

A celebration of life

Raymond Edwin Wilsdon

25th June 1921 – 5th December 2015

3pm 21st December 2015 Oxford Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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TRIBUTE

Ray was born in East Oxford on 25th June 1921, ten minutes ahead of his twin brother Cyril. The twins had an older brother, Kenneth and, in due course, a younger sister, Nancy. Their parents were Alice and Frank Wilsdon. Frank ran a successful grocery business, which allowed him to send his children to Southfield Grammar School. The twins had to go into school with labels on them to distinguish one from another.

Until Ray was diagnosed with Rheumatic Fever – wrongly as it turned out much later - and had to spend a year in bed convalescing. By the time he was judged fit to go back to school Cyril was in a different class – and there was no need for labels.

Frank Wilsdon died when Ray and Cyril were only 10. A major blow. The grocery business failed soon after.

Ray had had ideas of becoming an architect – or a farmer (there were a lot of farmers on his mother's side of the family). In the event he was unable to do either of these. When he left school at fourteen he joined a local drawing office and became a draughtsman – initially on car body design for Pressed Steel. With the onset of World War II he switched to designing aircraft components.

This was a reserved occupation, so while his twin Cyril joined the RAF, Ray remained at his drawing board for the duration.

After the War, Ray designed refrigerators then returned to car production for about ten years. For the remainder of his working life he was a finance and administration manager in the purchasing department of Pressed Steel Fisher. Experience which was to prove vital in later years when he was treasurer to the Parish Hall and secretary, treasurer and later vice president of the Friends of Old Headington.

In 1949 a young, newly trained physiotherapist called Pauline Milford arrived in Oxford and took lodgings in a house in Cowley. One of the other lodgers invited her to join a local tennis club that rented a court from Oriel College during the summer vacations. Where she met Ray and Cyril.

Ray was, apparently, very impressed with Pauline – because every time she missed the ball she said “shit”. The feeling was mutual.

Ray's fanatical interest in golf waned in favour of investigating local pubs with Pauline.

Which culminated in a wedding. - on 25th August 1951 in Cainscross Church in Stroud – where Pauline's parents were now living. The couple honeymooned in Ventnor on the Isle of Wight for 1 week.

Soon after they had the house built in Barton Lane – where they were to live for the rest of their lives.

Pauline and Ray discovered they were both interested in horses. One of Pauline's patients had a couple of what she calls “old nags”. The pair had lessons from a retired Major who had taught rookies in the Household Cavalry. Their first session was totally devoted to naming of the parts - of the horse and the tack. It didn't put Ray and Pauline off.

They went to Point-to-Point horse racing for many years firstly as a couple then as a family with Michael and Tony and often with brother Cyril and his partner. Not so much for the horses says Pauline – “purely to gamble”.

They went pony trekking in Llanwrtyd Wells in Wales. The tiny town was trying to establish a tourist trade by repurposing the ponies normally used for shepherding. The place is now better known for the World Bog Snorkelling Championships. Pauline’s pony was slow. Ray’s was fast. To make things worse Pauline started to feel unwell. First signs of pregnancy.

Mike was born in 1957. Here he is, grown up a bit, with a poem for his father:

MIKE:

HE IS GONE

You can shed tears that he is gone
Or you can smile because he has lived
You can close your eyes and pray that he will come back
Or you can open your eyes and see all that he has left
Your heart can be empty because you can't see him
Or you can be full of the love that you shared
You can turn your back on tomorrow and live yesterday
Or you can be happy for tomorrow because of yesterday
You can remember him and only that he is gone
Or you can cherish his memory and let it live on
You can cry and close your mind, be empty and turn your back
Or you can do what he would want: smile, open your eyes, love and go on.

David Harkins

Now it’s his brother’s turn... Tony?

TONY:

With two sons in the house, Ray headed out into the back garden and built a trailer tent from a kit. A tent that was towed across Europe many times for very happy family holidays.

