

A Celebration of the Life of

John Barry Elliott (Barry)

7 November 1933 – 28 March 2024

12 July 2024, Lauderdale House

Celebrant: Kate Hobson



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Introduction

Barry Elliot's ashes were buried in Highgate Cemetery on 12 July 2024. After a short ceremony there, the mourners walked through Waterlow Park up to Lauderdale house for the celebration of his life. That short journey held great meaning, as they were walking in Barry's footsteps. In his later years he had spent many happy hours in the park and enjoyed many cups of coffee in the Lauderdale House café.

After a long and fulfilling life Barry died very suddenly and without distress – at least to him. For the kind barber, Farzad, in whose chair he died, it was a terrible shock, and as the news was passed to his wife Kathy and beyond, the shock waves radiated out across London, the UK and several continents. And while that was very hard to absorb, most are agreed that he would have been satisfied with his death, and would even have found it funny.

On the day he died he was planning to visit the bookshop after his haircut, and the gym later in the day. He had already circled in the Radio Times the programmes he wanted to listen to in the evening. He also had 20 pages of his library book left to read – *An Unnatural Death* by Patricia Cornwall! Death took him kindly – he had no worries on the day he died, was in a place where he felt at ease, and had plenty to look forward to. And that is all that anyone could have asked.

His connections were numerous and far-reaching – whether through family, neighbourhood, shared endeavour or shared interest. He was a private man, but a good listener – and someone you could also be silent with. Friends and family have noted his kindness, generosity, wisdom and wit; his intelligence and caring nature; his willingness to help anybody out; his beautiful speaking voice and expressive hands. They admired his boundless curiosity and ability to pack everything into life in the most creative and interesting way. In short, he was 'amazing'!

Tribute

I shall talk a little about some of the things that made him the man he was. For this, Kathy has kindly opened to me copies of Barry's memoir, his retirement and 80th birthday books, and the many words that have been sent to her in recent weeks, and I have shamelessly dug that ground for the words that follow.

Barry was born in November 1933 in the coal mining town of Conisbrough in Yorkshire. The industry was dirty, difficult and dangerous – but a key part of the British economy – and mining communities were tough, hardworking and proud.

Barry grew up without a father, who died not long after he was born. His mother Laura had to work to keep Barry and his older brother Peter, and so they lived with their grandparents, Ernest and Laura, and spent much of their time with their cousins, particularly Marilyn, Patricia and Roger, who thought of Barry as a brother, a bond that has never weakened.

They had no money but there were always adventures to be had and mischief to be played – fishing for tiddlers in the river, and sitting in the stocks near the castle, or throwing stones down the chimney (they didn't do that a second time!).

Ernest was the undisputed head of the family – he wasn't to be crossed and held certain privileges to himself, like his newspaper, which never left his side, and his right to spend as long as he liked in the pub *and* have a hot dinner waiting for him at home. He had no hesitation in giving Barry a clout when he misbehaved, but he also seemed to have a soft spot for him – when Barry was very young he'd creep early out of bed and find his grandpa downstairs sitting in his chair by the fire. No-one else was yet about, and they would share a cup of tea with condensed milk and a good slug of rum, and a slice of bread and sugar. Perhaps his grandpa saw a little of his young self in Barry.

As for many small boys, the war was an exciting time – jumping out of bed when the air raid warning sounded and going down to the tiny cellar where the apples were stored, and later to the Anderson shelter in the garden; sifting through rubble for treasures – from bits of shrapnel to parts of crashed enemy aircraft. They weren't bombed directly, but suffered hits from stray bombs aimed at prime targets in Sheffield and Doncaster. Barry learnt a valuable lesson when he and Peter threw a live bullet into the fire, having failed to make it explode by other means. Peter was lucky not to lose his hand and Barry, who'd put him up to it in the first place, was more worried about what would happen if they were found out.

At 13, Barry became a pupil at Lord Wandsworth College – a boarding school in Hampshire which offered free places to children with only one parent. His mother wanted what she saw as the best for her boys, and Barry was considered lucky – Peter missing out because he was too old. Barry didn't consider this good luck at the time, though, as it was an alien environment with customs that he didn't understand, and friendship groups already established. Barry was slow to make friends and was loathe to lose those he'd made during the two years he was at Mexborough Grammar School, where he'd been perfectly happy.

