

Michael Penny

1917 - 2016

I never met Michael so it may seem a bit odd that I should stand here and tell you – who knew him so well - about his life. However I believe that every person has a story which should be told, and that it is important to do this as we mark the end of their time on earth. So I'm indebted to Stephen and Judy for the information that has helped me to prepare this short tribute. After that we'll hear some personal memories from Catherine of Michael as a grandfather.

Tribute

Michael was born at 11pm on 28th July 1917, in the family home at Greenway House in Taunton. His parents were Will and Fanny and he had an older brother – Dick.

Will was a pillar of Taunton society. He was Mayor of Taunton, a leading member of the Baptist Church and ran a timber importing business. His commitments to good works meant that he was often away from home, and this upbringing may have inspired a slightly non-conformist streak in his son.

Michael went to Sidcot School where he performed averagely in the classroom and outstandingly on the sports field. He was captain of the Rugby and Cricket teams and also excelled at tennis and hockey. His school shoes, which were comfortable and extremely well made, lasted him a life time and could always be polished up for special occasions, which is why they are here today.

After leaving school Michael joined his father and older brother in the family firm, TS Penny, which was based in Wood Street in Taunton. During his apprenticeship Michael travelled with his father to Scandinavia to pick out and order the timber that was to be imported to England.

Michael was twenty-two when war broke out. As he was working in a reserved occupation he was not required to fight and his family wished him to remain at work in Taunton, where the company was now making boxes for ammunition. However Michael wanted to join up and, in 1941, he travelled to Exeter where he joined the RAF.

Michael loved flying – he flew spitfires and later became an instructor for new pilots. He considered his time in the RAF to be the high spot of his life and wished to make flying his career. Instead, he bowed to family pressure and returned to the timber business.

Michael met Jean Crease at the Woodstock Road tennis club. They were married in 1946 at Wilton Church in Taunton and settled in Lewis Road, where Stephen was born. The family then moved to Little Canonsgrove, in Trull, where Michael and Jean were to live for more than forty years.

Sport continued to be an important part of Michael's life, especially tennis, squash and hockey. He also enjoyed gambling, walking, bird watching and trips to the wilder and remoter parts of the country like Lundy, the Scillies and the Lake District. Harlyn Bay in Cornwall was a regular spot for family holidays. He and Jean were very sociable, entertaining friends at Little Canonsgrove and Michael would play tennis and croquet with Stephen and take him to see the rugby at Twickenham.

The rise of national chains, like Jewsons and Travis Perkins, meant that the writing was on the wall for family timber firms. Michael could see that TS Penny's days as a timber importer were numbered so he and his brother began to build up a property portfolio so that TS Penny could continue in a new guise. When the timber business was sold Michael went to work for Colthurst's - the opposition - and later continued to sell timber products. One of his jobs involved selling skittle balls, which gave him the opportunity to visit pubs all over Somerset.

Michael retired but continued to play sport - keeping his squash going until he was 69. He took up golf and bridge and had many friends, some of whom joined him on trips to the races. He was a proud grandfather to Catherine, Lizzie and Robert and enjoyed their visits to Little Canonsgrove.

In the eighties Michael decided that he wanted to visit America. Jean no longer wished to travel so Michael set off alone. He travelled up the West Coast in a hire car, visited relatives in Canada and thoroughly enjoyed his holiday, which he continued to talk about for many years.

In 1998 Jean suffered a major stroke which left her very incapacitated. She moved into Beauchamp House and Michael sold Little Cannonsgrove and settled in a centrally heated bungalow in Fivehead, which he thought was bliss after the draughts and upkeep of an old house. He continued to be devoted to Jean, visiting her every day until her death in 2003.

Michael moved into Beauchamp House in 2008 and lived happily there for the rest of his life. He was much loved by the staff and remained healthy both physically and mentally. He was exceedingly grateful to have had a long and happy life.

Catherine, would you now like to share your memories:

Catherine's tribute

Dad's going to say a bit at the party later but I'm going to mention some grandchildren memories of Michael.

One of the oldest is an indirect memory in a way - when we were growing up, Lizzie, Robert and I all learnt from Dad how Michael had taught him - firmly - not to be a bad loser, after a game of croquet - and that's still what I think of if I'm tempted to be moody after losing something.

We remember Michael, and Jean, as loving grandparents. The warmth and fun of the atmosphere at Little Cannonsgrove, Jean and Michael's happy marriage. Their home was very cosy, in the kitchen with the ticking clock, with cans of Lilt lined up in the larder - that Lizzie loved, carob for Robert because we thought he had a daily intolerance, in the playroom with the dark red stove, the TV with Michael's racing, snooker, tennis or any other sport on, and the views of the beautiful garden, around the Christmas fire, the annual ritual of wheeling what at the time seemed like a huge TV into the dining room and watching The Snowman together. I had a particularly lovely time staying there once while Mum and Dad were away in Menorca - exploring the secret upstairs, and going through Jean's costume jewellery and button trove.

The garden was pretty magical with a spooky pond through an Orchard, a huge pampas grass island, all sorts of fruit and vegetables, Bob somewhere in amongst all of it, and cats Jack and Jill.

I remember Michael telling us his own memories of his family - his understanding of his own birth as so special as two of his three older brothers had died a year earlier, and his mother thought at 40 she would not have any more children, his war stories, his grief at mother's death in his 20s.

Michael lived long enough to have a lot of life after Jean died in 2003. He was clearly devastated to lose her, and not infrequently tearful about it.

But Michael was the positive man I've known. He bought himself some trainers, that he called his crumpet catchers, and made the most of what he could do. He was always raising our eyebrows about what he thought he could do - not many months ago when he really couldn't walk much he tried on his Speedos and wondered about going swimming, and he thought he'd like a pair of ice-skates for Christmas this year.

Lots of people have sent thoughtful letters of condolence to Dad and the family and some themes have helped me pin down how I remember Michael - we and others remember him as kind, gentle, enjoying a tale and some banter and particularly for his cheerful and optimistic outlook - an inspiration.