

A Celebration of the Life of

Gerald Howard Vickers (Gerry)

15 December 1924 – 12 March 2025

17 April 2025, Pontefract Crematorium

Celebrant: Hannah McKerchar



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Gerry took the time to put together some notes himself for his funeral, and his family have contributed their thoughts and memories, to build this tribute to a man who is remembered so fondly, and missed so hugely. Gerry was described in print as 'the founding father' of Drax Power Station. But more importantly, he was the actual father of Charles, Ruth and Alison, father-in-law to Carol, John and Ken, Grandpa to Laura, Alastair, Joseph and Lily, and Great-grandpa to George, as well as, by extension, grandfather to Charles's step-son Adrian and Alison's step-children Jonathan and Chelsey, and great-grandfather to Poppy, Brandon, Bradley, Poppy, Annie and Layla.

Gerry's story began in Rotherham in 1924, when he was born. The first child of Cyril and Doris Vickers, he was joined two years later by his sister Margaret, and four years after that by his brother John. Gerry started out life at Hesley Hall Farm, but spent most of his childhood in a new semi detached council house on Doncaster Road. The family were lucky to enjoy the attentions of a young, live-in maid, who Gerry was most impressed by, especially when he managed to persuade (or blackmail) her in to giving him a bedtime kiss.

He was interested in wildlife from a young age, but also enjoyed looking at and reading about cars and he and a friend would sit and 'car spot'. Gerry's particular favourites were the early Jaguar SS models.

Gerry was always bright; though his primary school years were marred by sickness, his teacher brought text books home for him so he could keep up with his studies, and he progressed to the grammar school, where he excelled. During his school years he spent many of his summer holidays at a farm in Firbeck owned by a relative of his father, times he often fondly recalled in later life.

His father couldn't afford to send him to university, but he did go to Rotherham College of Technology, and served a five year technical apprenticeship at Rotherham power station. On completing his apprenticeship Gerry began working first as a junior and subsequently as a control engineer. The Second World War was underway, and as Gerry had been a cadet Sergeant in the Air Training Corps he would have probably been sent for pilot training. Fortunately, his was a reserved occupation, so he wasn't 'called up', and was persuaded not to volunteer by his father, who had lived through the horrors of the trenches in the First World War.

One day, whilst working at Rotherham, Gerry was on the receiving end of a wave from a lovely young lady who had recently joined the typing pool. That was, of course, Audley, and it wasn't long before Gerry was taking her out to the pictures. He always said, he held her hand that night and thought to himself, 'This is the woman I'm going to marry.' And marry her he did, on 3 September 1949, the two of them enjoying a honeymoon in Minehead.

They started their married life in a house in Rawmarsh rented to them by Audley's eldest sister Doreen, and soon afterwards Gerry was promoted to shift engineer at Mexborough power station. He worked shifts for twelve years whilst attending night

school to gain qualifications in both electrical and mechanical engineering, and that expertise, plus his ever-increasing experience, saw his career continue to progress apace, with promotions to Keadby, Thorpe Marsh and Eggborough power stations. Gerry took his work very seriously, but did have the odd reckless moment. On one occasion he and a fellow engineer decided that they ought to investigate a problem at the top of one of the chimneys, only accessible by the steeplejack's ladder up the outside. His colleague soon thought better of it, but Gerry went all the way to the top of the chimney, over 300 feet up. It earned him a reprimand, but also, as he put it, 'gave me a bit of street cred.'

Gerry was widely respected within his field, and when the new station at Drax, which was to be the biggest in Europe, was being planned, he was asked to apply. So it was that, on 1 January 1970, he started work as Superintendent of Drax, telling the watching media, 'As a Yorkshireman born and bred, I am very proud that this great power station is located in this county and that I am to be responsible for its operation.' His office on that first day was a wooden hut in a field, but under Gerry's direction it was rapidly surrounded by an immense construction site, and a temporary camp for several thousand workers involved in the build.

Bomb threats were obviously not uncommon in the 1970s, and there were numerous times when a report would come in claiming one had been planted on site, necessitating a full evacuation and search. It was only after a while that Gerry noticed the claims usually coincided with a meet at one of the local racecourses, and soon put a stop to those impromptu days off!

Gerry commissioned the first three of Drax's six units by 1974, and he described his work at Drax as the pinnacle of his career, and something he was 'absolutely chuffed with'. But he didn't stop there; he was appointed Group Manager for the CEGB in the North-West, then the largest group in the country. That necessitated a move to Cheshire with Audley; Charles, Ruth and Alison were grown up and forging their own paths by then.