Like many boarding schools of the time, there was an emphasis on hierarchy and sport, backed up by rules and many beatings. Barry certainly got his fair share, if not more, as he wasn't very good at following rules – his nature was too curious and adventurous. There was also stubbornness – he wanted to make up his own mind about things and resented rules he saw as petty, pointless or exercising power for its own sake. He was the first to admit that at the beginning he broke them unwittingly, but later he did it through bloody-mindedness.

His interest in explosives continued, and he taught himself how to make gunpowder which he encased in a crude device made from scrap piping that he could wedge into a crack in the wall of an old quarry. This way, he created some quite dramatic explosions for his fellow students – and this time no-one was hurt. But word got round and the boys had to stop before it came to the notice of the masters.

Although Barry was never going to come into line with the school, it provided him with a good academic education, and he left with high grades, particularly in languages. But he struggled to find work or a university place, partly because he'd never been given the tools – either by his upbringing or his school – to know how to manage interviews, and partly because of the subjects he'd studied, which had been chosen in line with his mother's aspiration for him to become a dentist. That was one thing he was sure he didn't want to do – he had a romantic view of being a surgeon based on books he'd read about a Russian medical orderly in the First World War, but that was hardly going to get him into Medical School.

Having admitted to himself that he didn't really know what to do, he signed up for his National Service straight away, rather than putting it off till later. In the RAF cadet corps at school he'd learned drill and even some shooting, so it held no fears for him. It was 1951, and the Cold War was beginning to escalate. The government needed more Russian speakers but didn't want to rely wholly on refugees, so were aiming to train up English speakers. Having completed his basic training, Barry was on the verge of being assigned to the Pays Corps – because he could operate a calculator – only to be summoned by the Commanding Officer who had noticed his school reports and asked him if he'd like to learn Russian. Barry didn't see where this was going and said, 'I'd rather learn Spanish, Sir.' 'I'm not talking about bloody Spanish', the CO shouted, 'Do you want to do Russian, man?' Barry promptly changed his answer, and it was to be, as you all know, a pivotal moment in his life and career.

Barry was a natural linguist, but he also applied himself extremely thoroughly to his learning. He was given six months of basic language tuition from Russian speakers on Bodmin Moor, before joining a select group who were transferred to London to the Joint Services School for Linguists, an offshoot of the London School of Russian and East European Studies in Russell Square. This in turn led to the chance of studying for a degree in Russian, which included a grounding in three Slavonic languages, plus a subsidiary in French. He loved it! He graduated in 1952, by which time he had sampled some of the cultural attractions of London – he was drawn particularly to the theatre, where you could get very cheap seats high up in 'the gods'.

He had applied for a couple of jobs, one of which was with the War Office, but his plain speaking and honesty once again tripped him up. He had passed the skills assessment without trouble, but when asked about what he thought of the Colonial Office's work he replied that, now World War Two was ended, its purpose should be to train and help the colonies prepare for independence. They didn't call him back!

So he returned home to Doncaster where he picked up freelance work at the Pergamon Press translating Russian medical and technical articles, and this kept him well occupied until he decided to try again for a regular job. In 1957, a friend sent him an advertisement from the RAF college at Cranwell near Lincoln. They needed Russian speakers to teach officers at the college, and Barry was soon offered the job, only to have the offer withdrawn a few weeks later. He surmised that it must have been on

security grounds. As a student of Russian, he had of course been of interest to the Soviets, and had rebuffed several approaches. One cultural attaché plied him with theatre tickets and later took him to a cosy lush restaurant to sound him out on his politics and attitude to Communism, but Barry nimbly and politely avoided being drawn in and he wasn't contacted again. All this he made very clear to the RAF in a letter, and it worked – the offer was reinstated, and Barry re-accepted.

It proved to be a short-lived interlude however – he spent very few hours teaching because the recruits had so much else on their schedule, but he had to be at his desk the whole teaching day. Although that gave him plenty of time to read and teach himself to type, he couldn't take the boredom for long, and handed in his notice at the end of the summer.

Later that year a friend once again came to his aid by alerting him that the US Air Force Historical Research Institute based in Germany needed Russian-English translators, and he was perfect for the job. He was tempted by the salary and the chance to get out of England and experience another country, and immediately started teaching himself the basics of German. His route to Bad Soden took him via Frankfurt, and he was shocked when he left the station to find himself in a large square piled metres high with stones and rubble, with only a narrow track on the periphery for the trams to rumble round. This was Germany over ten years after end of the War.

