed the trips to London where he could meet his old political friends from parliament. In 1986 Dad was made a Commander of the British Empire at an investiture in Buckingham Palace which Henry Pickthorn attended in uniform as chauffeur. I do not think anyone was driving anywhere after the following celebratory lunch at the Stafford Hotel!

Dad's second 'big' job was as a member of the Prince of Wales' Council from 1969-85. The young Prince Charles occasionally escaped from naval service at Dartmouth to Caerhays and came to enjoy the garden as much as his grandmother who was also a regular visitor. Dad and Lord Franks were the only two council members who had any genuinely Cornish connections at a time when the Duchy was looking to its Cornish estates to increase its income. Dad and Mum attended Charles and Diana's wedding but Dad was never to become a fan of Diana. In this he may well have been in a minority which has somewhat expanded as time has moved on.

Very few aspects of Cornish life did not involve Dad in some role. One of his favourite annual events was the annual Young Farmers rally. Dad was president of the YFC from 1963 to 1989. Although Dad's sporting achievements were less than negligible he was president of the Cornwall Cricket club from 1967 to 2006. He became a JP in 1970 and served (mainly on Wednesdays) on the St Austell bench when drug problems first emerged in that area. One day he was chairing the bench when asked to deal with Cornwall's first 'naughty' shop trading illegally. A registry office wedding was taking place next door featuring members of the Bugle branch of the Wild West Society. They all came dressed as cowboys. Amidst this cacophony, 'Squire' was approached by a grubby lawyer who whispered: 'Your Worships, I've brought along a box of goodies to show you'. Exhibit A was a wind-up 'Willy Wonker' which, when unleashed, shot across the table and landed in Squire's lap: 'That will do, thank you. We've seen quite enough'. His last major job was as chairman of the Royal Institute of Cornwall from 1998 to 2005. A job he greatly enjoyed until there was an 'accounting problem' with the catering. Fraud was one thing but the laws relating to staff contracts were rather beyond him by then.

One looks today in amusement at a youthful Dad parading in his High Sheriff's uniform in 1968 and in full flow at the Birmingham hustings. Caerhays and Cornwall have been very fortunate that he gave his life to the community rather than to national politics.

The annual outings to the Royal Cornwall Show, where Dad always boasted he was in charge of lavatories, give an insight into how well known in Cornwall he actually was. It was impossible to move without someone accosting Dad with their moans, problems or needs for the future. The older and rather more pleasant aspects of political life and political work were an integral part of Dad's life.

And, oh dear, the laugh! Booming through the room of the tricky committee meeting, the absurdity of a public event (often shared quietly with George Falmouth) and always at home. An inspiring sound to us all which we will never forget. It is somewhat ironic that one of the funniest meetings Dad ever enjoyed was an episode at the Portloe Harbour Commissioners. Some commissioners were rather 'at sea' due to an intake of strong mineral water and the intemperate argument raged about harbour dues. Dad would really have laughed to know that one of the main (and well loved) protagonists who eventually fell asleep at the meeting is today in charge of the digging in the churchyard.

If you achieve Dad's great age one of his sadnesses in life was to miss his great friends – John Trudgeon, Bettie Town, Tommy Carlyon, Alistair Sampson, Hugh Colson, Keith Scott – I could go on.

Dad was as loving and generous to his family as any father could possibly be. Once he lost his lifelong partner after her long illness the savagery of alzheimers in destroying a brilliant and erudite mind has been very painful for the family to watch.

Let us remember the laughter and the achievements which are very unlikely to be matched in public life in Cornwall in our generation or for many generations to come.

CHW

19th January 2019