On retirement from the CEGB Gerry was offered a job with Sedgwick's Insurance, assessing power station plant. Typically, it only amounted to a few weeks each year, but allowed him to travel the world at someone else's expense and still have some involvement with what he knew best.

Gerry made good friends amongst his work colleagues, like Frank Ledger, who he continued to stay in touch with for the rest of his life, and John Buller. Gerry, Audley, John and his wife Minnie would holiday together in later years, taking their golf clubs up to Crieff in Scotland. He also made a more surprising friend, a toddler who once lived across the road at Keadby, called Alan Parker. He was the eldest boy of a work colleague, who for some reason took a shine to Gerry and Audley. On one occasion, after the family had moved to Hatfield, some 13 miles away, Alan turned up at the door; he was still just a young boy, and had ridden all the way on his push bike. Alan continued to visit all through Gerry and Audley's years in Cheshire, having upgraded to a car, and he

visited Gerry for the last time just a few weeks before his death. Gerry was always pleased to see him and he remains a family friend.

Gerry's work was a big part of his life, but so too were his family, especially having become a dad three times over, and he always made time for fun and games with his children. His shift work actually meant he was around for them a lot more, and he was a real entertainer, frequently jumping out from behind cupboards or trying his hand at roller skating with them. He was fully hands-on from the word go; when Audley was ill after having Alison, Gerry would do the night feed, and prided himself on getting her fed and changed in just ten minutes!

His children all remember family holidays, to the NALGO holiday camp at Cayton Bay where Gerry had used to holiday with his own parents, and then down to the south-west, Croyde in North Devon, with Gerry's sister and brother and their families. They stayed in wooden chalets which made it seem like a bit more of an adventure for the kids. Gerry always made the most of the entertainment, joining in with every competition, and especially the wind-up horse racing! He did have a real competitive spirit; he and Charles spent many hours playing table tennis in the garage at home, and there was no quarter given by the father to his teenage son. But in every other respect he was nothing but supportive to all three of his children as they grew up.

Charles shared his memories of his dad's love of motor vehicles:

One of my earliest memories was of the motorbike and sidecar we had at Keadby in the mid to late 50's until it was traded in for a 1955 Morris Cowley which never went anywhere in a hurry and didn't even have a heater but it did at least keep us dry. This was traded up again a couple of years later for a red and cream Standard Vanguard, which really looked the part and turned the heads of most of the young lads in our neighbourhood.

He'd always had an interest in motorcycles but by his own admission had never owned one that was much more than barely adequate until the early 70's in Darrington, when we ended up with a Triumph Bonneville, one of the best bikes of the era, albeit a few years old. It was nominally mine, but as he was the sponsor he felt he was entitled to an occasional blast on it, which always put a smile on his face.

Around this time I'd persuaded him to teach me to drive, but the lessons came to an abrupt halt one day after I'd decided to wave to the girl next door and subsequently crashed the car into the garage wall.

He always enjoyed driving and it was a sad day when he finally had to give up his licence in his early 90's.

Gerry always kept busy, even after retirement; he became Treasurer and then President of the Probus Club, enjoying their annual Christmas dinner for many years. He also served as a volunteer for the Royal National Institute for the Blind, repairing talking book

machines for those locally who needed them, equipment that later brought him a lot of pleasure when his own eyesight started to fail.

Gerry and Audley both threw themselves into the life of the village in Over Peover, getting involved at the village hall and the local indoor bowls club. Gerry seemed able to turn his hand to anything; when he decided to enter his Victoria sponge cake at the local fete it won first prize. He was always a good cook, and took on more and more of the cooking at home as Audley's health started to deteriorate. All the family have enjoyed Gerry's Sunday dinners, the meat done to perfection.

Gerry had more time to pursue his interest in wildlife once he retired, especially his passion for birdwatching. He became friendly with another local enthusiast who ran guided trips abroad, and took some of the most memorable holidays of his life with them, Costa Rica being an absolute highlight. There were occasions when Gerry perhaps refused to acknowledge that his age might have some impact on his athleticism – the altitude on an Andean trek was a bit much for him, and he had to call for help when swimming on the Great Barrier Reef when the currents were a little stronger than he'd anticipated – but he had some amazing experiences, and saw some incredible birds on his travels.