His colleagues comprised a motley crew of Russian and Polish émigrés, defectors from Soviet-occupied countries, Yugoslavians, and several younger, university-educated Germans. He was the only native English speaker among them, which made him especially useful to the American staff. The job was to translate or summarise Russian documents, newspaper cuttings or other material – some of it technical and industrial. But looking back, Barry realised that what they were doing was providing target bombing data in case the Cold War grew worse and led to military confrontation.

While he was there he got a taste of German spa town life – the relaxing hot-tubs and saunas at the Kurhaus, and on Sundays an open-air concert and genteel public dancing. He continued to seek out saunas wherever he went, and particularly enjoyed the ones he later found in Finland.

He honed his skills in German by talking to his landlady, and at weekends helped young women practise their English at the German-English Club in Frankfurt. He found it interesting that these young women were more outspoken about the war – they were horrified by Nazi war crimes and felt shame for their parents' generation.

When the Institute closed down, Barry was transferred to the Institute for the Study of the USSR in Munich, which was compiling a 'Who's Who' in the Soviet Union, and in 1967 this in turn led him into broadcasting, for Radio Liberty. As a 'copy-taster', he summarised releases from British and American news agencies to be broadcast in Russian. When he was promoted to Senior News Assistant, one of his tasks was to take

new staff in hand and train them in compiling interesting, succinct, accurate news stories.

When he first arrived in Munich he had no idea he would stay for 13 years. But in 1960 he met his first wife, Catherine, and they had a daughter Caroline, now known as Kerry. Sadly, the marriage came to an end, but a few years later he met and married his second wife, Wendy, who already had a daughter, Robin, and after Heather was born in 1968 they became a family of five.

Wendy and Barry moved back to the UK when Kerry and Robin were ready to go to primary school. Once again, a friend stepped in, helping him to get an interview at the BBC Listening Station in Caversham, near Reading. And once again, he had the perfect skillset for the job – this time translating items transmitted in Russian that might be of interest to the British Government. He and Wendy found a nice house in the village of Sonning Common, and there, in 1971, the family settled down. The monitoring was a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week task, requiring different shifts, often at night, which didn't make it easy to combine his work with family life or time for himself.

Looking back on Barry's career, his next move – to the BBC World Service – feels like a natural, almost inevitable, progression, but Barry never took any job for granted. He always applied himself and earned every posting by deploying his considerable accumulated skills – ever seeking to extend his learning and understanding. Barry's final position, as Head of the Central European and Finnish Service at the BBC, was the peak of an extremely distinguished career.

Even though he left the BBC over 30 years ago – it was compulsory then to retire at 60 – there are friends and colleagues from that time who still remember him with love and respect. The tribute to him in the BBC staff magazine spoke of his dedication and discipline, combined with 'a remarkable ability to win friends and influence people east of Munich'. As head of the South-East European Service he applied 'that consistent mix of system, sensitivity and occasional severity which served him well.' When the Berlin Wall fell, 'He seemed to enjoy the rough and tumble as Western broadcasters rushed and sometimes fell over each other in the scramble for facilities within the territory of the former Warsaw Pact.' And towards the end of his career he 'headed still further east, to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as the advance guard in the latest area of adventure for the World Service'.

Given the political situation and the mix of people working there, it was particularly important to have trust in colleagues, which led to strong bonds – some of Barry's World Service friends go back 50 years. The tributes sent to Kathy are full of praise for a dear man and a gentle manager; a good friend – always a source of advice, an excellent working colleague – responsive, very knowledgeable, totally unflappable, and with huge integrity. As his friend Peter Udell pointed out, Barry was an observer of events but, in a modest and unintentional way, a participant.

Gamon McLellan worked under him at the South-East European Service. He says, 'Being a deputy head can be a difficult and frustrating task. That was the reverse of my experience of Barry.'

And Vladimir Eigenbrot says he admired 'the ease with which [Barry] overcame the psychological barrier inevitable in a communication between recent immigrants from the USSR and a Western free citizen. Barry's sincerity, his kindness and benevolence, his total lack of a condescending tone ... distinguished him very favourably from a few of our English friends.'

Barry liked to ground himself – almost literally – by getting his hands dirty. As a small child he loved moulding lumps of clay into bowls and cups in the back garden in Conisbrough. Whether or not his passion for pottery started there, it went deep. He took classes from the seventies onwards, most recently at the Working Men's College, where he's fondly remembered by fellow potters, and by his tutor, Trish, who describes him as a good thrower, 'quiet and focused ... modest about his abilities and achievements'. She particularly remembers a menorah candle that he threw on the wheel and how, 'after it had been glazed, he lit a candle in it so we could admire it.' He also made some wonderful mosaics and mastered Raku firing. After attending a life sculpture course his imagination found a new outlet, leading him to craft an extraordinary piece inspired by the artists Max Ernst and Gunther von Hagens, famous for his Body Worlds exhibitions.