In the 1970s a chance meeting at a party with an Oxford Don – Dr Bruce Mitchell – persuaded Ray and Pauline to try Beagling – first with the Radley College and then the Christ Church and New College Beagles. In 1980 they joined the Dummer Beagles in the Cotswolds – which really suited them. Ray took on the job of treasurer – his years in the Purchase Department of Pressed Steel coming into good use.

Ray’s sons, Mike and Tony, explained the appeal of beagling thus: the hare pursued by the beagles runs round the edge of it’s territory. If you’re young and fit – and it must be said – enthusiastic – you can run with the beagles. If you’re older, less fit or more sensible – you can stand in the middle of the field and watch the chase – while having a bit of a chat. It’s a wonderful way to understand the English countryside – and country pubs. The day could be rounded out with an “eggy tea” at a pub. An “eggy tea” is a boiled egg and a whisky mac.

Friends in the Cotswolds would often give Pauline and Ray gifts of pheasants from the shoot. It became their habit to take the meat they wanted and toss the carcass over the hedge in front of the house to feed the local wildlife. It would disappear overnight.

Pauline remembers Ray as a great lover of the countryside – and the fact that he was a good DIY man about the house. A useful combination.

Here's Ray and Pauline's friend Richard Russell with his memories:

RICHARD RUSSELL:

As you've heard, Ray was very active in Old Headington's local affairs – contributing his time to the Friends of Old Headington and to the Parish Hall, year after year. For which he is remembered. Pauline has given me a few of the many kind letters she has received. I'll read as much as the time allows:

From Robert Grimley:

“On behalf of the Friends of Old Headington I would like to express to you and your family our deep condolences on Ray's death. Our members, and especially the current trustees, remain vividly aware how deeply indebted to him we and all residents of Old Headington are for the strong, active and loving commitment to this area which he and other like-minded people demonstrated in the 1960s, when the character of Old Headington was under threat from a proposed development of land at Church Hill Farm.

The impressive thing was that he, and those who collaborated with him in seeing off that insensitive plan, did not allow this success to be just a flash in the pan, but the initiative would be sustained and developed, as the Friends of Old Headington became a continuing group with the wider remit of protecting what we love about the whole of Old Headington. This continuing commitment on his part included his work for the Parish Hall, as well as his service as a key officer of the Friends, most recently as our Vice-President.”

From Ronnie Sonneyborn:

“It was always a pleasure for me to be at the Friends committee meeting when Ray was present. Gentle, good humoured and with enormous background knowledge his contribution to those meetings was substantial. And that was without mentioning his meticulous work as treasurer. He truly gave a lot to the community.”

From Adrian and Norma Williams:

“Whenever I see a neighbour in the street I will begin to think of reasons why I will have to hurry on. But whenever I saw Ray come into view I always used to think, “Good show, this is going to be good fun” – and so it always proved. Alas that hasn't been possible for several years and I have missed our conversations. Of course he will be missed by many in the village for all the things he did for us over so many years, and you will read and hear the public tributes with pride and pleasure. And there will be

many other little tributes, such as this one – no less deserved for being little.”

From Kathleen Williams:

“I think back on the real Ray we have lost, kindly, aptly humorous, generous with his time to support and help others, an appreciator of the countryside. He was so much a part of the foundations of the Friends in the earlier days. Building up sound contacts and practices before other Conservation groups got going. You too were part of this work which we have all benefitted from over the years. It was always pleasant to work with Ray. He got things done without brow beating or tensions, in his own unassuming way. There is much we can be thankful for to you both.”

From Jill:

“Ray did so much for Headington and I very much valued his time as Treasurer of the Parish Hall. He did the job so well and efficiently for many years. I remember how helpful he was when I rang him with a query and always was given such good and sensible advice.”

Ray remained active – not just in local affairs. He attended a Dummer function on his 90th birthday.

Sadly the last function. Dementia took its grip. But, with the help of carers, he remained at home with Pauline. Until – after only one night in a care home – he died on 5th December. Just the day after the whole family – Pauline, Michael and Tony – had been with him.