He and Audley were delighted to become grandparents, and always enjoyed visits to and from their grandchildren. Laura and Alastair wrote:

Obviously Grandpa was very successful professionally, but he retired when we were still young so we were lucky to experience lots of fun times with him. Alastair said, "Although through my working career I have seen what a significant career he had, what is most valued was how he supported his family and us as grandkids. I think got an amazing funny caring Grandpa who we were always excited to go and see."

When we were little all Grandpa ever wanted to do was make us laugh, chasing us around the sofa, making rabbits out of napkins at the dinner table, driving the car with no hands on the steering wheel until we screamed there was a corner coming up! When we had pancakes he used to stand on a chair and drip the golden syrup from as high as he could reach, with Granny shouting at him through the serving hatch, and on Christmas Day he would dress up as Father Christmas to deliver our presents.

We had great family holidays in Wales, going to the beach, riding the steam train up the valley and searching for fairies in the woods. It was always fun and exciting to be staying with Granny and Grandpa. We stayed with them in the summer holidays and the breakfast table was always laid out like a hotel, with corn flakes (which he let us have sugar on) and toast and marmalade. Walks from the house across the fields and lanes, always with binoculars for bird spotting and always with a walking stick for repelling dogs or cows and whacking nettles.

Alastair went golfing with him and learnt a few new words! Grandpa's hockey swing didn't transfer that well to golf but great pleasure was taken in any good shots Alastair did.

Grandpa always had a Telegraph crossword on the go with Sophie (cat) on his lap, she wouldn't sit with anyone else!

He was always working in the garden with the mower keeping the turf like Wembley. We loved watching wildlife programmes and Match of the Day with him. He was an expert at building the coal fire; no one else was allowed to do that.

Grandpa has always been supportive and proud of everything we've done and the choices we've made in life and I feel really lucky that we've been able to have him in our lives for so long.

And Gerry, too, counted himself lucky. His notes, reflecting (in the third person) on the life he had led, end:

He enjoyed life and counted himself as one of the luckiest of men. Lucky in his chosen career, lucky in marriage, lucky with health, his children and grandchildren. What else is there he would say!

Gerry did find it difficult when Audley started to struggle; he described his 'great sorrow' as she developed dementia, but was determined to look after her as he always had. They moved back to Yorkshire to be closer to the rest of the family; even there, Gerry was lucky, managing to sell their house the day it went on the market, happen accidentally on the perfect property in Burton Salmon, and have his offer for that property accepted there and then! The garden was over 2/3 of an acre, and despite being 84 Gerry took it on with gusto, spending many happy hours on his ride-on mower, and watching the birds that came to his well-stocked bird feeders. He also like to explore the various RSPB sites in the area, often accompanied by his son-in-law John. Gerry's bookcases were stacked with books on birds of the world, along with every other subject – his thirst for knowledge never waned, and he would never, as he saw it, 'waste time' on novels when there was so much out there in the real world to be learned.

Audley's death in 2020 was a huge blow; she and Gerry were together for 70 years. He talked about her often, and was glad of having his family around him. He came to live with Charles and Carol, happy listening to Classic FM (except when they played The Lark Ascending by Vaughan Williams...!), playing Scrabble with Ruth and Alison, and helping them with cryptic crosswords, or watching the golf and the snooker. He also enjoyed his strolls out round the village, appreciative of an arm to lean on as he was reluctant to admit to needing a walking stick. He remained as independent as he possibly could, always taking pride in his appearance; it was a point of principle with him that he never ate pizza, and never wore trainers or jeans.

Things eventually got too difficult to manage at home, and last May Gerry moved into Highfield Care Home; it was newly rebuilt and he was the first resident. He was very comfortable and well looked after there, always grateful to, and very complimentary about, the staff.

His taste buds had begun to fail him by this time, although he did finally succumb to a taste of pizza! Not to mention a trip out for a curry, something he developed a bit of a taste for, albeit reluctantly. Things were getting serious when he turned down his daily bottle of San Miguel, something he'd looked forward to every afternoon since being introduced to it about ten years earlier. Gerry made new friends at Highfield, especially Albert, whose company he really enjoyed and who Gerry's family are also glad to have got to know.

Last year saw Drax celebrate its 50th anniversary, and Gerry was invited back as guest of honour; he was really touched at how many people came up to thank him for having been such a lovely boss. He also celebrated his 100th birthday at Highfield last December, including enjoying a visit from his great-grandson George. And what a lot there was to celebrate: one hundred years of life, filled with achievement and affection, family and fun, and above all filled with love. That is the legacy that Gerry has left with you all.