His allotment gave him another kind of contact with the earth, which he'd developed while helping to 'Dig for Victory' as a child. He spent a lot of time there with his fruit and vegetables, which he brought to the table to enjoy. People remember him as a very good cook and a very generous host – always hospitable, even at very short notice. The garden at home was also his domain, and he decided on all the planting. It was one of the few things he was possessive about, especially when it was invaded by squirrels or cats, which he used to squirt water at when they had the temerity to enter.

Retirement allowed him to expand these activities, and also take some of the pressure off Kathy, who was in full-time work. They had married in 1981 and had a daughter Lydia, whom Barry loved to take to school. It was also an opportunity to meet and get to know other parents at the school gate, or bump into neighbours at the Farmers Market or in the street. They were struck by how open he was and ready to engage. He was always curious about how different people lived and saw life.

Barry had always loved walking, both at home and on holiday, often in the Lake District with family and a copy of Wainright in his hand. But now he embarked on a very different kind of 'walkabout' – a solo round-the-world trip to celebrate his new-found freedom. Starting in Thailand, he then headed via Hong Kong to Brisbane, where he stayed with his brother Peter and his family. Next it was New Zealand, where he was welcomed by friendly hospitable people and explored the stunning landscape of the Coromandel Peninsula by camper van. He then flew over to Vancouver to join Kathy for Christmas.

Kathy's family in Canada had immediately taken Barry to their hearts and between them have strong memories of Barry from visits over the years – pruning trees, helping to build sheds, treating them to dinners of lobster and haddock with Prince Edward Island potatoes, and falling out of his kayak. When he was 80 they wrote to say, 'Barry, you are always, and always will be, young at heart, always there for family and always have a sense of adventure in your soul.' David and Heather have placed flowers and maple leaves in their church in Barry's honour.

On his own side of the family he had always kept in close touch with his cousins and their children, who remember the thoughtful and exciting presents he gave them, including Russian dolls and a microscope, still much treasured.

As you know, family mattered greatly to Barry. He was ever welcoming towards all its members, including his brother Peter's children and Wendy's daughter Robin, who lived with Barry for about 12 years. After he and Wendy divorced they maintained a shared interest in supporting Kerry, Robin and Heather.

That regard for family formed a broad and deep seam through the rock bed of Barry's life, from the days when he and his cousins would run home for tea, only for their grandma to give them a slap round the leg with a wet dishcloth for being late, to the days when he sat telling stories to his own grandchildren.

He loved children and took great joy in watching them run around, sitting on the floor at their level to play with them, reading to them, and joining in any silliness going on including blowing bubbles in drinks, helping them turn somersaults in the air and heading down steep hills on his bottom! He spent many a happy hour with them, reading books and doing all the silly voices – or constructing things out of matchsticks or plasticine, and when they were a bit older he helped them to understand and appreciate art. They loved his mischievous side, which they saw more of than perhaps adults did, and he showed them how to see the lighter side of life if they were feeling sad.

I should like to end by sharing with you some personal perspectives of their dad from his daughters Kerry, Heather and Lydia:

Kerry, Heather and Lydia

'A constant, kind, understanding, gentle and funny presence in my life. Quietly getting his way with a wicked sense of humour, we always laughed together or had ridiculous adventures (him taking me to steal sage from a neighbouring allotment on Christmas Day, him hiding chocolate in the house for him to eat and me slowly stealing it'

'A love of books and stories ... was something we shared and enjoyed together. He loved detective novels and thrillers – we would eagerly await together the publication of the next Dick Francis novel.'

'Better than the books are the stories he told of his Yorkshire adventures, people in the family and his travels'

'He was always up for any kind of adventure and ... was the perfect travelling companion.'

'He was interested in creating and trying out all sorts of different crafts'

'My dad has passed on to me so many things down the years. They have become part of my essence, my very DNA.'

'He was always challenging me to think more about the world ... As I got older he was a friend as well as a dad and I'll always miss him.'

The word that so many of you use when thinking of Barry is 'gentle', and this comes from his focus on others, his spirit of calm, his thoughtfulness and kindness. He didn't give much away about himself, but approached each and every person in a direct, attentive manner, with no pretension or condescension. People felt valued, and so they valued him. A gentleman indeed.